

One

Where they were, they had not a clue, but then Alexis spotted a large chest in the corner of the vast room. “Look, perhaps this is something that’s been laid out for us.” Lock picks had been placed on the chest, and she skillfully put them to use. When the lock clicked, she bowed slightly. “Please, may the mighty Wizard in our group open the chest?”

Zendar realized why Alexis had asked: the chest might have a magic ward, so he put it to the test, concentrating as he raised his hands over the chest and said, “*Remove neuma.*”

When he was satisfied that it was, in fact, void of wards, he turned to her. “It is fine, my dear Alexis Tas, the chest is free of traps.” Turning back to the chest, anticipation tingled in his arms as he reached to open it, but it quickly subsided into disappointment; the chest contained nothing more than a small bag. Bigger than a grocery bag, but nevertheless, small. What could ever be so dear to be in it?

Zendar opened the bag and reached in. “What?” he muttered in confusion. The inside of the bag felt much bigger than it should have. He felt around, his hand meeting several objects held inside. He grasped one, and pulled out a bag labeled “Bervanlaw,” then another labeled “Zendar.” He continued removing the items from the original bag, finding bags for each character inside.

He looked at his Dwarven friend. “Here, Bervanlaw, this is for you.” Then he motioned to the tall, beautiful Elf, Cassandra. “This is for you.” He turned to the Ranger, Ozzadnar, next. “These bags are for you.” Finally, he gave both the Paladin and the Rogue their bags. The last remaining items in the bag were for the Wizard himself, a note and two books.

It was now apparent that all the bags were magical bags of holding. Each character’s bag supplied him or her with modest armor and weapons. Nothing special, mind you, as of course, this was their first adventure. To gain better equipment, naturally they would have to earn it in dungeon crawls and the like. As Zendar took out the last book the bag held, all the other bags of holding disintegrated, provided they’d been emptied as well, but not the Wizard’s. He immediately put in the items the Professor had granted him, namely bat guano, sulphur, crystal beads, an owl feather, one white pearl, a small pouch of fine sand, and rose petals.

Bervanlaw was the first to speak. “You got to hand it to the Professor, he knows his stuff. Here I have fine mail armor and a stout battle axe; what else could a Dwarf of the Red Hammer Clan want?”

Zendar, hearing the words, said, “Interesting, you are a member of a clan here in this world, The Eternal Realm...could come in handy.”

Bervanlaw smiled, and then burped, mumbling that he could have used another beer.

After a short time, they came to terms with their situation and the reality of who they had become: Zendar the Wizard; Bervanlaw the Dwarf Fighter; Ozzadnar the Ranger; Cassandra the Elven Cleric, not armed with a mace but with a beautiful silver leaf-laden Strongbow; Kitt the Valiant a Paladin; and Alexis Tas the Rogue—a mismatch, to be sure, as the Professor had thought, *Rogues live in the shadows where evil lurks.*

With the amazement of the equipment Professor Abbot had given them ebbing, it was time to read his letter. Zendar looked at his companions. “Listen up, let me read Abbott’s letter.”

When he had everyone’s attention, he cleared his throat and began:

“Hello to all, and I hope the equipment is suitable. You all have what you wanted: no computers, no cell phones, just adventure—but remember, as the Elves say, ‘Be careful Mani lli wish ten’; you are in a real place. You will not get a restart; it is game-over here. As you may recall from your short time looking at the hologram map, there are three distinct Kingdoms in the realm. The mountainous area to the north is ruled by the Dwarfs and is called the Ebruroth Kingdom. The Elves live in the great forest to the west, the Kingdom of Elderwood, or in the Elven language Hen Caed. Their lands border the Dwarf Kingdom to the north, and to the east is the great Sennebrian River, which is dominated by the great lake, the Beaverdeem Loch, which provides a natural border between the Elves and the Humans, who live to the east in the Kingdom of Kliomara. On the southern border of the human empire is swampland that extends to the southern reaches butted up against a giant gorge, named the Sylvania Abyss. Adventure there at your own risk, and by no means should you venture into what lies beyond the Abyss to the south, the Withered Hinterland. It is a desolate and horrid desert filled with unspeakable monsters.

“You will have to read the books to fill in the blanks. Happy adventuring and good luck!”

No one spoke for a very long time.

Finally, Ozzadnar asked Cassandra, who as an Elf was fluent in the Elder Speech, “What did the Professor mean by ‘be careful *Mani lli wish ten*’?”

She replied, “Be careful what you wish for.”

Zendar examined the books, *The History of the White Domain* and *The Kingdoms and Politics of the Eternal Realm*. He looked at his comrades, Bervanlaw, Cassandra, Ozzadnar, Kitt the Valiant, and Alexis Tas. “The books can wait. We can go over them at a campsite when we are above ground. Let us leave this dusty room and see what is in store for us, and let us hope, at some point, we find a way to get home.”

Bervanlaw farted, burped, and then laughed. “Why do we want to go home, Wizard? This is just what we wished for, right?”

Cassandra gave the Dwarf a stern look. In her mind, he was disgusting, a typical male, and a dirty Dwarf at that.

The room must have been some kind of place of worship. Opposite the doorway, on the other side, were the remains of an altar. There was but one door leading out of the marble walled and floored room. It was their path, no other. Alexis used her skill to pick the lock and the door opened. She, as always, stayed back, allowing the other formidable fighters to lead the way. In a D&D party, you let the fighters with the heavy armor lead the way. The Cleric was fitted with fine ring mail. The Ranger and Rogue donned leather, the Wizard robes. So it was that Bervanlaw, battle axe in hand, and Kitt the Valiant, in stout plate mail and with a long sword, led the party. Cassandra and Ozzadnar, bows at the ready, would be the second layer of attack. Zendar and Alexis in the rear guard, he with spell protection and she with the ability to hide and cause havoc with her short bow, would cover the group.

The door opened into a small corridor, walls draped in spider webs, the dusty marble floor covered in debris and fallen chunks of marble from the decaying walls. One could hear the scurrying and screeching of rats. Cassandra, Alexis, and Bervanlaw could see with their darkvision, due to their respective races; the others were in total darkness. Burnt out torches lined the walls at well placed intervals. Cassandra lit a few torches using the spell of Light, then Bervanlaw and Kitt led the way, torches in hand.

Bervanlaw swung his axe before him as they advanced, in an attempt to rid their path of cobwebs. He cursed, "I bloody well hate spiders, especially big ones. I am immune to poison, but you, my dear Paladin friend, you are human; you better have some holy curing ready!"

Kitt, intensely focused on the way ahead, said, "Quiet, Dwarf, we will smite whatever gets in our way until we get out of this dark and dank place."

It turned out the webs were very old, and whatever arachnids had lived there were long gone. It had grown very quiet as they made their way slowly forward. Ozzadnar attempted to cheer the group up, as they had traveled quite a ways and still were in a simple corridor covered in webs, dust, and debris. "We wanted a dungeon crawl, well, here we have it. Hopefully there will be rooms filled with chests. We could have a bit of fun looting."

As if divinely given, the corridor ended with another door. This time, it opened up into a larger area. They could go left or right but not forward, as columns of marble lined the rectangular room, with stairs at each end that led down to a bottom floor. There were no doors on the level they were on, but you could see a single door down below.

Something off niggled at Zendar, just out of grasp, then it came to him: the large room below was lit by braziers, giving off greenish-purple flames. The same kind of magic light Cassandra had cast back in the Alter room. The lit braziers revealed a large coffin in the middle of the room down below. It seemed Ozzadnar's wish had come true.

Upon seeing it, Ozzadnar raced toward the stairs and in a flash was at the coffin. Zendar, in a panic, yelled, "Wait, wait! There might be a curse, a ward!" He chased after Ozzadnar, the others racing down the stairs close behind him, but it was too late. Overcome by his desire for treasure, Ozzadnar pried open the coffin as the others watched with bated breath. The lid crashed to the floor with a boom that echoed beyond the walls.

There appeared to be no curse, no ward, but there was treasure. Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on who was looking at the situation—there was a problem. Ozzadnar stumbled backward, aghast at what he had seen, and in the space of his absence, the others could see into the coffin. A fallen knight lay in the tomb, now awake, with hellish, blazing red eyes. The knight had been protected from looters with magic. The Specter rose, a ghostly figure with worn and decaying armor. Shivers ran the length of the entire party's spines as they heard the ghostly figure draw his steel sword. A piercing banshee wail filled the room, deafening and instilling in them a pervasive sense of dread.

Kitt was the first to act, invoking a holy spell of Protection from Evil on the party. Bervanlaw was quick with his battle axe and was the first to engage the ghostly spirit. Sparks flew as steel met steel. Zendar cast a magic missile, which hit the Specter directly, knocking it back, but the ghostly apparition was hardly fazed; the ghostly being rose anew, taking aim at the Dwarf, but Cassandra cast a Blessing spell on Ozzadnar, Palicfin, and Bervanlaw. Invigorated, they charged the Specter. Sparks, clanks of steel—Bervanlaw roared, and the Specter screamed. The three valiant fighters pummeled it into dust; remnants of the Specter's ancient, decayed armor and little else were all that remained, in a heap at their feet.

Bervanlaw confessed, "I don't like spiders, but I especially don't like the undead. Still, all in all, it was a good fight, my comrades."

Ozzadnar then proudly proclaimed, "I will just see what is in the coffin this ghost was protecting." He rummaged through the contents, ultimately finding one pair of bracers of protection, one unidentified amulet, and a small bag containing thirty-five gold crowns. "Not bad for our first encounter. I say we look around some more in this dungeon."

Zendar corrected him, "It isn't a dungeon, it is a crypt with an alter room."

"Whatever you say, Wizard, but it does have gold, and if this world is like ours, money is everything."

Kitt nodded in agreement. "Yes, capital is good, but we have to be careful. None of us have healing potions, and I am sure we need to figure that out once we get above ground."

Zendar looked compassionately at Cassandra. "We do have a Cleric, but we must be very careful if we run into more powerful creatures. I am the least protected with only robes, so unless anyone objects, I will wear the bracers of protection." The party nodded their agreement.

He then saw the name on the casket: Curtieis the Invincible. Examining the amulet with new interest, Zendar placed it on the large coffin lid that had crashed to the floor. He then placed the white pearl and owl feather on top of the amulet and spoke the spell, "y' temple item." Mist swirled around the amulet, and when it cleared, only the amulet was left. He picked it up, half aggravated and half impressed. "Well, that was a good waste of a pearl and an owl feather. This is a powerful artifact, but damned if I know what it is!"

Cassandra, deep in thought *'how the hell did we get here.'*

Just a few weeks ago...

“What the hell? Goddamn internet!” Rob, overcome by fury, flung his headset. Peripherally, he was aware of the sound as it slammed into the wall, which might have given him pause had he not already been in motion: his controller hit the screen in the next instant, doing severe damage. The controller survived; the screen, not so much.

His anger mostly abated, he stood blinking at the cracked screen. *Shit. Perhaps it's time for a new monitor, considering monitors don't work well smashed*, he thought.

Rob Martin, you could say, was absorbed with gaming—but aren't we all, who love to game?

His cell rang. “Hello?”

“What the hell? We were just getting to where we wanted to go and you disappeared! What? You have to take a piss?”

“Look, I'm sorry, Nick. My goddamn internet is lagging; I can't keep up with the group. I got frustrated...and threw my headset...and, hell, my monitor is toast.”

“Nice going moron. Now what? We have to wait for you to get a new bloody headset and screen? This sucks.”

Rob laughed. “Come on, Nick, you've been telling me to upgrade to a better screen for how long? Give me a break. To be honest, I'm tired of the bullshit of online gaming and the internet, anyway. We're all continually frustrated playing MMOs together, and this is a prime example. If I go down, what, you all just carry on without me? Sure, that works with your idiot shooter games, but hey—and I'm not saying anything bad about shooters. I'm just a fantasy guy. And remember, we all have roots in fantasy adventure games. I've played every fantasy game ever made. Hell, remember when we would sit around a table and play pen-and-paper D&D? It was a blast.”

“Buddy, I remember well, but you know how things are now. Everyone's into the graphics and all that.”

“Yeah, that's exactly it, Nick—we have all been sucked into this kind of void. If we don't get into the 'here and now' of gaming—VR, MMO—the experience isn't complete. It's such bullshit.”

A hint of excitement crept into Rob's voice as he went on. “Hell, it's been years since we all played dice together. It would be fun, and I just saw on the web that Wizards of the Coast released the Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition. That might be what we need to get everyone involved, some new, exciting material.”

They paused in thought.

“Let me ask you, Nick—you're my best friend—will you help me gather all our old buds from high school and see if we can get a real pen-and-paper Dungeons and Dragons game going? All of us, just like the old days, no computers, internet, or MMOs; just pure fun and imagination.”

Nick nodded his approval, though his friend couldn't see it. “Of course. I'm sure I can talk Devon and Tom into it. If Tom commits, hell, Alexandra will too. They do everything together—

and Catherina is probable. I heard she just broke up with her girlfriend, so she would probably love our company.”

“Wow, really? Cathy broke up with Susan? Huh. Hey, maybe that’s for the best—Cathy is a beautiful woman; maybe she’ll come back to liking me.”

Nick’s laughter echoed in the phone. “You still have the hots for her? Sorry, buddy. Catherina is a rare beauty, but she likes what she likes, and no offense, she adores you as a friend, but she isn’t into men. If it will console you, hey, maybe she’d like you if you were a woman.”

“Okay, okay. Listen, if you can gather the troops, I will go to the Professor’s shop and get us all the supplies we need.”

“Hey, bud, grab me some dice. Mine are long gone.”

“Can do, my man. And I’m curious, which character are you going to pull out of the ash heap of history?”

After a short pause, Nick replied, “Bervanlaw, my trusty Lawful Good Dwarf Fighter, who else!”

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Rob rode the purple line to Old Town. It had been ages since he’d last graced Professor Abbott’s shop. Located on the north side of Chicago, it was a unique little shop, and fit right in with the Victorian architecture lining the long street.

He walked in as if he had been there just yesterday. The shop hadn’t changed a bit. The same stacks of books sat in front of the old-style, bar-like register area, and as usual, Professor Abbott, on a ladder, was fussing about with some books on a shelf.

One could literally spend hours inspecting the rows and rows of books. The shop had everything concerning Dungeons and Dragons, and many other pen-and-paper role playing games. *The biggest collection in the world*, Rob thought. *Well, perhaps not in the world, but in Chicago, for sure.*

The Professor, a man in his seventies, was thin. His whitish-grey hair, which was quite long, gave hint to a birth year in the sixties. He looked studious, and like a man much younger than he was. He must have loved John Lennon, as his glasses were perfect.

“What can I do for you, young man? Or are you just here to enjoy the dust and stale air?”

Even as thin and frail as the Professor looked, Rob felt inferior. The Professor had a commanding voice. “I wanted to buy some D&D supplies, and ask you some advice?”

Professor Abbot climbed down the ladder and gathered himself behind his register. On the right side of the register area sat many small boxes filled with every dice imaginable. “Suit yourself, young man. The dice, as you can plainly see, are in abundance and the

D&D Compendiums are in row one. Now let me ask, are you old-school or would you prefer to play with the newest edition?”

“That’s just it, Professor, and why I want your advice. I did some looking online at the new D&D 5th Edition books, seventeen in all...well, it’s a bit overwhelming.”

The Professor stared intently at him, a mysterious gleam in his eye. “To have an adventure of worth, one must at times be overwhelmed—that is the fun of it, isn’t it...what is your name?”

“Rob, sir.”

“Rob, to have a total experience, one must be engaged totally and have all the information and knowledge of the realm you are exploring.”

Rob held up a hand and rubbed his fingers together, silently suggesting that to buy all the books would be expensive.

“Yes, young man, I do see the problem; to be fully engaged, it would cost a great sum of money to buy the complete set, even if I gave you a discount. Tell me then, what do you really want?”

“I humbly tell you, Professor, I am not here to haggle, but to be honest. My friends and I have grown tired of online gaming. We’ve done it all. MMO’s, single-player games...meanwhile, we’re all glued to our computers, at the mercy of our screens and the internet. It tends to bleed you of your imagination.”

“I see. Well, Rob, I will be honest with you in return: you are not the first to come into my shop with those same thoughts, yearning to play pen and paper, so you can, as you have professed, use your imagination and have fun.”

Rob smiled. “Yes, sir, I knew you would understand the reality of our situation. Do you have any suggestions on how we can start up again without breaking the bank?”

“I do run a business, young man, but I see the logic of capital funding. Most that still play the old way have stacks of books they can rely on. You mentioned you played in the past—do you still have your old books?”

Sheepishly, Rob lowered his head. “I moved one time, didn’t have room and got rid of them.”

“A shame. D&D books are treasures, and they would have helped you now. Well, tell me what kind of game you want to play and the type of realm, and let me see if I can put something together for you that will, as mentioned, not break the bank.”

Excited again, Rob explained to the Professor what he had in mind. In ending, he added, “Also, most of us have very much enjoyed the bestselling single-player fantasy computer games that have come out, like the Elder Scrolls Skyrim, Dragon Age, and the Witcher 3. If you could incorporate some of those features and creatures into the game, it would be fantastic.”

The professor glanced at his magazine rack. He was well aware of the computer games Rob had mentioned, highly successful and award winning. “Rob, here—take my card, come back in a week. I am sure I will have put together something that will meet your needs.”

Rob beamed. “Thank you, sir, see you in a week.”

As Rob was about to open the door to step outside, the Professor loudly proclaimed, “Do send me your friends’ names and their particulars—race, character, character name, and alignment. Don’t forget to make sure you have a cleric in your group. My email is on the card!”

*

Nick reached into his pocket to gather his vibrating cell. “Hey Rob, what’s up? How was the Professor?”

“You wouldn’t believe it, Nick, the place hasn’t changed one bit! And the Professor, well, I have to see him in a week. He’s going to have something for us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I told him to outright buy the entire D&D 5th Edition books would be a bit pricy, so I explained what type of game we wanted, with a little of the computer games we all love to play mixed in, and he said he’d set up a great pen and paper experience.”

“Wow, sounds good. Well, I’ve been doing my due diligence and everyone is in, and actually excited, since we don’t get together as a group that often.”

“Who’s in?”

“Everyone my man, you know me, I get results.”

“You’re the best, bud, just one more thing. I need to send the Professor the D&D characters we’re all going to play.”

“Okay, will do. Oh, sorry, Rob—I did say I get results, just not how...I might have told them all you would supply pizza and a few beers.”

“No problem, Nicky boy. To get the crew together and have a real gathering to have fun, what’s a Bongiorno’s Italian Deli pizza and a case of beer? Hell, like going out to the movies, only better!”

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The Professor, busy browsing his email, clicked on one from Rob Martin, which read:

Hey Professor, here are the details you requested. Rob Martin: Lawful Good Human Wizard named Zendar. Catherina Strom: Lawful Good Elf Cleric named Cassandra Elrieth. Nick Tanner: Lawful Neutral Dwarf Fighter named Bervanlaw. Devon Harris: Lawful Neutral Human Ranger named Ozzadnar. Thomas Hillman: Lawful Good Human Paladin named Kitt the Valiant, and lastly Alexandra Cassidy: Half Elf Neutral Rogue named Alexis Tas.

As you can see, we do have a Cleric, and also a Rogue; as you know, you can't go adventuring without the ability to heal and pick locks! See you Saturday. Best Regards, Rob.

The Professor scratched his chin as he contemplated this information. *A wizard, interesting name...an Elven Cleric, hmm—I will add a Cleric who can handle a bow. Of course, a Dwarven fighter with a solid name—need to set his clan. A Ranger with another interesting name. Yes, a party must have guidance. A Paladin and a Rogue, the party must have balance...hmm...may have to rearrange that. A neutral Rogue, hardly—evil lurks in the shadows.*

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With the winds sweeping off Lake Michigan, it was a chilly November day in Chicago. Running down the stairs from the train was cold as hell.

Rob welcomed the warmth as he stepped into the Professor's shop, letting the door fall closed behind him. "Wow!" he said on a rough exhale, rubbing his hands together. "It's darn right nasty out there!"

The Professor lifted his head up from his reading, glancing at Rob over his glasses. "It's November in Chicago. Lucky it isn't snowing, Rob."

"Yes, sir, I suppose you're right." The words hung between them for a moment, until Rob cleared his throat. "Well, I did what you asked for. My friends are excited; do you have what I need?"

The Professor, not used to being asked silly questions, raised an eyebrow and cocked his head. Indeed, he had what Rob had asked for—why else would he have asked the young man to come back in a week? "I do, young man, of course. I wouldn't want you to have wasted a trip to my little shop. Let me go and get it now."

Rob waited in great anticipation.

The Professor came out with a large wooden box. It looked heavy, but he handled it like it was light as a feather. Rob, puzzled, didn't know what to think. He'd been expecting a book, or at least a stack of notes bound in a binder. Professor Abbott opened the box and there it was: a large black rectangle. It looked somewhat like a huge laptop, but different.

"What is this, Professor? I told you I wanted to play pen and paper, and—what the hell is this? It looks like a computer. How's this different from what I explained to you?"

The Professor shot Rob a stern look, but that gleam was present in his eyes again. "Do not be so quick with judgement, young man." As he lifted the black rectangular device out of the box and placed it on the table, he added, "You and your friends will still throw your dice and have your note pads in hand." Fiddling with the device, he pulled from the bottom something that looked like a large notepad. He pressed a touch-screen button and the device powered to life. Then, he opened the device itself. It had a very large, rectangular screen, which lay horizontal.

“No, no—Professor, I told you, no computers, no internet, just pen and paper and our imaginations! I don’t—”

The look the Professor gave him subdued Rob for the moment. “Patience, my young man.” Satisfied to continue, the Professor touched another button on the attached notepad. Almost like magic, a hologram rose upward out of the large screen; it was, to say the least, amazing and tremendously beautiful.

Rob stared, unable to keep his mouth from opening in awe. Forgetting his objection to the device, he pointed and said, “Wow, so this is the land? I can see mountains here, a large area of thick forest and over here more sparse forest, plain lands and rivers. And what is this at the bottom, a desert?”

“This is The Eternal Realm, Rob. This will be the place you will find fun and adventure. It is a bit techy with the hologram screen, but you must trust me, you and all your friends can sit around a table with your dice, paper, and pens and enjoy Dungeons and Dragons with a bit of Skyrim, Dragon Age, and Witcher thrown in. See here, this notepad.” The Professor stepped closer to Rob, holding the notepad up for him to examine. “Notice it doesn’t have a keyboard. All you have to do is touch the specific app; there are many. It will detail the adventure, and you will see the area of where you are on the hologram map. It makes for a more modern pen and paper experience.”

Rob’s awe and excitement were temporarily overcome by regret and apology as he realized how badly he had overreacted. “I am sorry, Professor, to be so short tempered. This looks great, and I’m sure once my friends see the hologram, they will think it’s cool.”

The Professor smiled, his eyes flashing with what might have been mischief. “To fully enjoy your experience together, make sure you are in a secluded area, away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Having no distractions is best, a quiet place, and make sure for atmosphere you have four candles placed to form the corners of a square around you. With flickering light, well, it does set the mood for Dungeon crawling.”

Rob grinned. “I know just the spot, Professor, away from the city, and quiet.”

“Very good, Rob. I knew you would like it, and it appears you have been attentive. Now, one last important factor to remember: let your friends know, to enjoy your experience to the fullest, be sure to always use your character names when you speak to each other. It tends to make sure the atmosphere and ambiance of the game is true. Put caution to the wind—no pun intended, in regard to the weather outside.” He smiled, placing a hand on Rob’s shoulder. “Zendar, wizards should never be short tempered.”

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It was all set. The group was to meet Friday night, at a cabin Rob’s uncle owned out on the shores of Lake Michigan, well away from the city. The moon would be full—not surprising. Rob’s uncle used the cabin exclusively in the summer, so it was available. Tuwyn did as requested and bought two large pies from Bongiorno’s Italian Deli, one meat lovers’ and the other vegetarian,

and a case of premium Alpha King Pale Ale. It wasn't really a cabin. The place was actually a large log-style house, suitable to keep a group of people very satisfied with their lodging, as it was even equipped with a gas fireplace. Tuwyn thought it would be a good thing to bring more staples, as always when you are having fun and you want it to last the entire weekend.

Everyone was in place. All the greetings, the laughing, the "Oh, it's been forever since I've seen you!"—all was said and over quickly, along with the beverages and pizza slices devoured. The players were eager to get around the table.

Rob came out of his room, the Professor's strange device in hand, and immediately, what had been a jovial get together tilted toward disappointment. Everyone except Nick looked on with the same thought written on their face: *What is this electronic, digital bullshit? I thought the point of all of this, coming all the way out here to the shores of Lake Michigan, was to get back to the basics, and we are going to plug in?*

Before a word was uttered, Rob proclaimed, "Yes, I know what you're thinking, I thought the same, but trust me, this is different. We will play pen-and-paper D&D."

He put the black device on the table and encouraged his friend to come round. Cathy, Nick, Devon, Alexandra, and Thomas filled their spots, grinning at each other with hints of bewilderment, wondering what was to come.

Rob, nervous but hoping this would actually go off as he intended, cleared his throat and announced, "Good, you all have your pen, paper, and dice ready. The Professor has something special he made just for us. He did state once we start, we are to refer to each other in our character names only. The Professor also asked to make sure we light four candles and keep the room dark to make for a more exciting experience with the flickering light. Go ahead, Nick, light the candles."

Catherina interrupted, "Rob, do you have to go on? We all appreciate the atmospheric mood; I'm sure we can all let our imaginations go wild. Just tell me—you do have an elven beauty I can adore?"

Rob, who had always been smitten with Catherina's beauty, said, "Of course, my dear Cassandra."

Nick pounded his fist on the table, typical of his Dwarf character. "Yes, right on, Rob—or, I mean, Zendar—let us speak as our characters!"

The group looked around at one another, Nick still beaming, Rob thinking, and Catherina focused on role play.

"Look, we have enjoyed the pizza and a few beers; now, it is time to get down and have some fun." Rob opened the box. With the screen horizontal, he then pressed the app that would show the hologram of the land they were to explore.

A collective gasp was released in the sudden quiet around the table as the hologram rose from the device. Awestruck, they stared at the exquisite detail, the beauty of it, until Nick blurted, “Ah yes, the mountains, the land of my people.”

Catherina, dreamy-eyed as she looked at the forest, said in a far-away voice, “Yes, I will find my Elven beauty.”

Rob looked at Thomas and Alexandra, both still speechless. “This is the land we will adventure in. Now all I have to do—oh wait, is everyone ready? Dice, pen, paper?” He looked at each in turn, until he was satisfied everyone was prepared. “Okay, let’s get started. Ready to see what Professor Abbott has programed for us?”

“Wait, wait!” Nick shouted. “I have to take a leak—pardon me ladies—but you know I am kind of like a Dwarf. I do like my beer.”

When he returned, Rob looked around once more. “Anyone else?” He glared at Nick. “Or can we start the game?” They all nodded. “Good. Now, let us all concentrate on the holographic map and—well, let me see here...I’m supposed to touch this one app, I think...”

Looking down, Rob searched for the app that read “Adventure One,” then tapped it on the screen. Nothing happened for several seconds, and then purple, green, and black mist rose from the hologram.

Wide-eyed, Thomas blurted, “Wow, that’s cool!”

Suddenly, the candles exploded with fierce, blinding light; in the next instant, the intense light extinguished spontaneously, sending them into total, absolute darkness. All six seemed to be weightless, floating lost in time and space, a cold, limitless expanse. Had they been cast into limbo?

After what seemed like an eternity, the group crashed collectively upon a cold floor. Darkness enveloped them.

The first to respond was Catherina—or Cassandra, as she was now to be known. She was an Elf with darkvision, so she could see the four unlit braziers around her comrades, who were scattered about on the marble floor. She, through her talents, spoke as she faced the first brazier. “*Aenye*,” she uttered, and the brazier sparked to life, blazing with greenish-purple flames, giving light to most of the area around it. She lit the other three as her comrades were waking.

As Rob came to, he saw Nick stirring to his left. Devon was nursing his knee, and Thomas and Alexandra were holding each other, typical of a couple in distress.

Rob took the lead. “Holy shit, guys. We...We must have—Damn, I have no bloody explanation for this.” Then he started to look around, to search for something to go on, anything that could explain, but found himself dumbstruck almost immediately as his gaze landed on Catherina. She had transformed into an Elf, Cassandra Elrieth: tall, slender, and more beautiful even than she was in her real life; with long blond hair, in a word, stunning.

Rob blinked, realizing himself, and looked at the others in turn. Nick—no longer the smaller friend who longed to be tough—was now Bervanlaw and, though groggy at the moment, as thick as a brick, stout, a typical strong and mighty Dwarf, yet his reddish brown beard was not that long, just six inches from his chin. Devon looked funny; being from the south side of Chicago and an African American, he looked more tanned than black, a strapping Ranger, Ozzadnar with stunning green eyes and light brown hair. Thomas and Alexandra were still in disbelief, hugging each other. Thomas was still muscular, though more chiseled than the star football player he had been in real life; a true Paladin, Kitt the Valiant with sandy light brown. Alexandra was a half-Elf, he could see that by her ears, yet not as slender as Cassandra; she was now golden brown haired Alexis Tas. Rob, now the Wizard Zendar, stroked his gray beard in amazement. He looked distinguished in his long salt and pepper hair.

With the braziers illuminating the space, it struck them that they were no longer at Rob's uncle's cabin retreat.

There was a long, heavy pause as the friends from Chicago realized they really had been transported to a land they knew little about, and from this first encounter it was clear, this was not fun and games; as Professor Abbott had warned, this was a dangerous world. They were no longer who they had been back home, but a mixed bag of Human, Dwarf, and Elven adventurers.

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It had been over an hour since they left the crypt where they had encountered the Specter, and they were all growing weary. At last, they could see, far ahead, the corridor was becoming much lighter than the corridors they had trudged thus far, ever so diligently, nerves razor sharp.

Bervanlaw, peering through the remaining darkness, confirmed it. "There be our exit, my friends, finally!" He started to trot toward the opening.

Suddenly, he stopped cold, as if he'd come to an invisible wall. "Bloody hell, where did the entrance go?" Then he heard it, thumping—a lot of thumping, and rattling. Glowing blue dots filled the darkness. The Dwarf could see shapes, but they were still too far off to distinguish.

The thumping turned into clattering slaps against the aged marble floor, and Cassandra saw them, many of them: skeletal figures with clubs and small axes, creepy yellowish-gray animated bones with chilling, burning blue eyes. She cast Protection from Undead on the party, who were all now aware of what was coming toward them at great speed. She yelled, "Get ready, it looks like we have to fight our way through these monsters!"

The three fighters formed a wall and took the brunt of the on-rushing skeletons, bashing them in a frenzied attack of defense. Bones bounced off the walls, but the horde kept coming. The power of the Cleric's spell was turning the tide of battle as the undead, boney creatures fell one after another—they were winning! But then...

Kitt was the first see it out of the corner of his eye, a bright, flaming ball blazing toward them. He was a Paladin, a protector. He charged the remaining horde and took the blast of the

fireball head on. A grand explosion rocked the party, and bones flew in all directions. As the smoke cleared, Kitt lay amongst the debris of skeletal bodies. Zendar, knowing another fireball blast could do them in, cast the spell Globe of Invulnerability, and a glowing greenish-white globe surrounded them; they were protected for now. The remaining skeletons hacked and smashed at the globe, but to no avail. In the darkness ahead, they could vaguely see a robed, hooded figure, a glowing ball in each hand, waiting.

Bervanlaw, who desperately wanted to rush the evil sorcerer, yelled, "What is he waiting for, dammit?"

Zendar, using all his strength and power, blurted out, "He's waiting until our protection goes down; he knows I can't hold this much longer."

The Dwarf swore, knowing the party was in peril. "Well, this bloody adventure didn't last long, did it!"

The globe began to fade, and then slowly disintegrate. They could all hear hideous laughter as the skeletons prepared to attack. The sorcerer raised his arms, fireballs blazing in his hands, then a tremendous bright beam of white light, originating from the entrance, exploded upon the evil sorcerer. The radiant light source moved quickly toward the fallen sorcerer, and as he tried to rise, the white light from the glowing entity exploded blindingly once more, engulfing the sorcerer totally. They could see him suffering as his skin wilted, until he was nothing but a burnt robe and shriveled corpse. The radiant entity turned its attack on the remaining skeletons then, and they fell swiftly. It was over.

Stunned, the party stood motionless, unsure what they should do. Was this a creature of good? It had vanquished the evil. Cassandra, without fear, went to the fallen Paladin, checking his vitals. She turned back toward Alexis and shook her head. Alexis fell to her knees, unable to control her sobs of agony. The others looked away, giving her space to grieve.

The radiant light came closer. Everyone could see now, it was a sprite-like creature, a radiating whitish-blue in color. She had extremely long hair which floated outwardly, like dozens of brilliant tentacles swaying gracefully in the air. The sprite's body was covered in some kind of runes that flickered and flashed.

She could sense the pain of Alexis, the sorrow and sadness of the group. Fluttering high in the air, she spread out her arms. A brilliant flash of light blinded the party momentarily. As the light dissipated and their vision cleared, the entire party stared in awe. Before them now stood a tall, slender Elven warrior mage with bright, shining silver and glowing blue armor. *The finest ring and plate armor I have ever imagined*, thought Bervanlaw. A white bow laden with silver leaves she wore on her back, and in hand she held a silver sword, with blue runes that glowed.

Cassandra bowed and sank down on one knee. She hadn't ever seen someone so beautiful, yet so powerful. They all kneeled.

“I am Istara. As you witnessed, I can shift-change. In my other state, I am a Radiant Glory, a vessel of the Dragon-God of Light. I had been tracking that madman for weeks.” She glanced back at the mass of bones and the dead sorcerer. “I am a hunter of evil.”

Turning back to the group, she looked grave. “I don’t know who you are, but be sure, you have now made an enemy of the Cult of the Dead.”

Zendar began to speak, but Istara raised her hand. “Wait.” She then bent down and examined Kitt, but rose just as quickly and commanded, “Hurry, get this man out of this decrepit place. Bring him outside. I can’t do anything for him here.”

Outside the cavern, Bervanlaw and Ozzadnar placed Kitt in the shade of a tree. The twilight was but hours away, the sun just touching the tips of the trees to the west. Looking around, there were meadows to the north and south. Butterflies danced in the dwindling sunlight.

Although it was much brighter outside, Istara still omitted a glowing, radiant bluish-white. She knelt beside Kitt and spread her hand on his chest. She whispered, “*Aine caclm dearme*,” and slowly, Palicfin’s entire body began to glow bluish-white.

Alexis, still in shock, continued to sob. Istara stood and went to her, putting her hand on Alexis’s head. Alexis immediately felt warmth and a soothing feeling. She became calm. “Don’t worry, my child, all is not lost. Your dear friend still has life essence, but he will need special help to stay alive.”

The entire party was perplexed. *Kitt was dead. No heartbeat, no pulse—he was technically dead.* Alexis looked up into Istara’s silver-blue eyes. “How can he still live?”

“I have stopped the process of death. You are all right to be concerned; he is technically dead, and without the spell I cast, he would certainly die.”

Bervanlaw, Ozzadnar, and Zendar were still trying to get their heads around what was happening. Alexis was calm, and Cassandra was awestruck.

Istara turned to the Cleric. “You, my dear girl, are a healer. Come to me.”

Without hesitation, Cassandra instinctively knelt in front of her. Placing her hand on Cassandra’s head, the Elven warrior mage closed her eyes and concentrated. Cassandra felt the same effects as Alexis had, warmth, calm, but then something else—a tingling inside. Istara removed her hand. The Cleric looked up, thinking, *I am in love.*

Istara smiled at her. “It is not love you feel for me, young one, but the love you have for your friends. Your powers are new; you can cast spells with efficiency, yet you are not strong enough to cast a greater spell of resurrection. I have transferred this power to you.”

Alexis brightened visibly. “Then she will be able to bring Kitt back to life?” The entire group felt jubilation.

Istara was starting to understand there was something odd about this group. “She has the power, but not the one thing she needs.”

Zendar knew right away. "We lack diamond dust, don't we?"

"Yes, and you will have to gather it, as it is the sacrifice that must be made to gain back your friend's life."

Bervanlaw quipped, "What's the big problem? I am a dwarf, and I know there are diamonds in the mountains. Let's go fetch them and bring our pal back from the dead!"

Istara looked down on the Dwarf with disdain. "It is clear you do not understand, Dwarf. First of all, necromancy is forbidden in the Kliomara Kingdom, in which you stand, and furthermore, your Red Dwarf Clan is a thousand miles away to the north."

"Enough please, Istara," Zendar pleaded. "What will it take?"

"Fifty thousand gold pieces' worth of diamond dust."

There was only the sound of crickets in the distance.

"I must take him to Queen Glynmenor in the Elven Capital of Livien Taure in Hen Cead, where he can be placed on the Alter of Light. My magic will wane, but the Queen's will not. He will be preserved and protected there."

Alexis went over to Kitt and knelt beside him. She planted a gentle kiss upon his cheek, then looked back at Istara. "Do what you must." The others followed suit, giving their own personal farewells to their friend.

Istara had great curiosity of this oddly mixed group of Human-, Dwarf-, and Elf-kind. Sensing the Wizard to be the wisest, she asked, "Wizard, you tell me your story, as I know there is something very strange, but be quick."

He told her, as briefly as he could, that they were from another realm, and had been transported to the Eternal Realm, adventurers looking for glory. He left out the part about them all being human, and from a place called Chicago, on planet Earth.

Knowing time was becoming critical, she said, "Wizard, we will someday continue this discussion; I sense you are leaving some gravely important things out of your story. Nevertheless, your friend Kitt will be safe in Hen Cead. When you have the necessary ingredient for the spell, tell the Queen's protectors, the Elder Guard, that you have been summoned by Istara. They will understand and let you through." She glanced at the Dwarf. "And you will be polite and say little."

Istara, the Elven warrior mage, took out a shining stone, even more brilliant than she herself. She looked on the drawn faces of the group she had just met. "I wish I could transport you all, but it is not possible; it will be taxing enough to get your friend through." She raised her hand—

"Wait, wait!" Cassandra cried out. She took an unconscious step toward Istara, gazing deeply into her silver-blue eyes. "Will I see you again?"

Istara's face softened and she smiled. "I certainly hope so, young one." She reached out and laid a delicate touch to Cassandra's cheek.

Then she turned back to the group at large. "I will give you all words of wisdom. Grave times have come upon the land, as you will find out soon enough. My advice is for Cassandra and Alexis to stay clear of the inner human Imperial Province; things are not right there, and I am afraid non-humans are getting blamed for things they did not do. There is a power struggle going on. Seek out knowledge and learn. Zendar, be careful with your magic; as I told you all, necromancy is outlawed, punishable by death, and it won't be pleasant or swift, but long, torturous, and painful. We are in Waterdale. To the west is the Elven Kingdom of Hen Caed, or in the common tongue, Elderwood. If you seek sanctuary, go there. Concentrate your efforts on getting better equipped and gathering gold. You will be able to buy diamond dust, or you can mine it. However, when you learn what you must do to mine it, you may think otherwise. There are areas outside the Kingdoms where vile, evil creatures lurk; you might be able to find bounties on these creatures in settlements and small towns that are being tormented."

Bervanlaw politely asked, "Miss, do you know how much we could get for a griffin, or let's say, a basilisk?"

Istara appreciated the Dwarf's tone. "Very dangerous creatures, master Dwarf, and quite rare. If you do stumble upon a Royal griffin, you could perhaps earn two hundred gold pieces, and for a basilisk, I'm not sure you will run into any of them; they inhabit the Withered Hinterland. There certainly wouldn't be a bounty down in that vile wasteland, but you might still reap quite a large sum, as they are quite rare. You could sell the eyes, poison glands, skin, teeth, and claws—perhaps a few thousand gold pieces, but be forewarned. Though tempting, it would be foolish to venture there."

Bervanlaw did the math. *20 Royal griffins, 20 basilisks; piece of cake.*

Zendar seized his chance, seeking reassurance. "Istara, do you think we can do it? It will be a momentous feat to gather that much diamond dust."

"You will." She paused and let her gaze land on each of them in turn, lingering a moment longer on Cassandra. Then she turned back to Zendar. "You must."

Then, she whispered a few words and an oval-shaped portal opened up, shimmering with blue and white flames. Astonishingly, she easily raised Kitt in her arms, cradling him, and walked into the portal. As she passed through, it disappeared.

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Bervanlaw had gathered wood, and Ozzadnar the ranger had gone on the hunt.

They all sat around the campfire eating rabbit. It wasn't Chicago pizza, but it was what it was. In this world, one had to live off the land until they could reach a town or city. There, they could find food in merchant shops and taverns.

Zendar pulled out one of the books. *The History of the White Domain*. "I know why Istara warned us about the larger cities. Certainly, we must find out what we can about the political situation, but in the outer reaches, it would be much easier to make camp and live off the land. Sure, we could find lodging at inns in these larger cities, but the cost may be too great."

Bervanlaw, positive as always, merely shrugged. "We will kill some beasts and we will raise the loot."

Ozzadnar stayed quiet, enjoying his meal. Alexis stared into the fire, and Cassandra was deep in thought.

The Dwarf then realized, to raise such an amount would be risky business, carrying all that around. A sack of gold crowns, say a few thousand, would be very dear in weight. Sure, a Dwarf could carry it, but then every sniping thief and evil-doer would want to do them in.

"Zendar, let's say we do gather all this diamond dust, or gold crowns. How are we going to carry such weight?" The Wizard pulled out the magic bag of holding. "With this, Dwarf. The original didn't disintegrate like the others."

Bervanlaw rolled his eyes and scoffed. "But then all someone would have to do is take the bag, Wizard."

"I don't think so. Tell you what, give me your axe and I will put it into the bag."

The Dwarf obliged, wondering what point Zendar could possibly be trying to make.

Zendar placed the axe in the bag, then gave the whole thing over to the Dwarf.

Bervanlaw gave the Wizard a look, resisting the urge to roll his eyes again, but stuck his hand in all the same—and felt nothing. His eyes grew wide as he moved his hand, searching and searching...it was just a plain cloth bag, empty inside. He threw the bag back to Zendar, brow furrowed. "What trickery magic is this, Wizard?"

Zendar reached into the bag and pulled out the axe.

The Dwarfs confusion turned to disbelief. "Well, I'll be damned."

"You see, Dwarf, the bag only responds to me. I can put anything in there and retrieve it, but to others, it is just a plain, empty cloth bag."

Ozzadnar licked his lips and wiped his greasy hands on his pants. "Read what is in the book, Wizard, we should start studying this damn world we are in if we are to survive."

Zendar looked around. As he and Bervanlaw were chatting, the Elves in the group had gone to the forest and dragged back branches, thick in soft fir needles, and distributed them among the group.

Cassandra examined her nails. "I would appreciate some help next time from you thinkers and philosophers." She waited for the men to make comment or apology. When none did, she

sighed. “I would imagine it may get a bit cold, and we don’t have blankets, so this will have to suffice.”

The Dwarf burped; the rabbit had indeed been good. Alexis cuddled up to Cassandra for warmth, and the others cozied up to the fire.

The Ranger repeated, “Go ahead, Wizard, read.”

“The Eternal Realm, once known as the White Domain, was divided by the coming of the Second Nexus into treacherous planes. War, pestilence, and evil ravaged the land, but was purged and cleansed by the coming of Helm, the God of Light. It was divine domination, a human outlook. The other loyal races, the Dwarfs and Elves, say otherwise. The lands had been sterilized by genocide of the so-called ‘Beast People.’ Orcs, bugbears, and hobgoblins had not been cherished by the Dwarfs and Elves but tolerated; they had lived together for thousands of years. The Dwarfs were well guarded in their mountain homeland and the Elves protected by the dense forest. That is, before the humans arrived. The only land available to them was dominated by the Orcs and other Beastmen. The rest is history, as the Beastmen were eradicated from the land.

“The lands to the south, do not trespass. It is an unwelcoming Hinterland, a withered wasteland filled with monsters. Giant scorpions, sand snakes, and other evil creatures permeate this vile land. It is a violent frontier. Thank the gods, the borderlands of swamps keep these vile creatures at bay. It is a grim desert. Some believe in the existence of the Serpent people, who were driven from their marshes and swamps. The border has been guarded for hundreds of years and there has never been any incursion of the myths. Luckily, the creatures of the desert do not venture out of their habitat.”

No one spoke, just contemplated what they had heard.

After a while, Ozzadnar broke the silence. “And of the other book, on politics and the kingdoms, Zendar.”

“The Kingdoms and Politics of the Eternal Realm

“The Eternal Realm, formerly known as the White Domain, is separated into three distinct kingdoms.

“The Dwarven Kingdom of Ebruroth is located in the north. A mountain region, the Dwarves mine ore, minerals, gems, and other rare materials. King Regnar Baltharm rules, and he, as are many on the governing Clan Council, is from the Ruby Clan. They have the largest clan and, as population dictates, have the most representatives on the council. Baltharm has ruled for hundreds of years and still has a firm grip on the Kingdom. A King’s position is for life, and when one dies, there is a council vote. Due to their iron-clad grip on the council, the Kings have come from the Ruby Clan for thousands of years. The clans’ bonds are extremely close, and to even think of tyranny and assassinations is not only shameful, but you would be put to death cruelly. The Dwarfs know they must always stand together, as they have riches, and that is most important.

“The Red Clan is deemed the middle class of the Kingdom. They aspire in their youth to become great smiths, merchants, and explorers. Many of the Red Clan reside in the human Kingdom, living and working as merchants and smiths.

“The Copper Clan is the lowest class in the Dwarven Kingdom. They are mine workers, ore and steel smelting workers, and some have degraded themselves to thievery or mercenary work, doing others’ dirty business.

“The Ruby Clan is known for their wit and great diplomatic skill. They are the elite ruling class. This clan was the first to find the rich gem mine in the Emerald Mountains. In time, they became rich and powerful. As they say, a smart wit and wealth are what you need to govern.

“The Emerald Mountains have the richest mines in all the Kingdom; they lie east of the Royal City of Thurbolder, home of the King and the Grand Clan Council. Gem mines of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires are rare but they are there, and well-guarded. There are also gold, silver, and the rare metal Dimeritium.

“It has been said the largest diamond mine in the entire Realm exists somewhere in the ancient Sungue Volcano. The highest mountain in existence, and to get to the highest peak, one would have to travel through the Moaning Rise, proceed to the Diamond Pinnacle, and then, if still alive, one would have to traverse The Desolate Tips. It is also said that each of these extremely dangerous areas are filled with all kinds of creatures, who protect their domains fiercely. No one in the modern age has ventured there. Only old and ancient stone tablets have information on this area, and they are well guarded where they are kept in the Royal vaults.

“Other Dwarven cities of interest are Khuldirth in the western Rimver Peaks region. Kor Durahl is a coastal city, the only area a landing could be attempted, but considering a ship hasn’t been seen since the adventurer Titus Kliomara in the year 0, according to Humans, although in Dwarven years it was 3485. The only other city worth mention in the Kingdom is Gemgrum. Ben Boldir is the guardian city which protects the only mountain pass into Eruroth. It is right on the borderlands; to the southeast lies Elderwood, and to the southwest, Kliomara.

“A note on Dimeritium: it is a rare and precious metal with one interesting feature—it represses the transfer of magical energy.

“Dwarfs do have deities, but they spend most of their time concerned with politics and mining. When faced with critical threats, only then do they turn to their gods.

“The Elven Kingdom of Elderwood, or in Elven Hen Caed, is ruled by Queen Lensa Glynmenor, who, like Baltharm, has ruled for hundreds of years. The Elves worship Theia, the divine Goddess of Light, insignia a burning sun, and the deity Porvata, God of the Woods.

“The Elven Kingdom is vast, with dense forest. There are some areas that are forbidden to venture in. In the deepest area of the forest sits the Capital of Hen Caed, the beautiful city of Livien Taure, which is surrounded by the Living Forest. Scores of the Elite Elven Guardians, the protectors of the Kingdom and the Royal Guard of the Queen, give the Royal city protection, as well as the many outposts that dot the boundaries of their borderlands. It is said

that other creatures of the forest guard the Royal city, but they are just rumor. Who believes in Ents (living trees) and Dryads (living, elf-like woodland sprites)? Other cities of Elderwood: Enathbel to the west, deep in the woods. Isanshara is south of the Capital city and guards the southern forest. Amanora, the most eastern city, sits atop a plateau overlooking the Sennebrian River and the expansive Beaverdeem Loch, the largest lake on the continent. Note: the Sennebrian River is a natural border between Elderwood and Kliomara. Iyvalone is another important border city, as it skirts the Dwarven Kingdom of Ebruroth.

“The Human Kingdom of Kliomara is ruled by Emperor William Vincent Themerfal. His father, Stephan Aldous Themerfal, died at the ripe old age of eighty-one. His father was best remembered for his role in the ending of the Heretic Inquisition Wars, which had been going on for one hundred and forty-one years. The war ended in the year 255, and he died in the year 305. William has been in power ever since. At the date of this printing, twenty years have passed.

“The Kingdom is a City-Provincial government. There are five Provinces total, including the Imperial State. The other four Provinces are Waterdale, Drehin Wood, and Upper and Lower Chiffren. The government has both a Senate and House, which has representative from all Provinces.

“The Kingdom’s official deity, who they worship, as evident of temples throughout Kliomara, is Helm, God of Protection. They also acknowledge the deity Tempus, the God of War. Their Royal insignia is an upright flaming sword, which honors the founder of the Kingdom, Titus Kliomara.

“There are other religions in Kliomara, though they are banned. One of note that has reared its ugly head in the past decade is the Cult of the Dead, comprised of fanatical followers of the Shaman Gurukk, who died in 252; three years later, the end of the Heretic Inquisition came to pass. Recent evidence suggests that the Cult lives on. Though sparse, they are dangerous.

“It is ill advised to travel to the southern-most part of the continent. First, south of the Kliomara Empire, there are the Swamps of Sothris. These marshes and bogs extend east to west, baring entrance to the ragged foothills, the Chesdan Bluffs, named for the General who lead the battle against the Lizardfolk. It was said that they were defeated, but scholars are warning that there is strong evidence that the Lizardfolk, to save their race, entered the Abyss and ventured into the Withered Hinterland. If one was foolish enough to want to travel to the Withered Hinterland, it can’t be reached by the Forbidden Sea. The Hinterland is surrounded on all sides by plateaus, with cliffs reaching hundreds of feet into the air all around the land. One would have to traverse the swampland, the Bluffs, and then the Abyss. What lay in these regions, no one really knows.”

Zendar shut the book. “A whole lot of information to consume, and remember what Istara said—today, we have made an enemy.”

Bervanlaw, who had been listening attentively, said, “It is clear, we must go to the Withered Hinterland and hunt monsters. How else are we going to raise such a huge sum?”

Cassandra turned away in disgust. She lay down beside Alexis and covered herself in fir branches.

Ozzadnar looked at the Dwarf with keen eyes. “You may have a point. Fifty thousand gold crowns is a Kingly sum, but we can’t just go off and rush in there!”

Zendar took the Ranger’s lead. “That’s right, Dwarf. First, we must make contact with people in settlements and towns, learn what we can; take jobs, earn money, upgrade our skills and equipment, and then, if we can’t figure out any other way to earn what we need to resurrect Kitt—*then* we find out who would actually buy exotic monster goods.”

Alexis, who had been listening to the scrabble, baited the men. “While you idiots argue, perhaps Cassandra and I should go to a human city and gain employment at the best establishment offering ourselves. Look at us—we are beautiful. We could make a fortune in no time.”

Cassandra knew the game Alexis was teasing about. “Look at me! Other than Istara, I may be the most beautiful Elf outside of Elderwood!”

Zendar bowed his head, realizing the futility of the discussion. “Point well taken, ladies. Look, let us rest. We’ve had a very emotional day, to say the least. We will make our plans after everyone has gathered their thoughts.”

Bervanlaw and Ozzadnar nodded. A contagious yawn burst forth from Bervanlaw just then, igniting a chorus of yawns around the fire. The Specter had been fun, the skeletons exhausting. Sleep was welcome.

Cassandra lay close to Alexis, whispering, “I am glad those knuckleheads didn’t take us seriously; to become a lady of the night, with men? Never.”

Alexis giggled quietly, but then her expression hardened. “You do know, I would do anything to bring back my man.”

Two

Ozzadnar stirred the ashes, satisfied as only blackened embers remained. He had been the first to awaken, pre-dawn, to fading crickets and the first sounds of birds chirping. A low mist hovered over the meadow in a slow dance, awaiting the sun; it would dissolve the majestic masquerade.

He glanced over to Cassandra and Alexis, “Pleased with breakfast?”

Alexis, who hadn’t slept well, continued her silent mourning. The Cleric, finishing off a handful of wild raspberries, wrapped an arm around her shoulders and hugged her gently.

Glancing at Ozzadnar, “It is pleasant to know, Ranger, that your survival skills will aid us. Thank you.”

Zendar and Bervanlaw, having ended a deep conversation, approached the rest of the group. “The Dwarf and I have been discussing where we should go from here. From the information Istara gave us, along with one of the books, I have determined we are somewhere in the Province of Waterdale, just north of the capital city Dwydon. It would be a good place to explore for merchants and other places of interest to gather information. We were warned of dangerous times.” Zendar paused and slowly stroked his beard, looking the group over. “We can decide once we get a grip on the mood of Dwydon and its surroundings, and go from there.”

Alexis looked to Cassandra. “But—”

The Cleric, having already sized up the situation, interrupted her. “That is your plan Wizard? You and the Dwarf mumble together and decide to go to the nearest Dh’oine city?”

Zendar stared at her, puzzled. “Dh’oine?”

“Sorry, Wizard. I thought you were the wise one, yet I see you are not well acquainted with the Elder speech. It means Human, you dolt!”

Bervanlaw smiled, fully enjoying the fact that the beautiful, stunning Elf wasn’t taking her dislike for men out on him, for once. “It is a fact, Elf, that mighty Elven Warrior Mage did warn us, so you two pointy ears can stay outside Dwydon, while real men do what is necessary.”

Infuriated, Cassandra reached out, pulling Alexis up. “To hell with you, Dwarf. We pointy ears are heading north, then west to make our way to Hen Caed—or, for you uninformed idiots, the Elven Kingdom of Elderwood. If you can keep up with your stumpy legs, Dwarf, let’s see if you use such tone and words among my people.”

“Wait, wait,” the Ranger stepped in, looking from Cassandra to Bervanlaw and back, “please, Cassandra, we must keep together. The Dwarf meant no harm, and Zendar was just looking to go to the nearest populated place. Agreed, we will make our way soon to Hen Caed, together, but we must get our bearings and also obtain supplies, food, and most importantly, information.”

Although Alexis yearned to head straight to the Elven capital to check on the status of her man, she said, “Cassandra, Ozzadnar is right. We do need to get our bearings in this world, and we must obtain supplies. We know from the Wizard’s reading, the Dh’oine towns are hubs of commerce, and Dwarfs live among the Humans. Elves do not, or at least not many pure Elves do, but you and I can stay to the outskirts.”

Impatiently, the Cleric capitulated. “Fine, then, I will agree—but listen carefully, gentlemen: you are to go into the city and be as quick as possible. Get what we need, then we push north!”

The day so far had been pleasant. The mid-morning sun had shrugged off the brisk dawn for warmth, evident by the cascade of butterflies: Morning Glories, Red Admirals, Commas, and Painted Ladies, taking the lead from the faded mist, continued the dance in the meadows.

Cassandra was the first to hear something coming from the road they travelled, from the south. "I think we should get off the road; what is coming isn't just a few horses."

The group, knowing this would be their first encounter with whatever it was, swiftly guided themselves to the wooded area to the west of the road they travelled. For hours, they watched as wagon after wagon made its way north. Men, women, children, crying babies, merchants, farmers, livestock in cages, cattle tied to the backs of carts. It was unsettling, as it didn't look like the vast caravan travelling was doing so willfully. Their faces were grim, unwavering, as they steadily moved away from the direction of Dwydon. The warm morning gave way to a hot afternoon, made all the more unpleasant by the dust stirred up from the well-worn roadway, as wagon after wagon rolled on.

Ozzadnar, as the party's chief scout, motioned to the others to get together. They were bewildered. "I am sure you are all aware by now, something is going on to the south. This cavalcade of wagons is too vast to be a normal thing. They are fleeing something, and we need to find out what. I spotted a wagon further down the southern road. It looks like they pulled off the path, and are fixing a broken wheel. Luck may just be on our side; the individuals look like merchants. We should investigate and see what information we can gather."

The others nodded. Words didn't need to be spoken; they had to find out exactly why people were desperately fleeing to the north from Dwydon.

Ozzadnar and Zendar, with Bervanlaw in the rear, approached the broken-down wagon. They made it appear they had also come from the south, to avoid alarming the merchants. There were two men, a young boy, and a woman. One of the men, clearly the leader, was directing the other man and the young boy, who appeared to be around fifteen. The man in charge was very tall, a good head taller than Ozzadnar, and built stoutly. Even the Dwarf was impressed. When the man noticed them approaching, he leaned to his wagon and lifted a crossbow in their direction. Zendar, sensing hostility, whispered an incantation to calm the man. "Dear Sir, we come as friends. We are in need of hospitality, and we will gladly pay, if your goods are what we seek."

The man eyed the trio up and down, then handed the crossbow to the young boy. "Keep an eye on them, Joel—if any of them lift a finger to their weapons, oblige them with a bolt." With a cold smile, he told the men, "The boy can shoot."

Ozzadnar took the lead. "It would be foolish to rob you among this march of people; we are simply in need of supplies. We didn't want to disrupt anyone on the road, but you are in a situation of need, and we willingly offer help in exchange for information and perhaps goods."

The leader, at last deciding the trio was not a threat, put out his hand to shake. "My name is Martin Mensford. This here is my boy Joel, my brother Alfred, and my wife Mildred. We are

merchants from Dwydon.” He turned to Bervanlaw. “Perhaps your Dwarf friend will give a hand. Are you good with a hammer, sturdy little man?”

The dwarf smiled, spat into his hands, and said, “Does a bear shit in the woods, merchant? Of course, I am! But it will create a thirst.”

Mensford and his family had been through a great deal in the past few days; they welcomed the candidness of Bervanlaw. “Help us get this wagon back on the road and I will treat you all to some beverage you will appreciate. We also have a store of provisions we can share and sell if you are in need.”

Zendar seized the opportunity to speak up, knowing Cassandra and Alexis were watching from afar. “We have two more in our party, Mr. Mensford. They are Elves.”

“Just call me Martin, Wizard. I am not prejudicial in my judgement, like many these days.”

After the wheel had been satisfactorily secured, the merchant showed the party his wares. Mostly foodstuffs and herbs, which Zendar gladly bought for the coming days; many were ingredients both he and the Cleric could use to make healing potions, and also to concoct anti-poison medicine. They hadn’t forgotten about the vast maze of spider webs in the crypt and aging marble corridors. Those hadn’t been created by little arachnoids.

With the wagon fixed, the merchant’s wife had prepared dinner for all, a savory stew with boar’s meat and plenty of vegetables. Cassandra and Alexis nodded their approval when Mildred asked them if the food had been to their satisfaction. The Cleric was well aware, at least for tonight, it would be the men who would converse. No need for strangers to be concerned with or question her hostility toward the male species. Bervanlaw, as was his custom, burped, smiled, and held out his mug to the merchant Martin. Cassandra rolled her eyes in disgust.

Catching her expression, Bervanlaw said, “Don’t mind the Elf, Martin; she’s not a big drinker. Fine ale, sir, may I have but one more?”

The merchant was enjoying the company of his new acquaintances. “You did a great service in helping, Dwarf. Certainly, another.” He smiled as Bervanlaw swallowed it down, and offered the ale once more. “And perhaps another, but now I will tell you of what you all asked about troubles to the south.”

Suddenly, Cassandra straightened up. “Quiet,” she hissed. “I sense something—something, or *things*, are all around us!”

Focusing, the Dwarf, Elf, and Half-Elf could see translucent, shining, yellowish eyes, many shifting and fading in and out of the shadows that engulfed the campsite perimeter.

“Bloody hell, wolves—and big ones, at that. Dire Wolves, to be exact; I can tell by their smell.”

Quickly acting, the Wizard barked orders. “Mensford, you say your son is keen with a crossbow. What about you, do you have another? Your brother, Alfred, have him protect the

shooters. Cassandra, Alexis, be ready with your bows, watch to our flank—don't fire that way. That is where you, Dwarf, will cover. The Ranger and I will go and cover the remaining area.”

Mensford was panicking. “They are fierce beasts, Wizard, and not all of us can see.”

“Leave that to me and act fast, it's us or them! Cover your eyes people,” Zendar shouted. In the next instant, Zendar cast a brilliant light spell and the sphere exploded, blinding the huge Dire Wolves. Before they could escape, arrows flew, bolts zinged, magic missiles exploded, and steel cut into furry flesh. A few of the beasts managed to escape but were scorched on their backsides by lightning bolts. It was over in less than a minute, but to all, it had seemed like more.

The merchant and his entourage were now fully invested in their guests. “The Deity of Helm be praised, and also to you, our newfound friends. I haven't seen fireworks like that since, well...hell, I can't remember.”

The Wizard smiled. “It was not all fireworks, and there was fine shooting and cleaving going on.”

Beside him, Ozzadnar pulled out a long knife. “Let's skin these beasts and gather what we can!”

It didn't take long, and after washing up the blood, scraping the hides, and stretching them out, the entire group settled down once again around the fire, which felt cozier now.

Zendar turned to Mensford. “Before you start Sir, on what we asked earlier, tell me, how did you know I was a Wizard?”

The merchant narrowed his eyes. “It was not difficult, Wizard. At your initial approach, I had anxiety, even a little fear. I saw you mumbling, then all of a sudden I was calm, no fear. It was clear you possess magical power, but beware on using it. Others may not be so inclined to accept it.”

When the Wizard appeared satisfied with the answer, Mensford cleared his throat and addressed the group. “Over the last several months, Dwydon has been overrun with priests from the Order of Helm. Trust me when I say this, I have been many times to the Imperial Capital and visited the grand temple of this cult. I have never heard such preaching in my entire life, as such that was going on in Dwydon.” He paused, scratching his chin in thought. After a moment, he sighed. “It was soothing, in the beginning. We all knew of the tensions between Emperor Themenfal and the brothers Iain and Angus Leoideach of Upper and Lower Chiffen. There has been a rift between them for many years now. What it is all about is only speculation, though. My thoughts on the matter, I know it has something to do with a struggle for ultimate power over the region.” He glanced at Bervanlaw, Cassandra, and Alexis. “I am sorry to say, the brothers Leoideach are stirring up old animosity between the races.”

For a moment, all that could be heard was the crackling ambers of the fire.

“I am sorry to frighten you, but my words do not come without substance. These priests continued to preach against the evils of races mingling, and that the Dwarves in the northern mountains cared little about the plight of their fellow citizens of the Realm, only interested in enriching themselves at the expense of the only pure race, Humans.”

Zendar thought about the familiar political atmosphere...“Martin, you say these priests purposefully are being used to insight anger, vengeance—to what end?”

The merchant got up, motioned to Bervanlaw to give his mug, then filled it with ale. Gesturing with the pitcher to the rest of the group, he asked, “Anyone else?” The Dwarf was pleased, but had grown serious on news of a possible war propagated on race. Likewise, the light of the fire flickered across solemn faces all around. Martin returned to his seat.

“I am not sure of the purpose of the message of these vile priests, Wizard, or why these specific ones are circulating hatred against non-humans. I can only speculate. It could be to cover up something more sinister.”

Cassandra, who had been silent until now, leaned forward. Her eyes reflected the flames, emphasizing the anger in her voice. “Merchant, what could be more sinister than spreading hatred and inciting violence against other races? We all know about the Heretic Inquisition Wars; what is so different?”

“Point well taken, Miss, but hundreds of years ago, Humans, Elves, and Dwarves fought the Beastmen together, defeating the Orcs and other beast races into oblivion. A part of our history, but there is now hatred being heaped on other races by Humans. In the past, the three races have been united, going so far as to sign a binding treaty long ago.”

Silence. Shadows danced upon Martin’s face. What would come next, Zendar could tell, was grim.

“Let me continue.” The man hesitated, taking a deep breath. Then, he met Zendar’s eyes. “A large army, donning insignias of elongated Lions, with both upper and lower longswords, sigils of Upper and Lower Chiffen, marched on our capital, Dwydon, and lay siege, thus the exodus and this long caravan of Waterdale’s people, fleeing for their lives.”

Zendar closed his eyes, rocking back slightly at the news. He was disturbed to hear it, but unsurprised. Looking back at Martin, he said, “So, it has begun, what we had been warned. Troubled times, and now civil war engulfs the Kingdom of Kliomara. Is there any other important news? What of the Imperial Capital, Kilburn?”

Downing the last of his ale, Martin shook his head. “I have no idea Wizard. We in Waterdale are unaware of what is going on in the Imperial Province, or any of the other Provinces.” Looking around at all the subdued faces, fire flickering in their eyes, he stood. “The women folk can sleep in the wagon; we men will make do on the ground. Stay alert and sleep with one eye open in case more Dire Wolves pass our way. When morning comes, we will say good-bye, thankfully appreciative in the making of new friends.”

Istara stared at the body of Palicfin. The once bluish-white glow which had engulfed his body had been replaced by a much stronger spell. His body, now more radiant in a light green and silvery aura, rested on the Alter of Light.

The Queen of the Elves, Lensa Glynmenor, was slender, beautiful, with eyes which made one bow down, yet could also be piercing. Cassandra had thought Istara was beautiful, and she was, but the Queen of the Elves had no equal; her allure was eternal. She moved with grace, in a gown of flowing white and the paleness of Luna green, trimmed in silver, with an adorning decorative silver pattern throughout.

“Tell me again, Istara, why did you bring this Dh’oine to the Capital...to me? You know resurrection is forbidden. You know what it will take, and I implore you to explain, since when do you interfere in things you shouldn’t? You have been given a gift from the Dragon God of Light, to hunt where evil festers—more specifically, to protect Hen Caed, our Kingdom.”

Kneeling, head down, Istara said, “I am sorry, Mother, but there is something different about this man I have brought to you. There is something different about the entire party I ran into chasing that evil, cultist sorcerer. One of them told me they had come from another realm, but time was precious, and I couldn’t waste it to investigate further.”

“Stand up and don’t be so indignant; we are alone, mother and daughter. Formalities need not be between us. You say they are from another realm—what do you mean did they land here from another land, like the Humans once did?”

“I am not sure, Mother, but I have dealt with many people, races, monsters, and creatures from the deepest dankest places in our world...these people had something inside them I could not quickly decipher.”

The Queen was used to having her questions answered. “Speak plainly, Istara.”

Istara glanced once again at the glowing body of the Paladin. “Mother, they all had the same aura, as if they were all the same. I have never experience that when dealing with others, especially considering two were Dh’oine, one Dwarven, and two Elven, though one was a Half-Elf. How could that be possible?”

“A question of intricacy, my dear one, yet it is difficult for me to decipher as well; this one here is definitely Dh’oine.”

“Will you inquire for the necessary help?”

“I will tomorrow, as the monthly shipment is ready to be delivered.”

“Thank you, Mother, I am forever grateful. I must go now and tend to my duties.”

The Queen mulled over the complexity of what she had promised her daughter, knowing the possible ramifications.

The last of the Royal guard possessing the large shipment had passed through the portal. Escorted by her Elite guard, they pressed into the shimmering gateway.

The Elite guard stood at attention by their Queen's side, awaiting him in the large, stone-walled portal room. At the one end, opposite where the portal had been, two large, shimmering black doors laden with silver ruins opened.

He was a tall man, with pale white skin tinged with hints of purple and grey. His features were refined, eyes black, piercing. He wore black plate adorned with Elven ruins similar to the door, trimmed in gold and silver. A silver scimitar at his side radiated a blue-purple aura. He bowed to the Queen, and took her hand. The Elite guard followed, but kept their distance; they knew of Royal protocol.

“My dear Lensa, it, as always, is a pleasure to see you. Thank you for the shipment, it is greatly appreciated.”

The Queen was used to the King of the Dark Elves' charm. “King Katar, are all the Drow as charismatic as you?”

King Katar Zinfaren, the leader of the Dark Elves—or the Evil Drow to the Dwarves and Dh'oine—thought for a moment. “My gracious Queen, you are too kind with your words, but sadly, living underground for hundreds of years has been harsh on our—or, let me say, *my* people. We live by magic light, never seeing the true light above ground. Though we make it work, with the help you give us with needed supplies, it is an existence void of green grass, forests, and clear rivers. Water is plentiful here, yes, but it is always darkness that prevails. The few that are born here have never seen the beauty that is Hen Caed.”

She squeezed his hand as they took their seats at the long, rectangular table of black onyx.

“We are grateful for the crystal you mine for us, Katar. Without it, our magic would wane.”

“It is an even trade, Lensa, yet I am not sure how long we can survive here. Most of our babies are stillborn, and you know what that means...”

The King's words brought back a dreadful memory to the Queen...

“Lensa, I must show you what we are becoming.”

Escorted by Elite guards, they approached a giant cavern, which had a large black Alter in its center. It was the Alter of Darkness. A lone soldier swiftly carried a stillborn infant, dead, and placed it on the Alter, then quickly retreated. Minutes passed. Then, eerie sounds emanated from the hundreds of webbed holes surrounding the vast cavern. Each, in turn, filled with pairs of blackish-purple eyes, waiting to pounce if needed to protect Nazroh'ruhad, the Ancient Queen of the unseen spider-like beings.

Squeezing out of the holes, dozens of creatures emerged, standing on eight hairy legs, spider like, but instead of fangs, multiple eyes, and a cephalothorax, each had a body, Elven in shape. Their bodies attached to a large spider-shaped abdomen. Each carried a large black composite bow at the ready. They were gruesome, hideous, and evil. Dark grey skin, shimmering coal-black, shoulder-length hair, and narrow, glowing deep purple eyes—fierce warriors standing at least seven feet high. The Ancient Queen’s guard. They formed a horseshoe shape around the Alter.

The earth trembled with the force of her bursting forth from an enormous, dark webbed hole—the Black Queen had arrived.

She was huge, standing twelve feet tall on black hairy legs. Her body was shimmering black with an under abdomen of deep purple, a spideresque creature. She had the torso and head of a woman, with flowing blackish-purple hair and huge, glowing purple eyes. She was dressed in shining deep purple armor, showcasing two muscular arms, easily capable of wielding the gigantic scimitar and shield at her side. She approached the Alter and leaned down to the stillborn Dark Elf. In words that no Elf could understand, she cast a spell. Then, she sank down and engulfed the once-dead baby, who was now twitching, and began spinning webs, spinning and spinning...

Gathering the web-encased baby into her arms, she turned and, with lightning speed, crawled back to the hole from which she’d come and disappeared into the darkness. Minutes later, when the Ancient Queen was safe, her protectors disappeared, and with them the eerie atmosphere that had permeated the air. All that remained was silence.

It was the first time Lensa had seen the ritual. She still remembered the painful prickling of gooseflesh and the intense chill that had engulfed her body at the sight of the Ancient Spider Queen. A shiver raced up her spine at the vision of that poor, lifeless infant stirring with new life, consumed by webs.

The spider creatures were not the only terrifying things that lived below.

With the memory fading once again to the back of her mind, she turned to Katar. “You provide the Ancient Spider Queen with stillborn babies, to make Driders—deadly warriors, protectors.”

“Yes, the Dwarves are forever encroaching on our vast caverns to the north. The damn greedy bearded ones, the Driders are the only thing keeping them at bay. If we are discovered, you know what would ensue. It is the price we have to pay.”

Queen Lensa knew what would happen if the Dark Elven Realm was discovered. The Dwarfs would spread news to all three Kingdoms above ground. All would be called to war, including her Elven Kingdom of Hen Caed—to hunt down and annihilate the Drow to extinction. There was no choice in the matter—it was an ancient treaty signed by the Human, Elf, and Dwarf Kingdoms long ago. This treaty had been the one thing that allowed the three races to live together, even though they had great differences. It bound them.

“Let us not speak of such things. There is something pressing I must ask you.”

The King smiled, his dark eyes softening. “Anything for you, my dear Lensa.”

After a lengthy explanation, the King responded. “For you to ask this of me, it must be of special importance. You say there is something different about these beings not from our world, that their aura is one and the same...strange. I will resurrect this Dh’oine, but as you know, it comes at a very high price. The Dragon God of Darkness requires a tidy sum of diamond dust.”

“Yes, Katar, I am well aware, and when they gather this requirement, we will confer once again on the matter.”

The King had spent countless hours pondering his Kingdom’s plight. He had, for decades, contemplated a solution. He ruled supreme; if an opportunity arose, he would take it. There was only one way to lead his people from darkness, and that was to lead them into the Light.

With the Queen and her entourage of Elite guards long gone, the Dark Elven King summoned the highest Black Mage in his Kingdom.

Vexus the Black, they called him. He was slight of build, very old—ancient some say—with dark skin, purplish-grey, even black in some areas. Many speculated that his skin pigment was due to his constant exposure to magic crystals.

He slowly approached his ruler. “My King, you request my services?”

“Yes, Vexus, I need you to research what it will take for our people to live once again above ground, in the light. Search your ancient scrolls, manuscripts; it is of vital importance to the continuing existence of our people.”

Vexus the Black bowed to his King. “At once, it has troubled me for a very long time, with the birthrate of our people. At the rate it is going, we would suffer extinction in a hundred years or so, due to infertility and stillborn births.”

As the sorcerer turned to leave, the King asked him one last question: “Vexus, you experienced the war on our people hundreds of years ago...What do you think would happen if we were discovered?”

The sorcerer, head bowed, stood silent for a time in deep thought. When he looked up at his King, sorrow filled his eyes. “Centuries ago, we were very lucky. Now, with the Dh’oine are as strong as they have ever been, and the contempt the Dwarves have always had for us—I would fear for all Elf Kind, my King.”

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Cedrick Loeideach walked briskly toward the private hall of his cousin Iain Loeideach, the Viceroy of the Province Upper Chiffen. His plate mail, with an elongated Lion with a longsword above the beast, flashed every other step as radiant sunlight streamed through the mosaic windows in the granite hallway. The rays lit up the impeccable marble-inlaid flooring. It was the most decorative and majestic of the Viceroy’s home: Darumburgh Castle. Pausing at the

grand duo doors of the grand hall, the Grand Chancellor gathered himself; although they were related, Iain was about the Province's affairs, first and foremost.

Upper and Lower Chiffen had once been one large self-proclaimed Kingdom. Each of the Provinces had once been their own Kingdoms. The Viceroy's great-grandfather had negotiated with the other rulers of each of the Human Kingdoms, and all claims regarding borders and mineral and resource rights were heard and settled. The Kingdoms would unite and become the United Kingdom of Kliomara. Titus Kliomara, the original settler, was the one who had led the Heretic Inquisition in the first of many wars against the beast people. A statue in the Imperial Province towered over the Grand Cathedral of the Cult of Helm, honoring him. It had been decided and a proclamation signed for the creation of the Kingdom of Kliomara, with each of the victorious Generals carving up the land. Iain and his brother Angus were from a long line of Loeideach, the ruling family in the Chiffen Provinces.

After a quick introduction, the Viceroy waved his hand and all who were in the grand hall dispersed.

"What news from Waterdale, cousin?"

"My Lord, the siege is in place and they will capitulate soon. As you know, Viceroy Bellin is a tough old bitch. She was wise enough to see the writing on the wall and made it difficult in the beginning. Her army, though they cannot match the strength of ours, were able to put trenches in place, rows and rows of timbered defenses. These barriers, as I stated, prevented our troops from assaulting the ramparts of the castle in a timely manner. But we did do our due diligence. Before the siege even began, our scouts informed us of the surrounding defenses that were being built."

"I assume you have Highclaire Castle completely surrounded, then."

"Well, not exactly. As I said, you know how cunning the bitch can be: they have diverted water from the nearby river and created a moat on the north side of the structure, preventing any attempt to lay a complete siege. It took some time to traverse the bogs and moat they created. However, steps were taken prior to the siege. Silently and unseen, we created a perimeter all around the defenses and the moat. A company of good men guarded the road to the north. No one could escape, not even the wise old Bellin."

"I see. We should have acted sooner. Gwennlian Bellin can be malicious and shrewd; she is no idiot. In your estimation, when will we have her and the Castle? It is the key to our initial drive to take the Imperial Capital. We get Bellin, and her brother Emperor Themenfal will have to negotiate."

The dark sky grew weak, as it had started to wane into purple. It would be dawn soon and the siege, which had lasted for a week, would finally come to an end, one way or another. With the water that had been diverted from the river now blocked, the water had receded. Highclaire Castle was ripe for the picking. The delay had given the Chiffen army time to build extra ladders,

and had also allowed for many more trebuchets and ballista to be brought from Lower Chiffen. The Waterdale army wouldn't be able to withstand the onslaught of firepower and defend the entirety of the Castle walls. It was only a matter of time before the Chiffen military would have their prize—Viceroy Bellin.

It was a valiant effort by the Waterdale defenders. They used scorching pitch on the invaders who climbed their walls. Bolts and arrows rained down on the Chiffens, but they were ready with their long shields. Wave after wave of men assaulted the walls, as the trebuchets and ballista pounded the inner Castle grounds.

Finally, the Castle overrun, the Waterdaletons, downtrodden and solemn, witnessed what they hadn't ever seen: their fluttering flag, bearing golden crisscrossed tridents with a silver lightning bolt casting downward on a background of royal blue, being taken down and replaced with the Chiffen army's flag, depicting an elongated Lion on a shining white backdrop with silver longswords both above and below the beast. It was official. The capital of Waterdale was now a surrogate of the United Chiffen army.

With the flag raised, it was now time for the Supreme Commander, Simmond Robasdan of the Chiffen army—or as he was known, Simmond the Fearless—to claim his prize, Viceroy Bellin.

“Knight Captain, have we secured the Viceroy?”

“No, sir, these oak doors are very sturdy and the Lady of the Castle is reluctant to open them.”

Motioning for the officer to step aside, Simmond hammered on the door. “Come now, Viceroy Bellin, it is I, Simmond Robasdan. You have met me many times in the Capital. You will come to no harm. I have a directive straight from Viceroy Leoideach himself. You will be treated with the utmost respect.”

Only silence prevailed.

“Suit yourself, my Lady, but I know your terrace is high above the Castle grounds; it is a nasty, long fall. There is no escape, and to try would be suicidal.” He put his ear to the door...nothing, only silence and the faint sound of wind.

He turned, “I was warned—she is a stubborn old bitch!”

After many, many smashes of an oar battering ram, the doors to the private quarters of Viceroy Bellin, splinters flying, burst open. “Shields up, men—she may have guards who want to put up a fight.”

They rushed in.

The Supreme Commander's ear had not deceived him; it was wind he had heard. Delicate, royal blue drapery trimmed in gold fluttered beside the open door leading to the terrace. He truly thought she wouldn't have tried to jump—it would have been to her death. Slowly, he

approached the doorway. She and her guards may try one last ditch effort to seize the day. Longsword and shield readied, he and several stout soldiers stormed the terrace. To Simmonds great surprise, it was empty. Sadly, he approached the granite railing, yet found not what he had expected. There was nothing far below on the ground. Absolutely nothing, save for his men diligently leading captives to makeshift detainment quarters.

Back on the ground outside, a dozen Chiffen soldiers stood in front of the Supreme Commander.

Knight Captain Shelby addressed his commander. "These are the men who were detailed to watch the roadway beyond the moat to the north, sir. It appears that instead of doing their duty, they decided, due to non-action from the Castle, to indulge in merry making. We found an empty barrel, which had contained ale by the marking on the cask. We also found tracks, which came from either a wagon or carriage. Our assumption is the Viceroy and perhaps others escaped."

"Who was the lead Captain in this group, Shelby?"

The Knight Captain pointed the disgraced soldier out.

"Come to me, Captain, and explain yourself."

"It was a trick, honorable sir. A man, in our uniform, came out to us. He said, due to the stagnation in what was happening, which was nothing as our engineers were still working on the moat, it was going to be some time before anything would happen...and, sir, a barrel was given to me and my men. He said it was a gift from you. We were told to enjoy and be ready in the coming days, as the water problem would soon be solved."

Simmond looked back at the Knight Captain, who said, "There is a man missing, and not among the few of our dead. We also found a makeshift wooden bridge. Not very sturdy, mind you, but a wagon or carriage and horse and riders could have passed over the water."

The Supreme Commander knew there would be hell to pay. He was in charge, and for his men to be so foolishly conned, well, something had to be done, and quickly.

"Knight Captain, assemble the six fastest riders you have in this bloody army and follow the tracks. The ground is plenty wet from all the rain the past several days. A wagon or carriage would find it slow going. Track down that bitch and bring her to me."

"Yes, sir, and what of these men, sir?"

"Hang them publicly and draw it out. We must be disciplined, damn it! I want every goddamn soldier in this army to be on notice. There will be no tolerance for this kind of disobedience! Let these traitors swing in the wind until nightfall, then put their bodies on long pikes and let them rot. Post them throughout the grounds where the army is camping. I am sure the message will sink in when the soldiers wake in the morning."

The party had travelled miles during their march southward. The rain had made their march a bit slower. Considering their first day had been hot and humid, the coolness of the air was refreshing.

“We better get to this northern Dh’oine city soon, Wizard. I don’t want to sleep cold and wet like last night.”

The Wizard nodded his agreement. “Cassandra, I am sure we all do. It was a bit uncomfortable last night. We do have the capacity to create magic fire, but we had to stay unseen.”

The Dwarf, who didn’t mind the colder weather, said, “Yeah, if only the bloody Cultist Sorcerer would’ve had a weak fireball, Kitt the Valiant would be among us.”

The Ranger, who had just arrived back from scouting, cut in. “It is a matter of physics, people. Wet wood doesn’t burn well, but we are in luck: up ahead, I found an abandoned farmhouse. We will sleep dry tonight!”

The entire group’s mood improved and their steps quickened.

Cassandra had scolded the Dwarf before they had started their march south. Though he did have shorter, stubby legs, his stamina could be matched by none. Not even the Ranger, who was quite fit. When the others tired, he egged them on by saying things like, “Come on, now, you long-legged lazybones,” and “You know, I could pick up the pace, you loafers.” It annoyed Cassandra, which was exactly the Dwarf’s intent. It was the only way he could get under her skin, other than with his disgusting bodily functions like hawking and belching.

The party thought they would soon be enjoying the warmth and dryness of a nice, cozy farmhouse. They were wrong.

Thundering hooves approached from the south. They could see a man on a carriage, frantically whipping the horses. As the group watched, the carriage wheel hit a large rut in the road. The driver lost control, and a moment later, the carriage tipped on its side, stones spraying as it slid. Uncontrolled, the horses dragged the carriage into the underbrush, and then, with a great thud, stopped in a ditch. One of the horses was thrashing about, mortally wounded. There were accompanying Riders, who had been beside the carriage. They surrounded to defend it. Other Riders further from the south, who donned different colors, stormed down on them. Clashes of steel could be heard, yells, and screams.

Zendar, once again, acted quickly. He had noticed the shield of one of the soldiers guarding the carriage, and also the shields of the attackers. “Quickly, Dwarf, Ranger, rush the ones wielding the shields with the elongated lions, protect the ones in defense of the carriage.”

Zendar, who had admitted his magic was weak, did manage to fire off a lightning bolt, which didn’t kill one of the Chiffen riders, but did knock him off his horse. Bervanlaw had downed one of the attackers with a swing of his axe, cutting the horse down from underneath him. Ozzadnar, Cassandra, and Alexis rained on the Chiffens an onslaught of arrows.

The Waterdale defenders hacked away, until the last of the rebel riders were killed. It had not been easily won; the Chiffens had been fierce.

Of the four that had protected the Viceroy, only two remained, both wounded badly. One of the protectors of the carriage, swaying in pain, shouted desperately as he tried to hold his sword up. “Back away! Who are you? Speak!”

Zendar mumbled words to calm the wounded and frightened soldiers. His offensive skills were weak, but on charms and healing, not too bad.

The Ranger quickly gathered the surviving rebel horses. “Well, it looks like we won’t be walking.”

As Zendar surveyed the damage, he realized a loud, fierce pounding was coming from the carriage door. Someone was trying to open it, but with much difficulty. The door was heavy, and to open it upward was tough. A woman’s voice rang out, commanding and angry: “Get me the hell out of this bloody carriage, and let’s get this thing upright.”

The soldiers were in no condition to help, but the Ranger was nimble. Climbing up on the carriage, he approached the door and looked down. “My Lady, I am a friend. I helped your men defeat the attackers.”

Bellin’s voice boomed, “Presently, whoever the hell you are, I could not care—get me the fuck out of here!”

Ozzadnar, after a strenuous effort, forced the jammed door open.

The woman, after climbing out of the carriage, stood tall, towering over the mixed entourage. She was dressed in a royal blue dress trimmed in gold, a shining tiara adorning her hair, gems sparkling in the light of day. A large ruby necklace, the gems encased in gold, lay stunning across her collarbones. The soldiers both kneeled, though with some difficulty, as the platinum grey haired Viceroy Bellin looked over the strangers.

The Ranger, who had backed off the carriage, bowed. “My name is Ozzadnar, my Lady. I am a Ranger, at your service.”

Forcing a smile, the Viceroy took out a silk handkerchief and wiped blood from her lip. She had scanned the area thoroughly. “My name is Gwenllian Bellin. I am Viceroy in Waterdale, and presently, my home, my Capital, is under siege. I assume it is now in the control of the Chiffen army. Is there a healer among you? My men are in need, and would someone check the others?”

Cassandra stepped forward to tend to the men. “I am a Cleric, my Lady.”

Zendar, who had already checked on the others that lay on the ground, stepped forward. “I am Zendar. I am sorry to report to you, my Lady, your other two men are dead, along with the attackers.”

Viceroy Bellin closed her eyes, allowing herself a brief moment of sorrow over the fallen, then commanded, “Dwarf, I am sure you have a name, and you, the other Elf?”

Alexis was quick to respond with a curtsy. "I am Alexis, my Lady."

The Dwarf, who had gotten used to his gruff attitude, instead became timid upon hearing Bellin's voice. Sheepishly, he looked up at her, mumbling, "Err, ah, my Lady, I am Bervanlaw...Can I be of service?"

She snapped, "You, Dwarf, you like to dig? You and the other able men dig two graves and bury my men. I will not leave them to ghouls or any other beasts that might roam here."

Zendar, joining the Ranger and Dwarf in attending to the Viceroy's command, asked, "And of the others, the Chiffens, do they need a proper burial?"

"You will drag those rebel sons of bitches out into the woods to rot. Let the beasts devour them. They are murderers!"

A warm fire was burning in the farmhouse. The Viceroy's soldiers had been tended to and were resting in two of the four beds in the large farmhouse. The Viceroy had directed the ladies to the others, her in one and the Elven women in the last. The remaining men would make the barn their resting area, with each taking a turn throughout the night doing guard duty.

With night waning, Cassandra felt the need to talk to Viceroy Bellin. "My Lady, thank you for taking command. The men we travel with are good men, but they do need guidance."

The Viceroy smiled. It was the first since the harrowing experience of the day. "All men need guidance, my dear one, and I must apologize to you ladies. I don't usually use foul language, but men do ask the most mindless questions."

Cassandra smirked.

Bellin glanced at Alexis, and then back at the Cleric. "Tell me, you two are very beautiful Elven women...why are you travelling so far from Elderwood, and with a Ranger, Dwarf, and Wizard?"

With a lifted eyebrow, Cassandra responded, "It is a long story, my Lady, we travel with them out of necessity." Thinking quickly, she stretched the truth. "We were not aware of the hostilities between Waterdale and the Chiffen Provinces. I know it is not common for us Elves, but all of us do seek to be entrepreneurs, Dwydon was the closest capital, and we travel with those men for protection."

Viceroy Bellin, as the Chiffen hierarchy and military could now attest, was a wise old bird. She knew Cassandra was not conveying the real reason this mismatched group travelled together. Yet, it was not her concern. It was urgent to get to the protection of the Sennebrian Keep on the shores of the great lake—Beaverdeen Loch. The three hundred mile length Loch had been created thousands of years ago. It was named Beaverdeen due to the fact that the original, small lake had been created in a vast valley by a huge beaver dam located north on the Sennebrian River. The Elves created the Loch that exists today when they engineered a larger,

more stable construct. The construct did have two purposes: One, to create a greater buffer between the lands of the Elves and the Beastmen, and also to save the forest; although the Elves were people of the forest and cherished wildlife dearly, beavers were long down the list of their favorite, for obvious reasons—it took a hell of a lot of trees to build the original dam. Over the years, with both Dwarven and Human engineering, the great dam that breached the area today had been built. Interesting thing, no beavers inhabited the area—they had been hunted into extinction.

Ozzadnar was the first to wake. He went forth to scout and gather, as was his custom. Quietly, he rapped on the farmhouse door.

Viceroy Bellin was also an early riser. “Come in, Ranger, I have important things to discuss with you.”

He handed the Viceroy a bag full of berries. “You knew it was me?”

Bellin smirked. “I might be old, Ozzadnar, but I am not blind. I saw you earlier, from the window, going out into the woodlands. I wasn’t sure if you were out to gather things as you Rangers do, or to take, well, you know, to relieve yourself for whatever reason.”

The Ranger, for the first time dealing with Bellin, felt somewhat at ease. “You mentioned you had something to discuss?”

“Yes, sit down and be silent; the Elves are still sleeping, and trust me, they will need their rest.”

The Ranger settled in to listen to Viceroy Bellin, as he didn’t have a choice.

“Just north of this road, which, if you don’t happen to know, is Waterdale Main—and don’t give me any faces. I know it is a simple name for a road, but I was not the one to name the darn thing, and furthermore, it does run the length of the Province.”

Ozzadnar, in an obedient way, nodded slightly.

“There is another road that travels westerly all the way to Sennebrian Keep, which is located on Beaverdeem Loch. I am sure you know the road and place I speak of, Ranger?”

Ozzadnar wanted to act like he did, but he knew he was being tested by the wise old woman. “I am a Ranger, my Lady, but to be honest, I am not from around here.”

She looked at him with narrowing eyes, yet smiled. “I know; none of you are from around here.” She paused, searching his face, then seemed to make up her mind about something. “You will do your Ranger duty and cover our tracks. I fear others may still be in pursuit of me.”

Bervanlaw inspected the carriage. With a few whacks of his hammer, all was in order. Unfortunately, the jammed door had to be ripped off.

The Dwarf was a willing driver; horse riding was not to his liking. *Bloody stumpy legs*, he thought. He would have liked to ride a horse, instead of having his ass bumping up and down on

the rigid drivers' seat. Zendar accompanied him, with Cassandra and Ozzadnar on horseback. Viceroy Bellin, Alexis, and the two wounded soldiers rode in the carriage, with the remaining horses tied to the back. The Ranger did as the Viceroy commanded and rode in the rear, dragging a small sapling behind his horse to cover their tracks.

*

Grand Chancellor Leon Christian entered the throne room as he had been ordered.

A tall, well-built man with blondish-brown, shoulder-length hair stared out a window overlooking the Imperial Capital of Kilburn. He was dressed in finely crafted chainmail with gold plate shoulders, tied majestically together with black and red leather trimmed in gold. A shining gold breastplate engraved with crossed longswords with a crown above them.

“Leon, what are we to do? The last reports I received state the bloody Loeideach brothers have started a rebellion and have laid siege to Highclaire Castle in Waterdale. These bastards are to our west and south—what the hell are we to do, especially if they have my sister?”

“My Lord, we don't yet know the outcome of the siege reported from Dwydon. As far as the Loeideach brothers, Iain is smart and strategic, but his brother Angus is ill tempered, a hot head, and imbecilic. Perhaps we can use it to our advantage.”

Emperor William Vincent Themenfal—first of his name, from a long list of Themenfals who had ruled over of the United Kingdom of Kliomara, domain over all the Human Provinces—spun toward the Grand Chancellor, a look almost wild in his eyes. “That is your advice, Leon? I bloody well know Leon is smart and crafty. I also know his brother is an ill-tempered idiot. Some say he ventured into the Sothlis Abyss and never has been the same since. The fact he is a Viceroy only came about because his brother put him in that position, so he didn't have to deal with him. Tell me, goddamn it, what are we to do now?”

Grand Chancellor Christian bowed his head and gathered himself. “My Lord, I think it would be best to do several things, of course, upon your review. One, we must fortify all Royal Garrisons along the Chiffen borders. Second, we must also review the entire Royal Army. As you know, our conscripts come from all the Provinces, as mandated by the proclamation that declared the United Kingdom as an entity. Let us find out where the loyalties of the Chiffens lie. We do not know how may be involved in this rebellious conspiracy.”

Emperor Themenfal pondered, for some time. The Grand Chancellor, head slightly bowed, waited patiently for his eminence command.

“First, Leon, let us find out about my dear sister. Second, do create an investigation panel to inquire of their fidelity, throughout the entire Royal Guard. See where their loyalties lie. If there are any traitors among the Chiffens, they will see the questioning as intrusive. Lastly, reinforce all garrisons on the borders of Upper and Lower Chiffen as you have advised. If I am correct about this reported siege, the brothers' plan is to capture Gwennlian, and use her as a bargaining chip.”

The Grand Chancellor had not been given the job for reasons of heritage. He was a brilliant military man, and very intelligent. “I agree with everything you said, my Lord, yet we also must consider...if we put our main focus on the main areas of entry on the borders of the Chiffen Provinces, it will make us vulnerable in other areas, especially Waterdale. I think perhaps that is why they are in Waterdale, to make us think to concentrate our forces on their immediate borders.”

The Emperor had already considered that scenario. “We have to gain the help from Elderwood and Drehin Wood. I need to set up a council with Queen Glynmenor and Viceroy James. They all are threatened. With their help, we can protect our western border, so we can not only defend our southern and easterly borders but defeat these rebels. The Elves will be in danger from this threat, but could well be our godsend. Viceroy James would protect our northern border, naturally.”

The room was heavy with silence for several moments as both men contemplated the gravity of the situation.

The Emperor tapped a finger against his chin, a deep crease in his brow. “Leon, there has been disturbing reports of widespread preaching on racial hatred, focused on the hatred of the non-Human races by Priests of Helm. This is concerning.”

Leon Christian stood steadfast. “I agree wholeheartedly, my Lord. We also must look to the north and northeast to build our strength. The Province of Drehin Wood would never capitulate to the Loeideach brothers. The James family has long been supportive of the Themenfal family, and I personally know, the hatred between Tomas James and Iain Loeideach is deep. As for the Elves, well, you know their reluctance regarding interfering in Human affairs.”

Arms crossed, knuckles under his chin, the Emperor stared at the floor as he mulled over what the Grand Chancellor had said. “Agreed, and that is why I am not concerned regarding the province to the north, but the Queen of Elderwood must be convinced of the threat that is brewing. If this war—and yes, it is now—war drags on; the people from all the regions will be impacted. When the masses start to suffer, it is then they are most vulnerable, in many ways. Especially if the fires of racial divide have been stoked. They will not care about the facts, the reality; they will look to feed their families, protecting themselves and their lands. They will rally together, even in hatred.”

“Agreed, my Lord. The populace, when put under duress, will tend to capitulate to mob rule. It is very apparent Chiffon is promoting non-human racism. Most commoners will not see the real intent of the Rebels.” The Grand Chancellor bowed, ready to leave.

However, Emperor Themenfal’s head suddenly snapped to attention. With a piercing look, he proclaimed, “There are many things that need to be put in place immediately, my dear friend Leon. Perhaps the most important...try and find Istara Miraven. She would greatly help in convincing her mother to join us.” Slowly, deliberately, the Emperor turned away, back toward the window overlooking the Capital. As he stepped up to it, hands now clasped behind his back,

he said, “One last thing, Leon. Go to the Grand Cathedral and tell—no, *order* Severinus Havendane to come to the Castle at once. The High Priest of Helm has some explaining to do!”

The Emperor’s advisor agreed on the High Priest. Regarding the Elves, that was an entirely different matter. They tended to stay clear of Human conflict, and had done so for a hundred years, keeping to their own sovereignty and land, building defenses to ward off any intrusion against them. Sure, there was trade between all the races. It was the nature of commerce. In regard to finding and talking with Istara, it would be a daunting, if not an impossible, task.

He also knew of the protections the Elves’ Kingdom contained: the forest Dryads, the Sprites, and other beings such as the rumored Ents, living tree beings, but also of a great spirit of Light, a real, earthly creature—the legend stated it was of immense size and power.

Grand Chancellor Leon Christian didn’t believe in mythical creatures.

Severinus Havendane, the High Priest of Helm, who the Emperor wanted to see immediately—was nowhere to be found.

*

They finally arrived. Zendar had never seen such a structure, nor had any of their group: the towering Sennebrian Keep. It was massive; its grey granite silhouette sparkled in the sunlight. The fortress, with a backdrop of a shimmering grey-blue lake, seemingly going on forever to the north, west, and south, was impressive. Upon seeing it for the first time, the only thing one could deem—it was surreal. One could look to the north, the south, and west...nothing but endless, sparkling diamonds dancing on gentle waves in the sunlight. The granite structure easily was a quarter-mile in length. Tower upon tower lined the castle walls from north to south. The Keep could easily withstand any ladders or other devices that might try to breach the structure. The designers of the structure were engineering geniuses; they had known what they were doing. The fortress was impregnable.

The Dwarf, although impressed, thought, *what of the back side of this grand structure, where it faces the water?*

As Viceroy Bellin gathered the group, readying them to enter the Keep, Bervanlaw stealthily pulled Zendar aside.

“Wizard, have you ever seen such a thing?”

“The Sennebrian Keep was built by Humans and Dwarves. It certainly is tall, but don’t be fooled by the fact it’s narrow. It has deep underground tunnels, which also defend against anyone trying to dig underground to try and compromise the structure. It was built so tall that no ladder or siege tower could breach its walls. It is quite genius.”

“Wizard, all that I know regarding Dwarven Architecture...I have never seen a structure as wondrous as this construct.”

The Ranger, Dwarf, and Wizard sat in a large hall where a great dinner of venison, potatoes, and carrots had been served. It was one of the best meals they all had in some time, and the men had eaten their fill. While the men were still gathered around the table, Cassandra and Alexis, though they had enjoyed the meal, left to visit the kitchen in search of green vegetables.

Earlier in the day, the men had been granted permission to walk the walls. Viceroy Bellin had noticed they were getting restless; she had a feeling the entire party was growing restless. On the top of the walls, one could really get a sense of the enormity of the structure, the vastness of the Loch. For many miles to the east, it was nothing but shrub land.

The Ranger missed the woods. “Wizard, the three of us walked the walls for some time; it was good exercise. Still, one thing puzzles me. I did not see one boat, as far as the eye could see. I didn’t see any docks, nothing. What is up with that?” Ozzadnar spun his fork, completely bored. He hated being cooped up, and his fascination with the lack of boats did little to ease his agitation.

“I don’t know, really. Ask Viceroy Bellin. She mentioned she was going to gather the others and have a chat with us.”

The Sennebrian Keep, although in the Province of Waterdale, on the shore of Beaverdeen Loch, was for all intents and purposes an entity and property of the Ruling family Themenfal. It had served the Themenfal family and their relatives for centuries. Some of the common folk, who didn’t know of the real surroundings of the Keep, thought it a grand summer paradise with water and beaches, all one would want to get out of the populated cites. They were ill informed. First and foremost, the easterly area of Waterdale was sparsely populated, and there was a reason why. One would think, with such a vast body of water as the Beaverdeen Loch, fish would be in abundance, a great economy would thrive. Yet, it was not the case. The Loch, even in its brilliance, had no beaches, no splendor—oh, yes. There were fish, lots of fish, but also vile creatures. Though one could fish from the shore, boat fishing had been outlawed centuries ago. Why, one might ask? Ask those fishermen’s families to where their fathers, sons, and daughters who manned those fishing vessels had disappeared, and in mild weather. Never to be seen again. Those that searched for them were never seen again. One could look over the Loch and, every once in a while, see huge boils in the water. What created those boils...no one could say. Legend had it the Elven Mages had created creatures to protect the waterway from anyone trying to traverse the Loch. Those legends might have been true, but no one dared to set sail on the Loch to test the theory.

Viceroy Bellin, after giving Cassandra and Alexis truly sincere hugs, looked over the entire party. The group sat, some anxiously, all waiting in anticipation. She approached Zendar and gave him a small, decorative wooden box. He went to open it, but she stopped him. “Please, Wizard, wait until I tell you all my thoughts, then, in private, you all can see my gift to you.”

Zendar, who had grown accustomed to listening to the Viceroy, gave her an earnest smile and sat down.

The Ranger needed an answer. It was a great mystery, no boats on the Loch. “Before you start, and I mean to be respectful, my Lady, but I, along with the Wizard and Dwarf, thought it odd that there was not one boat on the water. Why?”

The Viceroy’s face hardened. “Why don’t you put a boat on the water and find out?”

She smiled. It was not the warmest of smiles. With Ozzadnar effectively subdued for the moment, she returned her gaze to the group as a whole.

“To be honest with all of you—I want to thank you.” She looked at each one, nodding in turn to the men and women before her. “I can thank you for guiding me here, but also for your bravery. If not for you, I would probably be in the clutches of the Viceroys of Chiffen. So, I thank you, and reward you. However, the reason I have brought you together is not merely to praise you or reward you. You each know of your virtue; it is self-evident. I will also tell you, I know there is something special about you. What makes you special, I will ponder. Perhaps at some time in the future, you will fill in the blanks of what puzzles me.”

She scanned the group. All eyes were on her. “You know the reason you are special. But, for now, there are things you all need to do. Wizard, Dwarf, Ranger—you will escort Cassandra and Alexis to the border of Elderwood. They need to be guided to the town of Four Falls, which is located at the northern reaches of Beaverdeen Loch. Cassandra, from Four Falls there is a road that will lead you west to the Elven city of Isanshara. Zendar, once the Elves are safe and on their way into Elderwood, I need you to deliver a letter to the Royal Garrison in Lakewood, which is east of Four Falls. Ozzadnar, the Chiffen Army may be coming here—let those fools. This Keep can withstand any assault they throw at us, for years if it must. You will leave, travelling along the shoreline north. You will find a road to Four Falls further on. You will lead the party on a northern path along the shore, which leads to a road that travels to Four Falls.”

She pulled out a small leather pouch and tossed it to Zendar. “There are two hundred gold crowns, which should be plenty for the delivery of the letter, and also help you get some better gear. I may be old, but my hearing is very sharp. Your whispering is well warranted, and your little cloth bag should protect your gold.”

With the warmest smile the group had ever witnessed since the day she climbed out of the carriage, Viceroy Gwenllian Bellin began her good-byes. “You two lovely women, Cassandra, Alexis...your mission is most important. You will need to venture deep into Hen Caed and convince Queen Lensa Glynmenor that a great threat is coming, and we, those who didn’t start this conflict, need help to defeat the great evil of the hateful racial dogma being preached and permeating throughout the land. This is not just a civil rebellion of the Kingdom of Kliomara—it will spread if the threat isn’t stopped and will turn into non-human genocide.”

Viceroy Bellin, wiping tears from her eyes, left. The party sat in silence for a long time; it had struck a chord with all of them to see Gwenllian’s demeanor. From the second they had met her, she had been stern, hard, and commanding. Her generous gesture and gift of gold would go a long way to help them—but it did come with strings attached. Why would such a strong woman be so affected? Now, it wasn’t just about resurrecting their dear friend, but a fight for justice for all.

Zendar motioned the group to come close together. “Let see what the Lady’s reward is.”

He opened the beautifully carved box. There wasn’t one among them whose jaw didn’t drop—inside was a flawless, ten carat ruby worth thousands of pieces of gold.

3

Stealthily, Cassandra and Alexis made their way through the forest. Gently brushing aside broad fern leaves, which grew in abundance, they pushed on, admiring the many plants and brilliant flowers. Entangled roots covered in moss bore out of the ground everywhere. This twisted gauntlet made travelling in a straight line difficult. Yet the Elven guards, who had given them directions, had been clear: The path was there for those who could see. It was an obvious reference. Elves moved swiftly and quietly, and were very difficult to track. Leaving behind only faint tracks on the velvet ground of the forest, the moss acting like a thin sponge, the trail would disappear within minutes. One would never see a broken branch, fern, or anything else; the velvety roots were the key. They could always tell when “others” were invading their forest, mostly due to the noise, yet even when intruders tried to move with stealth, they always left a track of trampled ferns, broken twigs, and gashes in the mossy carpet.

Up ahead, it grew brighter. The shadowing trees were giving way to a meadow. The Cleric alerted the Rogue, softly whispering, “I hear something ahead in the clearing. It sounds like children singing.”

Slowly, hunched down, Cassandra and Alexis crawled through the ferns, which were mingling with luscious green grass. Moss had become void and the ferns small. At the edge of the clearing, the grass was dotted with small flowering shrubs. The sprawling meadow before them was perhaps the most picturesque they had ever witnessed. Beautiful Bluebeard Caryopteris flowers, Butterfly bushes, Forsythias, and other colorful plants blended with wild flowers of light blue, radiant red, yellow, and purple created a vast masterpiece of vibrant splendor.

And then, they saw them—the source of the angelic singing. They looked at each other, smiled, and with admiration looked on: It was not children they heard but tiny fairies no bigger than a hand. Beautiful Sprites, their fluttering wings shining in the brilliant sunlight. Around a dozen of them were in the meadow, each with a slightly different color of hair, skin, and translucent wings. They danced, or rather frolicked, in the air around a beautiful white statue depicting a naked woman, arms stretched out, and a deer-like creature with head bowed down, reaching for the hands.

The tiny creatures reminded Cassandra of Istara in her original form, yet they didn’t shine as brightly. The majestic Sprites were singing a song:

Elaine blath, Feainnewedd

Dearme aen a'caelme tedd

Eigean evelienn deireadh

Que'n esse, va en esseath

Geainnewedd, elaine blath

Alexis gently pulled at the Cleric's sleeve, nodding toward the Sprites. "What are they singing?"

Cassandra, with a brilliant smile, said, "They are singing: A beautiful flower, the sun of a child. A dream when peace is in the world. But time is a life for everyone. What is still going on, waiting for the end. Beautiful flower, child of the sun."

Cassandra rose from hiding; she found herself so inspired, she had to join them in singing. "*Elaine blath, Feainnewedd. Dearme aen a'caelme tedd. Eigean evelienn deireadh. Qeu'n esse, va en esseath. Geainnewedd, elaine blath.*"

The Sprites were not impressed.

Hostile is a good word, Alexis thought as the scene unfolded.

The Sprites turned from happily romping children into angrily buzzing hornets. What Cassandra and Alexis didn't figure was the charming little people could become monstrous. Buzzing around Cassandra, they shot tiny arrows that felt like bee stings from their bows.

Cassandra cursed and quickly uttered a protection spell. "*N'aen aespar a me...You little bastards, stop! Stop—I am a friend!*"

Alexis, not wanting to kill any of the angry fairies, waved her short sword, purposely making sure she didn't hit any of them. It was hilarious, similar to how one would wave a fly swatter, but without the intent to kill or mangle.

Suddenly, a blinding light—as if it were born of the sun itself—appeared. The Sprites ceased antagonizing Cassandra and gathered together, like little hummingbirds hovering, heads bowed. In unison, they declared, "*Aen'drean va, eveigh Aine! Istarsa, weddin Rhena.*"

Cassandra also bowed, and repeated the words of the Sprites, but in the common tongue so Alexis would understand, "Come, the Immortal Light! Istarsa, child Queen."

Istarsa morphed into her Elven form. The Sprites bowed once again, then turned and swiftly disappeared into the forest to the west.

Istara motioned her hand for the Cleric and Roque to rise and looked to the white monument. “This statue depicts Queen Glynmenor, feeding the sacred Halla.” Admiring the naked figure, she said, “She was and is very beautiful.”

Cassandra passionately agreed.

Alexis thought, *What is a statue of the Queen doing out here in the middle of nowhere?* Aloud to Istara, she said, “My Lady, can I impose? We are out in a largely unpopulated area, yet there is this statue—for the Sprites to admire?”

Istara’s face grew cold and hard as stone. “There was an ancient battle here, long ago, between the Elves and hunters. They came across the water, in the hundreds, trapping and killing the Halla for profit. Since that day, no hunting or trapping is allowed.” Her eyes intense, her voice cutting, she said, “No one is foolish enough to try and cross the water. The Halla populated this area by the thousands, but unfortunately, they are now almost extinct. The few left live far to the west in the protected territory. To visit there, one would have to have the Queen’s permission; only in possession of a document with her seal could you travel there. Even with that permission, one is well warned, the area is heavily guarded.”

Cassandra, still as taken with Istara as the first time they met, stared at her with something closer to awe than admiration. “The Fairies said you were a child Queen, my Lady.”

“Yes, they are correct, yet I am no Queen. Actually, a Princess; Lensa Glynmenor is my mother.” She looked the two over and, with a piercing glance to the Cleric, said, “I am sure you noticed, those delicate, beautiful creatures can be very nasty. Are you okay?”

Where Cassandra plucked the tiny arrows from her shin, pinkish-red welts remained. “Damn little buggers, it feels like I ran into a bee’s hive.”

Alexis smirked as she noticed bees all around were busy pollinating the thousands of flowers that propagated the meadow. “The Elven guards did warn us, Hen Caed is a land of beauty and enchantment, but also dangerous and deadly.”

“Well said, Alexis, my dear girl. Now, tell me, what is your purpose in entering Hen Caed, young Ladies?”

Cassandra, eyes wide with the memories of recent days, began to relay the tale of their journey thus far. “It all started like this, my Princess...”

*

The rain had stopped. It wasn’t far to Four Falls.

“Thank the gods!” Bervanlaw, who had been bouncing on the rutted road, screeched. “My ass is getting sore, I have a thirst, and I am tired of having to pull this godforsaken wagon out of the mud.”

The Ranger, riding a gray mare, had just come back from forward scouting. “Don’t worry, Dwarf, the road ahead is dry, and Four Falls is not too far. As far as your sore ass, if you could ride a horse, perhaps you wouldn’t get wood splinters.” Laughing at himself, he rode back toward the front.

The Dwarf, not amused in the slightest, thought, *Hell with you, you god damn Ranger, isn’t my fault I have short legs.*

At last, the group approached the small guard post at Four Falls: Cassandra the Elf, Alexis the Half-Elf, Ozzadnar the Ranger, Zendar the Wizard, and Bervanlaw the Dwarf.

“Greetings!” Zendar bellowed. “We seek refuge and a place to sleep.”

The apathetic guards, more interested in their dice game, waved them through with barely a glance; it appeared the news of civil unrest and possible revolution had yet to reach their ears. Totally plausible, considering they were on the far western border of Waterdale, that word hadn’t reached Four Falls’s political structure yet, but that was about to change.

Zendar turned to his group. “I will take the Viceroy’s letter to those that govern Four Falls, and then we will make plans to head our separate ways. I suggest you all lay low.”

Bervanlaw, as was his habit, said, “Let’s find a tavern where we can lay low and fill our bellies with grub and drink?”

Ozzadnar nodded with great enthusiasm. “I am starving, and a good pint of ale sounds good to me.”

Cassandra and Alexis shared their consent as well; they were famished.

The Wizard, eyes narrowed, warned caution: “Okay, you all go fill yourselves and gather supplies for our journeys—we still must press on. Viceroy Bellin’s letters must be delivered promptly. We know what is at stake. Don’t get into any trouble.”

Wishful thinking; the Dwarf had a knack for turmoil.

Councilman Cullen Glas of Four Falls took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes with forefinger and thumb, and set down the letter. “You say, sir, that the siege of Dwydon happened days ago and Viceroy Bellin is now safe at the Sennebrian Keep?”

“Yes, sir,” the Wizard replied.

Glas looked down at the letter once more, then up at Zendar with a laser-like focus. “My men report that you and a motley crew came into town. Can you explain? It is highly irregular that Elves, Dwarves, and Humans travel together—never mind confessing to being involved in the rescue of our Viceroy, and speaking of rebellion.”

“Most respectfully, Councilman Glas, my crew is just a group who found themselves travelling together out of necessity. As far as the rebellion, I don’t speak of it; it is reported in hand writing by your own Viceroy—in a letter which bears her seal. Furthermore, I will not allow any degradation of the intent of my party to bring this information to you. We will be leaving soon. The Elves have a stated mission commissioned by Viceroy Bellin to travel into Elderwood, and the rest of my party will be departing for Lakewood. We need to deliver the Viceroy’s letter to the Royal Garrison there.”

Councilman Cullen Glas, with a slim smile, had examined intently the Viceroy’s seal. It was absolute and not some fraudulent copy. “You and your party will be treated with the utmost respect, sir. We will supply you with military escort to Lakewood. In regard to your Elven party members, unfortunately, we cannot offer any such escort. The Elves are a bit touchy on encroachment, no matter the circumstance. Any military, soldier, or official envoy has to be fully vetted and approved, and civilians are scrutinized even more closely. They will be on their own.”

Zendar, pleased with the outcome, briefly bowed his head in thanks. “Sir, we do appreciate your efforts. I understand the situation in regard to the Elves. I fear not for my party members who have been tasked to travel into Elderwood; they are capable. I also thank you for the escort to Lakewood. In these times of severe civil unrest, we must join together and defeat it.”

The councilman nodded his agreement. To the guard at the door, he motioned with a flick of his hand and said, “Please take this gentleman to his companions. All courtesies will be forthwith, and we will all do our due diligence to help them with their journeys forward.”

Inwardly, a great wave of relief overtook Zendar. *Thank god he believes the truth; another may not have been so forthcoming.*

The party did indeed fill their bellies and quench their thirsts. The Dwarf was too busy ploughing down grog and grub to yap off to any strangers.

Zendar found them, as directed by the town guard who had seen them enter the Hamstead tavern. He gathered the troop. “I see you have satisfied yourselves well. I suggest we get some supplies, as it is time we get to our tasks.” Looking at Ozzadnar and Bervanlaw, he added, “We will be escorting the ladies to the roadway that leads to Elderwood; they will be on their own from there. We gentleman are headed for Lakewood, to the Royal Garrison, with escort.”

Cassandra and Alexis readied themselves quickly while Ozzadnar downed the last of his pint.

Bervanlaw chugged his as well, then burped loudly, proclaiming, “Ah, about time I had my thirst quenched!”

As they walked out of the tavern, Cassandra turned on the Dwarf. “I am glad we are all splitting up, you pathetic, despicable, disgusting midget!”

Bervanlaw laughed heartily as he wiped bits of food from his beard, grinning with his yellowing teeth. “I love you too, bitch.”

*

The Elderwood scenery to the west didn't disappoint. Willow, Maple, Oak, Hickory, and Birch blended together to make a rich tapestry. This diversity of trees lived together in harmony, as only nature could; seedlings fell and grew. Other bush-like trees flourished as well, such as Sassafras and Fern. The splendor of Elderwood was for Cassandra and Alexis to enjoy. Travelling in Hen Caed, with its slender and beautifully flourishing flora, was quite a contrast from Waterdale and the human town of Four Falls, with its bustling activity, saw mills, and commerce. It was a striking contrast; in the Elven domain, not a tree was felled.

*

Bervanlaw, tired of riding the wagon, rubbed his backside and shouted out to the Four Falls escorts, “Hey, you bloody foolish idiots. I am done with this.” He jumped off the wagon with crossbow in hand, slung it over his shoulders and took to marching straight ahead.

One of the escorts yelled, “Suit yourself, little man, we will see you when you get there in a few days.”

One thing this young soldier didn't know about Dwarfs: They are sturdy, strong, and mostly just damn stubborn. Bervanlaw had the stamina of a bear and could march for hours on end. When Bervanlaw heard the frail words, he picked up his pace, thinking, *I will show you, you bloody green horn. Doubt me, you shiv, ha! Bring it on, mouthpiece.*

As the party's small caravan arrived at the Lakewood gates, Bervanlaw stepped out of the shadows.

“Ha, I see you bloody lame bastards have finally arrived.” He looked at the one who had ridiculed him during their march. “Son, perhaps you should listen before you spout off, because this was only a peaceful escort, not some protectionary trial through turmoil and conflict. Else you would be dead, do you hear me? So take that into consideration before you think like a bloody idiot!”

The young soldier scoffed. “Yeah, and what did you do? You left us, period.”

Bervanlaw, with a wry smile, said, “Yes, I did, pup...And guess what? I discovered a trap, which you would have rolled into hook, line, and sinker.”

The soldier shook his head, scowling. “Bullshit, Dwarf, we would have stood strong and held our ground—and *still* protected you and your group.”

Bervanlaw threw up his hands, looking to the sky briefly as though it held the answer for why this young soldier could possibly be so dense and arrogant. Irritated with the soldier, he marched over and helped Zendar and Ozzadnar out of their wagon before he spoke again.

Again giving his attention to the young soldier, he turned to face him and folded his arms across his chest. "I have no god damn idea of who you are, soldier, and thank you for protecting my friends. Let it be known, and I say this with most respect: I was attacked by a small patrol from the Chiffen Army. You know their sigil, elongated Lions and swords above, or below. It should be alarming to you and to your commanders that such an attack was so close. But these individuals were just a scouting party."

"You say, a group? Then how did you survive, Dwarf?"

Bervanlaw touched his battle axe, then his crossbow. He smirked at the poor, simple soldier. "Easy, lad, there were four of them, and me. I knew they wanted me dead. As the greetings started, I saw their intent, so I simply took the first action. The first two horses in front of me, I slashed with my axe, and then cleaved the riders' skulls as they tumbled down; poor bastards were too slow. I then used their torsos as shields as I pitched off the others in their panic with my crossbow. It was a shame; young men maimed and killed over little old me." A devilish grin overtook his face. "The last one, sad really, he was sitting in a pool of blood, squirming around, shouting obscenities as he pissed himself. I came face to face with him. He was totally helpless, smelling of urine and blood—what to do, right? I didn't want to do anything. I figured, let him die on his own, but he lunged at me in a last-gasp effort with a dagger, and I had to split his skull. Which reminds me, I need to sharpen my axe; bone tends to dull the edge." He pulled out the dagger he took from the Chiffen and handed it to the young man he was scolding. "Here, lad, a keepsake to remind you not to be such a bloody idiot."

The group went forward into Lakewood in silence.

*

Emperor Themenfal slowly rolled his finger around the rim of his glass. "My lady, is the wine to your suiting?"

Tesla James, formally of the elite Imperial Province Verdain family, nodded her approval with a thin smile, the slightest tilt upward of the corners of her mouth. "My Lord, I do appreciate the fare. It is always good to see you, yet let me ask, how is Lacey?"

The Emperor's mood changed from buoyant to gloomy. "Your cousin, I am afraid, my dear Tesla, is not doing well. I am told, by the doctors, she is not responding to medicine any longer."

Fighting back tears, Tesla whispered, "I am sorry, My Lord."

Looking at her with a rare, unchecked passion, he gently took her hand. "I should have chosen you, my Lady, years ago when I had the chance."

Silence prevailed for a few minutes, with slight glances exchanged, and then polite eating and sipping. The mood changed. Once lovers, they smiled at each other with affection and sadness for what could have been.

"My Lord, I have always loved you, and as my Emperor, I always will."

A brooding smile spread on the Emperor's face. "My lovely Tesla, it does weigh on my heart the fact your husband and my dear friend, Tomas James, has always been in love with himself. His vanity knows no bounds."

*

A sliver of sun hung just above the tree line, shadows mixing with rays of diminishing light through the tall pine trees. The sunset bleached the clouds in orange, red, and purple brilliance. It brought a warning of high winds. The flag at Pevenshire Keep started to wave ever so slightly, with its bright red background, a Black Shadow Cat at its center; it would be rippling soon. The sun setting, sunlight diminished, no moon, the night grew slowly into pitch-blackness.

Commander Lucas Alasdair, the Drehin Wood Army leader, right-hand man to the Viceroy, walked briskly to the war room. He passed the guards without interruption and entered the room. "My Lord, what the hell is going on?"

Viceroy James, who was looking over a large map, motioned for his friend to let him think. Tomas James was tall, handsome, and charismatic. Though he had fierce, piercing blue eyes, his smile disarmed many, leading them to believe he wasn't as hard and chiseled as stone. On the battle field, however, he was not one to be reckoned with. His hair, to the shoulders and blondish-brown, lay on his silver plate mail. The enameled Black Shadow Cat in the middle of his armor conveyed strength and fear. He was an impressive man; before he was married to Tesla Verdain, a beautiful and rich woman from the noble family of Verdain in the Imperial Province, he was thought of as the best catch in nobility circles. He often thought the same, himself.

Turning at last to his right-hand man, he said, "Commander, I am glad you have arrived. I have been informed by our scouts a combined Army of both Chiffen Provinces has laid siege to Highclaire Castle. I have no god damn idea what the Loeideach brothers are up to, but it amounts to treason."

Lucas was puzzled, his brow furrowed and his hand to his chin as he thought it over. "I had no idea, my Lord. What they want with Viceroy Bellin bewilders me. Waterdale isn't exactly a high military prize—quite weak, actually."

"Lucas, do you not see? If they take the Emperor's sister, she is the bloody prize! They would gain a grand chip in this obvious game of civil war. If it were your sister, what would you do? Exactly—bargain! To what aims, I have no idea. I know the feuding between the Loeideach family and the Themenfal family goes way back, but does the distrust still linger from a hundred years ago?"

Standing straighter, Lucas said, "If we are going to go to war, my Lord, then we must be ready. Will you grant me the creed to gather conscripts and lead our forces?"

“Certainly Lucas, if there is one I can trust, it is you. Let us sleep on this situation and send word to the Capital tomorrow. Perhaps we will learn more in the coming days of the fate of Viceroy Bellin.”

“A wise decision, my Lord. I would like to discuss other matters, but I am sure the Lady Tesla is waiting; it is late.”

“We can discuss things in the morning. As far as Lady Tesla, she is in Kilburn, in the Imperial Province, visiting her cousin.”

Understanding dawned on Lucas’s face. “The Emperor’s wife, my Lord, she is bedridden, is she not?”

“She is,” James said flatly, already heading for the door.

With that, they bid their farewells and the Commander and Viceroy parted ways, to pick up discussion the following morning.

The Viceroy’s squire placed the last piece of James’s armor on the rack. “Is there anything else I can do for you, my Lord?”

Tomas James slumped on his bed. It had been a straining day mentally. What to do? What the hell was going on in the Kingdom? “Just one more thing, can you put out the candles?”

The squire, in his exuberance, did his duty. He put out all the candles—except one. He mistakenly thought it was out and left, but the wick still had blue flame, and came roaring back. Lucky for him, the candle didn’t have but a quarter-inch to go, and was the furthest away from his Lord.

The flickering of the last candle cast faint shadows on the wall tapestries. A looming shadow stretched high across the stone; the thrust was quick and surgical. Blood dripped from the bed as the candle finally died out, leaving only darkness...

Sunrise was met with chirping birds, and wind. The red flag with the Black Shadow Cat whipped in the strong wind. A loud scream echoed throughout the Keep.

Commander Alasdair rushed up the stairs to the Viceroy’s bedroom. Guards were there in force, servants and maids were weeping. “Report, Lieutenant?”

“I am sorry, sir, Viceroy James is dead. He was assassinated during the night. There are no leads...nothing, as if the villain vanished into thin air.”

Lucas Alasdair was a proud man; he wouldn’t shed a tear for his friend, nor would he show his grief to others. He was the one in charge now. “Lieutenant, gather the forces and declare Marshall Law—no one moves in this Province without my knowledge!”

Within hours, the assassin had been caught. Unfortunately, he died during his capture. It was found out that he had come from the Imperial Province—so it had been reported. The Drehin Wood Province was now ruled by Commander Alasdair, and he put out a proclamation that the assassin was from the Imperial Province, and they would no longer aid or abet the Emperor until all the facts of the Viceroy's assassination were reviewed.

“Yes, my, hum, Lord Alasdair...you are in need of my service?”

“Yes, you have been my confidant for many years, Belfour, and for many years I have counted on you. I need you to take this message to Darumburgh Castle in Upper Chiffen. Read this message. Put it to memory, then destroy it. You must tell Viceroy Iain Loeideach and no other, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir, your order is my command. Consider it done.”

De facto Viceroy Lucas Alasdair sat back in his former Lord's velvet chair. Smiling, he pondered this turn in events. *I will now become Viceroy of this province, and we will defeat Themenfal once and for all.*

Alasdair's great grandfather was beheaded by Emperors Themenfal's great grandfather, something the Alasdair family never forgot. The time for vengeance had finally arrived.

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Fort Adwick, just east of Lakewood, was impressive. A large, square stone structure with a guard house, to enter one would have to raise the slotted Iron Gate. Once permission was granted, the huge twelve-by-twelve-foot twin oak doors would be opened. This duo entry system worked wonderfully to thwart attack. This type of structure was typical of all the Royal Garrisons.

After a short conversation with the standing guards outside, the Iron Gate was lifted. All party members were asked to leave their weapons. The Wizard had silvery, bluish-purple, and gray bracelets clamped on his wrists.

Commander Harold Culven reread the letter from Viceroy Bellin, occasionally glancing from it to his visitors: The Wizard, Ranger, and Dwarf.

Zendar, being the spokesperson, rubbed his wrists. Dimeritium bracelets had been clamped on each arm. By law, all magic users entering any Imperial property, which included all forts, cities, and temples, had to comply to wear the rare metal. It had one great property: Magic became unusable, even to the most powerful. Once these bracelets were on, only the special guard key would be able to unlock them. These keys were few and far between, and guarded and accounted for as if worth a fifty carat diamond. Priceless, one might say. Regardless, these keys were strictly accounted for. Law abiding Wizards, Mages, and Sorcerers were treated with respect and allowed bracelets; those who ignored the law, and or used their magic unlawfully—it wasn't bracelets, but Dimeritium shackles and the dungeon for them.

Culven, noticing the Wizard's discomfort, said, "Sorry, ah, Zendar is your name, but the law is the law."

The Wizard said grimly, though with a wry smile, "Don't be sorry, Commander, I am well aware of the Kingdom's laws; we can't have magic users throwing lightning bolts and fireballs around haphazardly, now, can we?"

Fort Adwick's Commander, not amused, didn't answer. He detested magic users.

To the group, the Commander said, "I will send the Emperor's messenger on to the Capital at once. Thank you all for your service to the Kingdom and our esteemed Viceroy Bellin. You may be excused." He looked down his nose at Zendar, scowling as he added, "The guard at the gate will release you of your bracelets, Wizard."

As they left, Bervanlaw, who had become bored and impatient, but had been silent for once, said, "Not the happiest chap, that Commander Culven."

The Ranger shot back, "You wouldn't be too happy, Dwarf, on hearing the news of civil war. Just think—he knows he will be leading men into the fray, and possible death. Not the most appealing thing."

The Wizard grinned. "He did have service to the Kingdom on his mind; now, he will have to prove it."

The three ventured into Lakewood. It was a thriving town, similar to Four Falls. Well-built structures with thatched roofs dotted the roadway. One could hear the ripping of lumber, men shouting orders, children running amok, women shouting for them to watch for wagons, horses and their by-product littering the road, a cleanup troop scooping up the dung.

The Dwarf soaked it all in, thinking, *there's nothing like the smell of horseshit to stir up a thirst*. Bervanlaw glanced to his left. A large pig was being led to a muddy pen. *Yes, a large mug of ale and a nice hunk of roasted pork would be nice.*

It had been a long morning at Fort Adwick; it was time to gather gear and make plans.

Bervanlaw was the first to spot the shop. They stopped and looked at the sign: Voltac's Armor and Weapons Shop. The subtitle read, "If you aren't spending, piss off."

"Got to love the sign!" the Dwarf proclaimed.

Voltac Thundergrip was busy banging on some steel. Sweat gleamed from his massive forearms. It was evident—he had been an armor and weapons smith for a long time. Seeing the light shine in at the doorway, Voltac yelled at his apprentice, "Keep at working on the plate, Darie, I've got customers!"

Darie "Rubyhole" Puven, a stout, reddish-orange-haired young Dwarf, was quiet yet diligent. He gave a brief nod and continued on without pause.

A beast of a Dwarf, Voltac stood with arms like tree trunks crossed over his huge chest as he eyed the three up and down. His face framed by the blackest of hair and long beard, a few strands of grey woven through, he was a menacing specimen, or at the least intimidating—certainly no one to be trifled with. “Aiming to buy, are we, gentlemen?”

Bervanlaw scanned the shop. There were many fine items: swords, shields, battle axes, helmets, spears, crossbows, mail both chain and plate. “Fine shop you have here, sir.”

“I am no ‘sir,’ my fellow Dwarf, my name is Voltac Thundergrip, and as the sign stated...you buying?”

Zendar reached into his bag of holding and pulled out all the Dire Wolf pelts, then raised his arm to display them for Voltac. “We’re trading, if you are interested.”

Voltac’s eyes widened briefly with amazement, then raised from the bag to meet Zendar’s gaze. “Nice bag of holding you have, Wizard.”

The Ranger considered engaging but continued scanning and examining items.

Bervanlaw’s stomach rippled with hunger. He could smell the blazing forge in the back of the shop, but something else was wafting from the opposite side of the large room, coming from another doorway. Without thinking, he blurted, “Smells like Gene and Judes.”

Zendar gave the Dwarf a stern look, the slightest touch of panic in his eyes. Gene and Judes was a famous hot dog and fries joint in Chicago. To even utter the name in this world could raise suspicion.

Voltac’s eyes narrowed, and he yelled back at Darie, “Come here, boy, watch the door.” His apprentice was quick to obey. “I and these gentlemen are going to go into my office and have us a drink.”

Bervanlaw was willing, but the Ranger was bewildered, and the Wizard puzzled. Brow furrowed, Zendar said, “No need for drink, my friend, we—”

Interrupting him, Voltac held up his hand. “You want me to sell you wares—you will comply and have a drink with me. Period.” He then gestured with his massive arm to another adjacent room and waited for the three to enter.

He arranged three chairs in front of his desk, which was piled high with bills of lading, stat sheets, and diagrams. Zendar, Bervanlaw, and Ozzadnar sat in silence, accepting the fact that this merchant, this Dwarf, was so hospitable.

Voltac pulled out of a deep drawer a large amber bottle, then reached across with both hands to a cabinet, grabbed four glasses, and set them on the desk. Upon filling the last one, he took a long draft of the spirit. The three complied. Bervanlaw belched, the Ranger squinted, and the Wizard coughed.

“Mighty fine stuff, this spirit from Ebruroth. Another thing Dwarfs do well, they make fine liquor.”

Zendar, still reeling from the strong drink, took a moment to catch his bearings, hands on his knees. Finally, he spoke: “Merchant, sir, we—”

Yet again, Voltac interrupted. Casually, watching his glass as he swirled the liquor in it, he said, “Been a long time since I was at a Cubs game.”

There was a long silence as all four of them traded looks with one another.

Voltac poured another round.

“It has been a very long time, gentleman, and if I am right, that bloody Professor Abbott sent you here.” He then got up and locked the door. “What we speak of here in this room stays here. Outside this room, I am Voltac Thundergrip, and you are...?”

After introductions and the happiness Voltac felt on hearing the Cubs had recently won the World Series, it was time to be serious.

Very serious.

Zendar, feeling very nice from the spirit, repressed a light burp, gave a slight shake of his head, and began: “We were a party of six. One of our members, a Paladin, was mortally wounded. Lucky for him, and our entire party, we were saved by a strange and wonderful being named Istara.”

For the next several minutes, Zendar recounted every scene, from the time of being dropped into the vault room up to the moment they reached Voltac’s shop.

Voltac poured another round. Bervanlaw smiled. “And you, Voltac, what is your story?”

Voltac slowly spun his glass on the table. Taking a deep breath, he said, “You will be the first ones to hear my story. Why? Well, you all know the answer. We are in a foreign world.” He pounded down his drink and stared vacantly beyond them, into the past. “Just like your party, we were dropped into this world—five of us, ten years ago. Two Dwarves and three humans, no Elves: Me, named Voltac Thundergrip, a fighter; the other Dwarf, the same, with human Mage, Cleric, and Fighter. We were a pathetic group, really, too heavy on might and muscle, light on magic. Though the Cleric was good, he was no fighter and couldn’t use a mace worth shit. The Mage was even worse, could barely cast a light spell, although he did find an interesting amulet.”

Zendar reached into the bag of holding and brought out their amulet. “Did it look like this one?”

Voltac’s eyes widened and he leaned forward, peering at the amulet Zendar held up. “Bloody hell, yes—almost exactly. There must be something about the amulet; why else would both our parties find them?”

Ozzadnar, unusually upbeat from his buzz, said, “It all ties together—your party, our party. Please, go on, Voltac, the rest of your story.”

Sitting back, Voltac’s eyes lingered on the amulet as he continued. “As I was saying, I was travelling with friends, of course, but together we were top-heavy on fighting skill; we were vulnerable. We learned of a hermit, who lives far from here. He was known as a strange fellow, but when it comes to the arcane, we were told there was no one better. We knew the amulet had some significance, so we struck out to find this recluse. We finally found him, deep in dense forest in the Drehin Wood province, northwest of the capital Ravenwood. It took a bit of coaxing, but he finally allowed us into his home. It was a bit creepy, really...jars, elixirs, bottles with all kinds of things in them: Spiders, eyeballs, lizard tongues, and a host of other godawful shit. The other thing odd about this old coot was, he didn’t want gold to identify the item, just had us gather certain herbs and mushrooms as payment. He didn’t like venturing out of his comfort zone, his odd, mossy, thatched-roof shack.”

Zendar leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and peered intently at Voltac. “And of the amulet?”

“Very powerful magic. The hermit told us it was a key of some sort. An ancient artifact, but for what purpose, he wasn’t one hundred percent sure. He just kept saying it was a key to another world.”

In an angry rush, the Ranger spoke out, “That son-of-a-bitch Professor, it must be his fun to send groups to this realm and see if they can find the gate, or portal or whatever—this key to another world. Our damn world!”

Voltac was a hardy Dwarf; he could pound down the liquor. He poured another round.

“You are on the nose, Ranger. It took a while, but we did find out there was an ancient portal, and our party was damn determined to find it and get the hell back home.”

He slammed back his drink and continued. As he spoke, he set his glass back on the desk, his fingers tracing the rim.

“That is when my life here really started. We travelled into the Kingdom of Ebruroth, to the Dwarven capital of Thurboldur. We trapped animals, mined a bit to make wages to live. The Dwarves treated us well, as long as we worked and traded, but they always had a raised eye regarding my Human party members. You could say they were suspicious. Like your party, we upgraded our armor and weapons, and as we listened to many conversations in taverns, we learned of a place to the northeast reaches of the Kingdom—a place called the Forbidden Zone.”

Voltac looked up from his glass and stared at Zendar, Bervanlaw, and Ozzadnar. The three exchanged glances with one another, wondering what he would tell them of this place.

Fidgeting with his glass again, Voltac said, “In the mountain range, called the Emerald Mountains, lies the city of Gemgrum. It is a thriving place; gem mines are scattered throughout

those mountains. It is said most of the Ruby Clan's wealth comes from the area. King Regnar Baltharm has a strong military presence there. It is to the north of this guarded city that the Forbidden Zone resides."

Bervanlaw let out a long burp, then wrinkled his bright red nose. Flashing yellow teeth, he bellowed, "And what is so scary or *forbidden* about this zone, you say?"

Voltac barked a harsh laugh, shaking his head at Bervanlaw. "Don't be so cocky, my Dwarven friend—it is called correctly. There is a reason no one goes there. Long ago, as we were told in gossip and stories, there was a great battle between Dwarves and men. A large army from the lower Kingdom sacked the Far East Dwarven city of Kor Duralh, massacring all the inhabitants. Not a Dwarven man, woman, or child was spared." Voltac closed his eyes briefly, his brow furrowed. "These armies of men were monsters, with evil intent. They had a plan to traverse the Emerald Mountains, killing any and all who opposed them. However, word of the slaughter reached the Capital and King Baltharm sent a tremendous army to protect Gemgrum. The battle between these warring factions lasted for weeks, with the King's army eventually victorious, but it was at a great cost. Thousands died in a place they now call the Moaning Rise. We were told, according to legend, ghosts, specters, and other undead still exist in that place, due to the nature of the evil ones. We were naïve; we took it for all it seemed to be, a legend and nothing more."

Running his hands over his face, Voltac suddenly pushed back from the desk. Without a word, he refilled all the glasses, then left the room.

In his absence, Zendar stared at the amulet, still in his hands, and worried about where Voltac's story was leading, for his past was likely to be found in their future.

After several minutes, Voltac came back with two loaves of bread and a dozen meat pies. He laid the spread of food down, motioning for the others to dig in. They all ate heartily.

With a few pies down, the merchant wiped gravy and bits from his beard and continued.

"Although we really didn't believe in the undead, still we took caution, and each of us obtained silver weapons. Swords, hammers, and maces—expensive, but well worth it; the legend wasn't fiction. It was the truth."

Bervanlaw, face stuffed, belched. "As you know, we also ran into skeletons."

Voltac stroked his long black beard, nodding thoughtfully, though something in his eyes told the three that skeletons had been the least of his problems. "Skeletons galore, but we smashed through them. The ghosts were another problem altogether, but at least our Cleric was worthwhile. He cast a bevy of spells and the ghosts vaporized. It was eerie, to say the least, listening to them wail and scream. We made it through the area and marched up into a place called the Desolated Tips, an odd mountain range with jagged peaks and littered with tall pines. There was only one pass, which led to another area we had to pass through to get to the Diamond Pinnacle." He paused and sighed heavily, as though the mere memory of this trek were

making him weary. “This mountain was the only way to the Sungue Volcano, to the furthest reach of the Continent, and we were told, if one could navigate the inactive volcano, one would find the lone pathway to the highest mountain on the Continent: Mount Bridgeheim, the place the magic portal is supposed to be.”

Ozzadnar, fully engrossed, blurted, “You didn’t reach the portal, did you?”

Voltac, memories of dread filling his mind’s eye, glared at the Ranger. “Brilliant deduction, Ranger. No, the party didn’t reach the Diamond Pinnacle, the Sungue Volcano, or Mount Bridgeheim.”

Suddenly, the room grew quiet. They knew something awful was to be told.

Voltac rubbed his bloodshot eyes. “It was in the Desolated Tips where my party met its demise, moving through a very thin pass. I was lucky; I had stepped into a small crevice and got my foot stuck, didn’t see the damn thing in the snow—it saved me. I could see up ahead, my friends...my best friend, the other Dwarf, leading the way. Then, as if out of nowhere, the Aarakocra ascended upon them.”

Bervanlaw, clueless, sat up straighter and asked, “The what?”

“The Aarakocra. Bird folk, hideous and mean-as-hell bastards, they are. They are manlike birds of prey—head of an eagle, body like a human covered in feathers, human-like arms, and legs like a bird with claws. And they’re winged beasts. My friends had no chance. The sons-of-bitches had bows and longswords. First, these bird folk rained down arrow after arrow, weaving about in the air. My friends were at their mercy. It was our own arrogance; our party was brash with a glee for power of sword, hammer, mace, and axe. We had no crossbows or bows, and like I said, our Mage was a useless moron. His first and only spell, a fizzled-out fireball, only enraged the Aarakocra, and they descended on him first.” Voltac’s voice broke and he took a moment to take a deep breath. When he continued, glassy eyes staring into space, his voice was low and raw. “They hacked him to death. I could have tried to be the hero, but I knew if I tried to help, it would be in vain and I would die, so I ran as fast as I could down the mountain.”

After a moment of quiet while Voltac’s words sunk in, Zendar asked, “These bird folk, did they come after you?”

“It was my luck. I found a small cave where I thought, *Come in here, you bastards, and I will hack the crap out of you bird shits until my last breath.* What saved me was, a storm had been brewing, and the snow suddenly fell in driving sheets. I found out later, the one thing the Aarakocra hate more than Humans and Dwarves is driving snow. They have difficulty flying in it. I assumed my tracks were covered by the storm and the bloody bastards flew back to their nests high in the mountains.”

Bervanlaw, his eyes heavy and his voice laden with sorrow, uttered, “And your friends?”

Picking up the bottle, Voltac swilled the last of the spirit and threw it into the waste can. A loud, metallic bang resounded in the otherwise silent room. “They all died. Eyes pecked out, faces slashed by claws, guts ripped out and strewn all around. Like I said, these bird folk are nasty, mean creatures, but if I ever run into those bastards again, I will be ready. My only regret was I couldn’t avenge my friends, in my panic, knowing I had to get off that mountain pass. I took what I could.”

The Wizard looked at the amulet, his mind racing. “And of your party’s amulet?”

“Yes, the bloody amulet. I took it from my friend, the moron Mage, and hurled it as far as I could down the steep mountain. I blamed the damn thing, only to my regret—it was my only way back home.”

Ozzadnar sat back, lost for words at what lay ahead of them if they were to pursue returning home. Beside him, seemingly unaffected, Bervanlaw picked his red nose, examining what he pulled out on his finger.

Zendar, however, couldn’t stop the mounting questions filling his head. “I am sorry, Voltac for your loss. I am sure anyone in your shoes would have done the same thing. You said your party was sent here by Professor Abbot ten years ago...What have you been doing all this time”—he expanded his arms to indicate their surroundings—“excluding all of this?”

Voltac, eyes red and half drunk now, said, “I made it through the Moaning Rise travelling the same path. It was evident to me we had cleared a way, since no undead attacked. I made it to Gemgrum and worked the mines for a while. As you can see from this shop, I was a talented smith and worked under some amazing master smiths in Ebruroth. When I raised enough money, I came here to Lakewood and built this business. I was resigned to my fate, and until you showed up today, I thought I would live and die here in this place.”

Bervanlaw, feeling a kinship with Voltac and sensing something in his tone, perked up. “But you have a plan, and perhaps advice?”

“Yes, I do, but let us not talk about it further today. I have things to prepare. Come back tomorrow and we will talk, and I will get us—or rather, you all—equipped with what you will need on your journey ahead. There is a very fine inn just down the road called the Boar’s Pen. Go get yourself lodging and come back tomorrow. There is much we must discuss.”

The three agreed, if not only because they were all bloody well tipsy, to do as he ordered. It was a very interesting tale, which held promise. And they all had one thing in common—they were all from the same world.

On approaching the door to the outside, Voltac, with a raised voice, said, “Tomorrow, it will be all business, gentlemen, no spirits, and remember the sign—piss off if you aren’t going to spend gold.”

The Wizard smiled. He knew why Voltac said what he did; it was a cover, although young apprentice Darie's ears probably wouldn't care, as he had been busy the entire time pounding on plate.

*

Istara had listened intently to Cassandra on why they had adventured into Hen Caed. Now, she looked at each of them. "My dear Ladies, Dwarves can be, let me just say, *not* Elven. They endure themselves in digging in the ground, yet they do build magnificent structures. They also create magnificent weapons, almost on the same level grade as Elven workmanship. Where we have the advantage is in our magic."

The Cleric, relieved she was in Hen Caed, said, "My Lady, Dwarves smell, and they are rude and arrogant."

Istara laughed. "My dear girl, you are too funny. Yes, they can be vile little men, but they do serve a purpose."

Alexis piped up, "Yeah—to be obnoxious, rude, and crude."

"Enough about your friend Bervanlaw. There actually are some very civil and noble Dwarves—King Regnar Baltharm for one—but let us talk no more about them. It will be getting dark soon, and I have one more place to take you before we reach the capital, Livien Tuare, tomorrow."

They entered a vast oak grove as the sky started to turn from blue to purple.

Darkness permeated the grove. With limited sight, Istara led her friends to a small meadow carved out in the grove and waited. The wind whispered through the trees.

Tranquil, yet eerie, thought Alexis.

Cassandra, always in awe in Istara's presence, waited to see what was in store, knowing nothing terrible would befall them, not in the presence of the Princess of Hen Caed.

Faintly, a small, shining, light-green globe appeared, and then another, and another, until dozens of these globes travelled toward them. In fact, they weren't levitating globes, but rather each was held by slender, silvery, light-green beings, elf-like but different, covered in leaves, with shining, pale, round silver-grey eyes—they were dryads. One of them stood out from the rest, as her aura was brighter and her features radiated. She was mostly silver in color. She was the Lady of the Wood—Linara, Queen of the Dryads—and magical.

Instantly, she and Istara communicated telepathically. The Dryads understood the common tongue, yet chose not to use the language. Linara, however, sensed the friends of Istara were different. "Welcome, Istara, and welcome to your friends. It is odd that you travel this way, but I am sure there is a purpose. What, my dear Princess, can we, the protectors of the wood, do for you?"

Istara nodded to the Queen, as she and all the Dryads bowed before Istara. “My dear Dryads—and thank you, Linara, you are as gracious as beautiful, and wise. These friends I bring are in need of your protection and your warmth. It will get cold tonight. I must go on my own tonight and return in the morning. I hope you will accept them, and keep them safe.”

Linara bowed. “Your wish, my Princess, is our command.”

Istara started to glow, silver-blue. Looking to the Cleric and Rogue, she said, “I must do something tonight, which is most important. Linara and the others will keep you safe and warm.”

In unison, Cassandra and Alexis nodded.

Istara walked a distance, then in a bright flash, she was gone.

Linara motioned to the two timid Elven beings. “Come here to me. You must be hungry.”

As if on order, food was brought. Cassandra looked at Alexis and smirked. “Vegans.”

The night air became very cool. The Cleric and Rogue nestled together among the Dryads. The magic globes dissipated, and the group slept as one, close to one another, using their body heat to keep warm. Alexis was tired and fell asleep fast, but Cassandra was in bliss. Her hero, Istara, had helped them, and the Dryads were warm and women. She was in her comfort zone.

*

Istara, in her Radiant Glory form, instinctively toned down her glow, completely invisible in the dark sky. She looked down at the battlefield, aghast at what she saw: Hundreds lay dead in a half-mile radius. The area was west of Dwydon, close to the Imperial Province. It must have been a tremendous battle. She assumed, by the sigils of the fallen, those with elongated Lions and those with crisscrossed swords and a crown above, it was a fight between the armies of the united Chiffens and the Imperial Royal Garrison from Fort Waterford, which was the closest of the Emperor’s army.

Ghouls were ripping apart bodies on the outlying areas of the battlefield. She would have laid waste to the vile creatures, but upon closer examination, they were being dealt with. A lone figure in dark armor was, with impressive speed, his sword dancing, slashing and laying the beasts to their deaths. It was clear: Those who were clearing the battlefield had sought out the services of a monster hunter.

Closer to the main road, torches burned, carried by those who were collecting the dead in wagons, desperately trying to save the bodies from desecration at the jaws of those foul monsters. War always brought evil, not only in the human experience, but from monsters; ghouls could smell the dead. They stayed away from populated areas, but give them a ripe field of rotting corpses, or an open, fresh grave—they were like magnets drawn to their opposite. What was clear in this battle, there was not decisive winner. As she idled in the air high above the battlefield, Istara thought, *Each side retreated to their safe zones.*

Istara flew in and around Dwydon. She saw what she had expected, yet also something she hadn't.

The flag waving in the wind was not of Waterdale, but an elongated Lion with swords both above and below, as she expected. The United Chiffen rebels had taken over the Waterdale capital. Yet, something much more disturbing: bodies on long spikes. There were many humans, but many more Half-Elves and Dwarves. Cassandra had not embellished her story of a racial war spurred by the preaching of the Priest of Helm, it was clear; the Chiffens were using radical ideology to gin up the plain folk, for what ends, though, Istara couldn't be sure. What the Princess of the Elven Kingdom did know, however, was that the killing and mutilation of the Elder folk, Elves and Dwarves, had not happened since the Heretic Inquisition Wars, hundreds of years ago.

*

Sleeping off their bender, Zendar awoke to bells ringing, and they were not in his head. Leaning up on his elbows, he looked around, trying to discern the source.

Beside Zendar, Bervanlaw ripped a monstrous fart; the meat pies had done more than nourish. Scrunching up his nose at the loud bells, and likely his own smell, he said, "What the bloody hell is going on, bells ringing?"

Ozzadnar, who had already been up for half an hour, rolled his eyes. "Get dressed, Dwarf, Wizard. Let's find out what the racket is all about and go see Voltac."

Bervanlaw let out another long fart, lifting one leg a little. Laughing, he said, "Oh, that one smelled—yep, you're right, Ranger. We need to get out of this stinky hole!"

Zendar stared at the Dwarf, a bewildered and slightly disgusted frown on his face. "For Christ's sake, Dwarf, no wonder Cassandra hates you."

The Dwarf, unabashed, thought, *Hell with that bitch.*

Once outside, they found total disarray: people were running in all directions. Soldiers from the Royal Garrison were combing the streets. Fear seemed to be the only constant in the chaos; it was present in everyone's eyes.

"Holy shit, Wizard," the Dwarf bellowed. "We need to get to Voltac's shop, and fast!"

The sign on the door stated, "CLOSED." Bervanlaw hammered on the door with both fists, yelling, "Open up the god damn door, Voltac, it is us—the three."

A slot in the door slid open and then quickly shut. A fraction of a second later, the door opened. Voltac, body hidden from sight behind the door, motioned feverishly with one large hand for them to come inside. "Get the hell in here—quickly!"

Voltac slammed the door, bolted it, and in short order escorted his newfound friends into his office, while yelling to Darie, “Mind the forge, and don’t open the door for anyone.”

Both Bervanlaw and Ozzadnar were rattled. Zendar, the only one still calm, asked, “Voltac, can you tell us, the bells—what is going on?”

“You haven’t heard? Viceroy James, who rules the Drehin Wood Province, was assassinated. It has also been reported there was a huge battle between the Emperor’s Royal Garrison from Fort Waterford and a united Chiffen Army in the south. It is a full-blown civil war—shit is hitting the fan, big time.”

Bervanlaw chimed in, “We have no cause or reason to be involved. Yes, we rescued the Viceroy Bellin from Dwydon, but it ends there for us; our only purpose is to get the hell out of here and back home. Let the warring factions in this realm have at it, period.”

Voltac, who was developing a kinship of sorts with his fellow Dwarf, agreed. “Bloody right! I have lived here a long time, but this war is not mine, nor yours. Our goal is to make it to that portal in the Forbidden Zone and get the hell back home.”

Zendar, in full faculty, said, “So you are saying you are with us then.”

“Yes, I know the way, and I—as you—want to go home.”

“You are aware—we did tell you yesterday—we are not alone, and have a grave task of gathering a large sum of gold to buy diamond dust to enable us to resurrect our friend.”

Voltac knew Necromancy was forbidden, but he had heard rumors regarding how one could be raised from the dead. Yes, there was the morbid Cult of the Dead, who, as stories circulated, could raise the dead. The only problem with it was that the crime was punishable by death—a fitting punishment for raising the dead.

He also knew there were other ways.

Voltac grinned and slammed his fist on the desk, sending papers flying in all directions. “God damn right, I know what you need, and you all must have been sent by the Almighty. Without you, how the hell would I ever get back home? I want to go with you, join you.”

Suddenly, Bervanlaw burst out, “Damn right, my friend, you know the way and we will take you on.” Looking at the Wizard and Ranger, he added, “Right, my friends?”

Ozzadnar simply stood silently, an indiscernible look on his face.

Zendar hesitated, looking from Bervanlaw to Voltac and back. At last, he said, “Yes, we need guidance and we can’t leave a true friend behind in this world. Now, what will it take, Voltac? As you know, we have obligations.”

Solemnly, the merchant of many years, the one who hammered away at making fine weapons and armor, the one who longed to pay back those bastard bird folk for killing his friends, said, “We drank hard yesterday, but I didn’t forget what you told me. I have worked here in the Eternal Realm for a very long time. I have much—money, a great business, and weapons and armor we can use to get us the hell out of this place. In regard to your fallen friend, I will give you whatever you need to gain the diamond dust. The bloody money I have saved serves me no purpose now; it is our ticket home. You will not need to languish and toll to meet that end; we will resurrect your friend as soon as we can travel to the capital of Elderwood, by whatever means necessary.”

Voltac reached into his desk and brought out a pry bar. He got up and stepped to a certain spot, then knelt down. Using the bar, he lifted a secret wooden square. “One thing I learned is, you don’t carry gold around with you; too many thieving bastards out there. In a time of war, it will get worse.” He reached down and pulled out a pouch the size of a grapefruit. Opening the pouch, he poured the contents on the desk.

To say the Wizard, Ranger, and Dwarf were wide-eyed would be an understatement. In a sparkling, colorful heap were diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. Voltac smiled at their expressions of awe. “There is more than enough to buy the diamond dust you gentlemen need. Gather your friends, let us resurrect your fallen and kick those bird folks’ asses.”

The three were surprised to hear a new voice from behind them. They spun at the sound and found Darie standing in the doorway. For how long he’d been there, they didn’t know. Young and diligent in his work, he had been polite but silent thus far. Now, with voice low, he said, “Are you sure, Master Voltac, you want me to take over the shop?” He hesitated, looking unsure of himself. He asked in earnest, “How can I?”

Voltac, with a wry grin, told the boy, “Listen to me, young man. Ever since you carted your ass down from Ebruroth, you have worked very hard for me. I have pressing business to attend to and you must be the man of the shop. You know everything I know, and can handle the shop well. Stand on your feet, boy, grow some balls and be a man. The shop is yours until I come back, and if I never do...well, then, be proud that you earned your keep and carry on.”

*

Voltac had a wagon filled with everything they needed for the journey ahead. Weapons, armor, and something very special in wooden crates, along with foodstuffs and cases of spirits from Ebruroth. They were ready to travel to the Elven capital. He had the Wizard put the gem bag into the bag of holding for safe keeping.

As their guide, Voltac insisted, “First, gentleman, we must travel to visit the hermit and make sure the amulet is authentic and works. I would hate as hell to travel to the Forbidden Zone and through the gates of Hell, only to find out the amulet isn’t the key we need.”

The party agreed. For days, they pushed on, skirting around and to the west of Ravenwood, the capital of Drehin Wood, on an old road rarely travelled.

They were fortunate, as most of the posted guards in the western part of Drehin Wood had been called back to the capital of Ravenwood. The guards who had stayed behind to man the posts were sparse and weren't in any mood to cause disruption; other posts were totally deserted.

Voltac stopped the wagon and looked around, muttering, "I know the path is here somewhere...Ah, there it is." He veered the wagon to the right, onto a roadway overgrown with grass, but with strips of bare ground still visible where wagons had travelled.

The forest became dense; sunlight struggled to creep through the thick canopy. Moss-covered tree trunks, eerie and echoing squawks, and a whispering wind made for an unnerving ambience.

Voltac stopped the wagon again, pointing north. "We'll have to walk from here down this path."

Bervanlaw looked around at the wagon, then back to Voltac, his eyes skeptical. "What about the wagon, the gear?"

The guide hacked and spit, then laughed. "We are the only ones about here for miles and miles; don't worry about the gear." Glancing at the others, he ordered, "Tie the horses to the wagon. We don't want them wandering around."

They followed the path, right to the hermit's hut. Rapping on the door, Voltac called out, "Master Priveus, please open the door—I have urgent business. It is me, Voltac, you remember."

After a long silence, the door creaked open and a disembodied voice said, "Come in, Voltac. Who are your friends?"

Voltac motioned the three to go first, then closed the door once they were all inside.

The hermit was sitting hunched in a comfortable chair, and he motioned for his visitors to sit as well. He appeared thin and frail, with long grey hair streaked by black and white, which matched his thinning beard. His cheeks were sunken, and dark circles puffed out below his coal-colored eyes.

After listening to their story, with dull eyes and no emotion in his voice, Priveus held out his boney hand and said, "Let me see the amulet."

Voltac raised his eyebrows. "Master Priveus, you don't want us to go pick herbs and mushrooms?"

The hermit shrugged and replied, "No, I have my apprentice to do it now."

Zendar pulled the golden amulet out of the bag of holding and placed it in the hermit's outstretched hand.

With a slight grin, the hermit told him, “I had a bag like that once.” Turning his attention to the amulet, he slowly wrapped his spindly fingers around the artifact. Unfolding his reading glasses with his other hand and placing them low on the bridge of his nose, he looked a long time at the runes and writing.

As he took his time inspecting it in silence, the rest of the party sat mesmerized by their surroundings. Voltac had not lied; the home of the hermit was indeed filled with creepy things. Then, Priveus put away his reading glasses and handed the amulet back to the Wizard.

He got up and went to a shelf, off which he grabbed a bottle. “Would you all like a drink? It will make you feel good and warm. It is Mandrake swill, and not too heavy on the hallucinations, as long as you don’t drink too much, but it does have a kick. Good spirits, I call it.”

Voltac thought back in time...*Holy shit, so that was the herb we collected for the old coot, Mandrake, and we didn't even bloody well know it! What a smart old son-of-a...*

The hermit’s apprentice arrived, holding a bulging sack. He was a bean pole, with brown, greasy hair. He had long, noticeable whiskers protruding from his chin, perhaps a dozen. Making his way through the room, he accidentally tripped over Ozzadnar’s boots, because the Ranger had stretched out his legs, trying to relieve his muscles from the long horse ride. Begging pardon and bewildered by all the company, the gangly novice quietly slunk into the shadows.

The old hermit, revitalized by the Mandrake concoction, said, “I do remember, years back, when Voltac and his other friends visited me with a similar amulet. This artifact you carry is of the same origin. It is a key, and I am sure, as Voltac has already told you, its purpose is to open a gateway to another world. There is such a portal. It does exist, yet to travel there could and may cost your lives. There is a reason the portal is difficult to get to.”

Bervanlaw, ever the impatient one, blurted, “Tell us, then, why is it difficult? We know of the Moaning Rise and of the bird folk. For what else should we be wary?”

The hermit let his gaze slowly travel over the entire party. “Dwarves are so impatient—and you, Ranger, too uninterested.” With unexpected intensity from such an old hermit, he settled his eyes on Zendar and said, “Wizard, listen to me, you all will be able to get through the Moaning Rise. With the right fire power, spells, bows, and crossbows, you can defeat the bird folk easily. The Diamond Pinnacle will be a bit tough if you run into the creatures that inhabit there—ice trolls, if the stories are correct, and other beasts of Ice. Try and avoid those Ice trolls who live there; they are greedy beings, and if you have what they want, they won’t let you pass.”

The hermit paused to take another long drink of spirits. After, he smacked his lips and sighed. “Right, so. Then, you will have to travel through the Sungue Volcano, but don’t be fooled: Beings from the plane of fire exist there. What kinds and how many, I do not know; my only advice is, get through there as quickly as you can, and stealthily. Wizard, I would recommend you study up on your Ice and Frost spells. They will help on the Diamond Pinnacle and in the sulphur fire pits of the Sungue. Then, and only then, once you have passed through the Volcano, will you find the path to Mount Bridgeheim.”

Bervanlaw flashed his yellow teeth, spouting off, "Well, that's it? Then what the hell are we waiting for? Let's smash the shit out of some undead, shoot down the bird shits, carve them up, smash and melt the Ice dumbasses, kick and freeze the snot out of any god damn creature who gets in our way in the volcano, and march to Mount Bridgeheim!"

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After the party left the hermit's hut, night came quickly. They found a suitable campsite, and after a fine meal of fresh deer the Ranger had hunted, and other foodstuffs Voltac had packed, the newfound group of four sat around the fire.

The Wizard, knowing their journey would be different in Elderwood, frowned in thought as the fire's light flickered in his eyes. "You all know, once we reach the Elven Kingdom, we will not be making any fires; it is strictly forbidden. Furthermore, I am worried we will not be able to travel there at all."

The Dwarves were indifferent. The Ranger, however, reminded Zendar, "Istara did tell us to invoke her name, and the Elven guards will let us pass."

"True, but that was before the outbreak of civil war in Kliomara.

Voltac had been waiting to show his new friends something special, and deemed now the time. However, as he stood to retrieve it, he was interrupted.

Out of the shadows, four men with swords drawn, and a fifth man, a thin figure hidden by a hood, stalked toward the group. The hooded man yelled out, "Give up the amulet and you all live; if not, you all die."

Zendar instantly cast a globe of invulnerability spell, and a green-yellow globe encased the entire party. The swordsmen, in panic, slashed down on the protective globe, but to no avail.

Bervanlaw with axe at the ready, Ozzadnar with longsword raised, and the Wizard conjuring up a lightning spell, they stood their ground, prepared to fight. Then they heard Voltac. "Steady, gentleman, I will handle this. Wizard, how long will this protection last?"

Glancing to Voltac from the corner of his eye, body still oriented toward the group, Zendar said, "Not long, Voltac!"

The second the globe crumbled, a flint sparked, a bottle was thrown, and the marauding party of five burst into flames. Screaming, they dashed in all directions, but unfortunately for them, the Ranger and two Dwarves hacked them down. The thin, hooded one was fried with a lightning bolt, which put a hole through his gut. As quickly as it started, it was over.

As the Dwarves and Ranger dragged the bodies far into the bushes, Ozzadnar pulled back the hood of the thin one.

"Well, I'll be damned. It's the bloody hermit's apprentice."

Bervanlaw belched—it had been a good meal—and scratched his belly, shrugging. “Guess the poor bugger was sick and tired of picking Mandrake.”

Zendar approached. “We should bury them.”

Sternly, Voltac spat, “Hell with them! Leave them for the wolves and the worms.”

Back at camp, Bervanlaw was the first to ask, “What the hell did you throw at those ingrates?”

A broad grin spread on Voltac’s face. “It is something I made for those bird folk shits, a fire bomb. I hadn’t ever used one, except in my shop to test it. Folk around here would think I dabble in witchcraft, being a Dwarf, so I just tested it, refined it, and now I have many of these bombs.”

Bervanlaw moved away from the wagon.

Voltac’s grin grew wider. “Oh no, my friend, you don’t have to worry, it isn’t like a bunch of cases of nitroglycerine. Here, I will show you.”

He pulled one from a crate and held it out for Bervanlaw and the others to inspect. “See here, there is a flint mechanism that you must ignite. Once you do, the wick will fire up and then you can heave it, and *boom*, the bomb explodes. Anyone or anything in its path is set on fire, big time.”

“Very nice, Voltac, I think we can light many of the bird shits to flame!”

Zendar chimed in, “And what if someone were to fire a fireball at us, at the wagon, Mr. Thundergrip?”

“Well, then, I guess we would be all screwed—but it would be a glorious, explosive end!”

*

The next day, the party fitted themselves in new gear and weapons. Bervanlaw admired his new chain mail and battle axe, thinking, *Voltac is a master*—plus, his new duo bolt crossbow was primo.

Ozzadnar felt great in his new Dire Wolf leather and ring mail. Voltac was not only skilled but fast, working the Dire Wolf pelts to perfection. Zendar was pleased as well. What replaced his flimsy robes were fashionable leather Dire Wolf ones. Who said Wizards couldn’t wear leather?

With Voltac and Bervanlaw manning the wagon, Zendar and Ozzadnar on horses, they went forward, travelling south from Drehin Wood towards Waterdale and the city of Four Falls.

4

Morning came. Cassandra and Alexis sat side by side, their arms entwined, fending off the chill in the air. Around them, the grove was empty. The Dryads, who had kept them warm throughout the night, were nowhere to be seen. However, the Dryads weren't gone; they were hidden in the underbrush.

A sudden, brilliant flash illuminated the woods, and then Istara appeared.

Stepping briskly toward them, she lent them her hand. As she tugged them swiftly to their feet, she said, "Come, it's of vital importance. We must, without hesitation, go to Livien Tuare to see my mother."

Cassandra started to speak but was interrupted, in a tone she had never heard from Istara. "Child, there is no time to talk or discuss anything. Keep up. I could fly to the Capital, but it is my duty to make sure you arrive safely, so be silent and move!"

Their march continued into early afternoon. As Istara led, her followers saw for themselves what the Elven guards had told them of: although there was no clear path, Istara weaved her way through the towering trees and around massive moss covered roots effortlessly. There was clearly a pattern and even logic to the unseen trail.

The tips of the tall trees started to slowly sway as the wind grew stronger, and cold. The smell of rain was heavy in the air, and blinding flashes began cutting the sky, lighting up the darkening horizon to the south, followed by the low rumbling of thunder.

"It's too far, my young ones. We must find shelter or we'll get soaked to the bone." Instinctively, Istara changed course, leading them to higher ground. The large roots of the forest became sparser, giving way to smaller trees and dwarf shrubs mixed with wandering hills. A thin path led to a small cavity in one of the hills, a home of sorts strategically placed, so those within could easily become aware of any encroachment. She looked back at Cassandra and Alexis. "Wait here. I must go in first."

With a pleasant voice, as she entered the small cave, she said, "*Modron Lionors, esseath elaine.*"

Istara continued softly speaking as she went further in, but Cassandra could no longer hear what she said. Beside her, Alexis whispered, "What is she saying?"

"Mother Lioness, you are beautiful."

A moment later, they heard a soft growl, then purring and many high-pitched squeals.

The area grew dark. Rain lashed the forest canopy in driving sheets. The wind howled, trees swayed violently, lightning flashed, thunder boomed. It wouldn't be long until the fierce storm broke through the meager shelter the trees provided.

“Come in, slowly, before you get drenched.”

The girls, wide-eyed as they entered, were mesmerized.

Istara had cast a spell creating a small, faint, yellowish, glowing ball. Hovering midair, it illuminated the cave. It was not the only thing that glowed—she was petting a large lioness, a Tan Shadow Cat, which was sprawled out, with five rambunctious kittens in the middle of feeding. The lioness's large eyes shone yellow and bright as she looked up at Istara's companions. The kittens were gently fighting for their mother's nipples to feed, crawling over one another and squealing.

Watching the cat cautiously, the Cleric whispered, “My Lady, are these cats always so friendly?”

A thin smile crossed her lips. “This is Shiori; she is one of few Tan Shadow Cats in eastern Hen Caed. You two are lucky. I've known this beautiful cat since she was very young, and I also know her mate, Sajura. He wouldn't have been so friendly, nor she, if I had not been accompanying you.”

Brows knit in confusion, Alexis asked, “Why is he not here, protecting her and the kittens?”

“He is out on the hunt, but he wouldn't dare enter. He will call to his mate and leave what he has caught. Males have been known to eat their young. Shiori is aware, and would fight him to the death if he ever imposed his will while the kittens are small.”

Cassandra found herself inspired and commented, “We should treat all men that way, only thinking of themselves.”

The Rogue was still confused. “If this is their home, where does he live, and what do they eat?”

Istara glanced at Cassandra, flashing a quick wink. “He would have found another cave until the kittens are bigger and stronger. Then they will teach the little ones how to hunt.”

Again, the Rogue asked, “And what do they hunt, rabbits and the like?”

The Elven princess replied, “I hear they fancy inquisitive Half-Elves.”

The Rogue's cheeks grew faintly pink, but she joined them in their soft laughter.

The lioness purred, and the kittens, finished gorging themselves from their mother's tender nipples, clumsily tripped over one another as they played with Cassandra and Alexis, chewing on

their boots and nibbling at their fingers. The kittens squealed and purred, and tried desperately to growl, but their attempts sounded more like yelping.

It was pleasant, a stark contrast with the weather outside.

*

Emperor Themenfal and his trusted advisor, Supreme Commander Leon Christian, scrutinized the battle map.

“Please, Leon; update me on the skirmish to the west of Fort Waterford.”

“My Lord, four regiments of the Royal Garrison and two brigades of Cavalry met a large United Chiffen force. The battle raged on from early sunrise until an hour before dusk. Both sides suffered numerous casualties. Our superior Cavalry brigades were the difference in the battle. Presently, our forces have been reinforced and are holding their ground across the Bellchill River. We have the upper hand in Waterdale due to the closeness of Fort Waterford, and the distance the Chiffen must travel from Dwydon.”

“And therein lies one of our problems, Leon. They hold Highclaire Castle and the population of the capital city in their grasps. There is no other way to get to Lower Chiffen than to our southwest, but as our scouts have reported, the bloody Chiffens have built great defenses at Eastcliff and Fellspar in the south, which would take many lives if we tried to smash through them.”

Both hands on the map, the Commander lowered his head in regret. “We should have seen this coming, my Lord—I should have seen this coming. They outsmarted us.”

“Don’t hang your head, Leon; we will get the upper hand. With Viceroy James’s help, we should be able to crush the brothers Loeideach and their bloody Chiffen army.”

“A clever plan, my Lord; they indeed have built strong defenses in both passes, leading into Lower Chiffen. Reports from Harron Hollow Keep to the southeast confirm this. Fort Deadwood can confirm the same. If we concentrate on any of these entries into these two areas, we will be vulnerable from an attack on our flanks from Eastcliff or Fellspar.”

Rapid, booming raps on the war room door caused both men to whip around, just as the door burst open and one of the Emperor’s personal guards rushed in. He thrust a letter into Emperor Themenfal’s hands. “My Lord, an urgent message from Drehin Wood!”

As Themenfal silently read the letter, despair knotted deep within him. He looked up at the Commander. “Viceroy James was assassinated two nights ago, and it has been reported the assassin was from our Imperial Province.”

*

Jasper was thin, with curly brown hair and brown eyes, and he walked with a limp; as a young boy, he'd fallen out of a tree. Now, he was sixteen, and had escaped conscription by the Chiffen army due to his youth. His father often scolded him: "*Boy, keep up, and don't give me that gimpy act—get a move on.*" His father, Luther Helford, was like that. They were a poor family regarding gold, but rich in togetherness. Although the boy walked awkwardly, all in all, he, his two sisters, baby brother, mother, and his moody father were happy on their farm. That is, until the war started.

His hard-working father had been conscripted into the Chiffen Army and sent to Fellspar. His two older sisters volunteered to work in the hospital tents tending the wounded, a very admirable job, but one which left him, his mother, and his baby brother to tend to themselves. With most of the men gone, the only work available was down in the Salty Bluffs.

"Come here, boy," shouted a stout man holding a pickaxe. Hopkins Granson showed the wear of age but was lean, with stringy, reddish-brown hair and fair skin. He glared at Jasper with his pale blue eyes as the boy approached. "Now listen to me, boy, you have a name?"

"Yes, sir, it's Jasper Helford."

"Jasper, is it? Well listen, boy, one thing you need to always do is keep your bandana tied around your head—always. Do you hear me? It is important you keep your mouth and nose covered."

Hopkins stared hard at Jasper until he nodded. Satisfied, Hopkins said, "One more thing—let me see your hands."

Jasper flipped his hands back to front.

"Aye, a green horn. Ah, well, I best get you some gloves for your delicate hands, won't get much work out of you with blisters, now, will we?" Looking the boy up and down, as though taking inventory, he asked, "You got a canteen, son?"

Working the salt mines in the Bluffs was hardy work. Salt was an important commodity used throughout the Realm as a preservative. Swinging a pickaxe all day was tedious and back breaking. The only godsend was that breaks came often. The owners were no slave drivers—not as they had once been. They knew the risk of exposure to sodium dust. Mining rock salt was time consuming, and to keep the workers safe, breaks in the fresh air was a must. The mining companies learned the hard way, years ago, the risks of driving their workforce too hard; the workers had suffered from extreme dehydration, and often death. If you were caught working without a mask or bandana covering your face, you were immediately fired, sent packing without pay.

Hopkins was a tough one, but did appreciate effort. Sitting with Jasper, on one of their many breaks, he told the boy, "You work pretty well, even with that limp. Tell me, boy, what brings you here?"

“My father is fighting with the Army.”

“You got other family?”

“Yes, sir, my two sisters are helping in the hospital tents near the front lines, and my mother and baby brother are home on the farm.”

The older man squinted, shielded his eyes from the sun. “Very admirable work your sisters are doing. They say this war was long coming, boy. Sad, really, taking a man from his family, to leave his wife, his children unprotected, and all for god damn politics!”

“But, sir, my father was told—we all were told—the Emperor had his evil henchmen kill a Viceroy to the North; he is an evil man and must be overthrown.”

Hopkins Granson grinned, than spat. “Is he? This is what the Leoideach brothers are circulating? Ha, propaganda bullshit! I once worked in the capital of Kilburn; not a finer man than the Emperor! But I must keep my thoughts to myself—never know who is listening.”

“But, sir, you don’t believe what we were all told?”

Hopkins glanced to the roadway. There were several wagons oddly manned by Priests of Helm, in their familiar burgundy robes, handing papers to a foreman. Others were loading large sacks into the wagons.

“Don’t always believe what you hear, boy. Wars aren’t fought for righteous causes, ever. It is always about gold, power, revenge, or retribution.”

*

Wagon after wagon pushed through the dusty plain. Dwarf trees mixed with twisted brush dotted the wide canyon. The road led to only one place: an entrance into the Swamps of Sothlis. The wetlands to the west were home to pelicans, egrets, herons, and many other bird species. It was rumored that, at one time, Lizard folk lived in remote areas of the swamp, but no one had seen any in hundreds of years. Fish were said to be in abundance, but the reptile population made fishing as a means of making a living impossible. Poisonous snakes, large snapping turtles, and the apex predator, the alligator, who some said reached twenty feet long, all populated the western side of the vast swamp.

The eastern swamp area was not at all like its western cousin. A dam system had been built, leaving this section of the Sothlis dry as a bone. It was the only easy way to one of the Eternal Realm’s great wonders—The Sothlis Abyss.

The road ended at the entrance of a large cave, carved out of a looming hillside that rose from the dry delta. Wagon after wagon rolled into the opening, disappearing into the torch-lit tunnel. Deep within the tunnel, sacks were loaded on a wench and lowered below. This continued day after day, night after night.

But rock salt wasn't the only thing lowered into the depths of the Sothlis Abyss.

High Priest Furael Crow looked out over the vast cavern, his expression stern. Satisfied, he walked silently with one of his top advisors, Olaf Hedding, as he surveyed the many glittering mounds. Both covered their mouth and nose with a cloth to deter the foul stench.

"How are the shipments coming, Olaf?"

"Very well, High Priest Crow, very well indeed. The war is providing for our needs, and the Mineral Salt Mining Company is keeping us well stocked."

"Excellent, within months we should be ready for Talisar."

"Yes, and it will be a grand day!"

"What of the brotherhood?"

"More and more come into our ranks each day."

"Splendid."

*

Viceroy Iain Leoideach stood over six feet tall, with wavy blond hair, steel blue eyes, and a charming smile. He stroked his chin, pondering what his brother had just said, then replied, "No, brother, we will not waste our resources so quickly!"

Angus Leoideach turned from the war table, seething. "We have the Emperor by the balls, yet you let the Army stand idle for days on end while they reinforce their lines."

Angus stood two inches taller than his brother Iain. Like him, he had blond hair, but not wavy; more straw like. Deep, dark eyes and large jaw made him appear menacing. The two hadn't fought for years; it was known, Angus was the hot head, and Iain the strategist.

"If I have told you once, I have told you a thousand times, brother: patience is a virtue."

"Hell with your virtue! Why do we wait? With Dwydon, we have one capital, we will hopefully have good news from Ravenwood, and on top of all of that, we have the bastard surrounded. We must push now to the capital of Kilburn and take the Crown, put the bastard Themenfal on a pike, and rule the Realm."

"Not just the Kingdom of Kliomara, but the Realm. That easy, Angus? March in, defeat the many Royal Garrisons, and then what? March on the Elves and Dwarves?"

"It will have to be done, brother, if we are to control the Realm. The Elves sit out there in their forest, sublime to anything. There are vast resources untouched, and then the Dwarves,

with their pompous King Baltharm controlling iron ore like a tyrant. Scouts tell us he has closed the gates at Ben Boldir and the pass is heavily guarded.”

“The Dwarven King can do as he pleases; it doesn’t concern us.”

“What if this war rages on? We will be in need of iron ore, and if the border is closed and we are in need of smiths? What then?”

“Dwarves aren’t the only ones who can bang out armor and weapons. We have working mines to the north that will provide what we need. The Imperial Province doesn’t control any mines; they will be the ones to suffer. Now listen to me, brother, and let me show you on the map what we are going to do.”

Iain moved pieces around on the map, detailing his plan to his impatient brother.

“This is how we will defeat the Emperor and the Imperial Province. Once Fort Waterford falls on its western border—and it will, soon enough—we will move on Stone Keep on its eastern border. This will create two fronts Themenfal will have to deal with. Once we get word from Drehin Wood, we will then set in motion attacks on other Royal Garrisons. From Northcliff, we will attack Highcliff Keep again on its eastern border. From Eastcliff, we will attack the southeastern border at Harron Hollow, and to the southwest, with an army coming from Fellspar, travel northward, and with the victorious army from Fort Waterford coming down from the north, Fort Deadwood will capitulate within days.”

Angus smiled, but it wasn’t pleasant, more evil than good. “I can see it, brother, yes, but why do we wait? Let us set the plan in motion. We are ready.”

“Again, I say patience, my brother. Drehin Wood will be our key to setting the noose around the Emperor. When the Black Shadow Cat banners wave, and Alasdair’s Army marches on Fort Adwick, then we will make our move.”

A loud knock came at the door. One of Iain’s personal guards came in, escorting a tall, thin man dressed in leather.

The stranger bowed and pulled back his hood. “Viceroy Iain Leoideach, I have been asked to give you and only you this message.”

Iain waved his guard to leave, but said, “My brother Angus I trust with my life. He can stay. Tell us of the news you bring.”

“My Lords, I am Belfour. I work for and am loyal to Lucas Alasdair, acting Viceroy for the Province of Drehin Wood. Viceroy James is no longer among the living, my Lords, and my Lord Alasdair is at your command.”

Iain smiled. Angus’s eyes sparkled.

“Thank you, Belfour, I am sure you have had a long journey. You will be treated to fine food and rest in the morning. If I may ask, will you ride directly to Viceroy Alasdair and deliver a message?”

A thin grin crossed Belfour’s face, and he bowed. “Your offer of hospitality is most gracious, my Lord. I will rest and then set out for Drehin Wood in the early morning. I only ask for one thing—a fresh steed.”

“Of course, you will be provided with one of our best.”

*

As the princess escorted her new friends into the Capital, Istara nodded to the many who bowed down. Livien Tuare was captivating. Large oaks mingled with maples. Homes made of white sandstone dotted the city, with neatly thatched roofs made from broad reeds and thick bark, decorated with pristine flower gardens. As in the forest, the ground was covered with moss and massive roots protruded here and there, yet there were tracks from wagons that made the roadway visible. The Elves traded with the Humans and Dwarves, though the trade was in their favor. Elven goods were always in high demand.

Cassandra and Alexis walked behind Istara in absolute awe, their wide eyes roaming all around. Well-groomed and handsome horses were ridden by Elven guards and civilians. The guards were stoic, with their mixed silver, white chain, and leather armor, each with magnificent bows on their backs and longswords at their sides. The civilians were both handsome and beautiful. The Elves were an attractive people. Mix that with colorful, exquisite clothing, this setting made the dull brown and gray landscape of the Human towns a superior upgrade.

They hadn’t walked fifty steps when several Elven guards approached, each with a horse. The guards bowed, and one of them spoke: “Istara, we are honored. Please, take these horses, as the Queen awaits your arrival.”

Istara thanked them, “Come, ladies, hop up on a horse. We ride.”

Cassandra was in heaven. Alexis, not so much; she wasn’t the fondest of horses.

They followed the Elven princess in stride at an even pace, along the beautiful fairway of homes, flower beds, and parks dotted with statues of Elven culture, virtue, and history.

As they made their way along, Cassandra thought, *It is bloody botanical gardens on end.* Soon, the roadway graduated to a higher elevation and then over a hill, then they saw it—Duen Canell, a magnificent white palace built between two enormous oak trees that towered hundreds of feet in the air. There was an escalating bridge and a roadway that led to the gates of the magnificent structure.

Istara stopped and looked back, seeing the awe-struck gazes of Cassandra and Alexis. Stifling light laughter, she said, “Come, my young ones. Don’t worry; it is real, not fantasy.”

Istara and her guests slowly made their way up the rising bridge and through the gates of Duen Canell. Hoofs clattering on the cobblestones, they dismounted, and Elven guards bowed, then took the steeds.

The inner sanctum of the palace was picturesque. Silver birch trees mixed with lavish gardens, overflowing with flowers of every color. Fountains depicting naked nymphs and sprites dotted both sides of the walkway.

The main door to the palace, two large doors laden with silver leaves engraved on their edges, blended well with its white color and silver trim accents. As they approached, the door opened, and a dozen Elite guards came out, posting themselves on each side. Each in brilliant silver plate, they bowed, but one went to the center. "I beg your tolerance, my Princess, but who are your guests, and why have you brought them to Duen Canell?"

Ailduin Dahana was Queen Glynmenor's top commander of the Elite Guard. He was striking, with whitish-blond hair, aqua eyes, and a dimpled chin; he was tall and quite handsome.

Istara, with a hint of patience, obliged him. "High Commander Dahana, I appreciate your concern, but these guests must see the Queen. They will leave their weapons with you. Don't worry, they will present no threat."

The Commander bowed. "Thank you for the reassurance, my Lady. Your mother awaits."

Queen Lensa Glynmenor didn't disappoint. She was dressed in a shimmering white gown, trimmed with silver. Luna-green runes with gold trim graced her sleeves and the skirt of the gown. Her long, silver-blond hair was braided and tied in the back with a Luna-green ribbon. Her statue the sprites danced around in the far meadow didn't lie: she was a radiant beauty.

Istara bowed, as did the Cleric and Rogue.

"You bring strangers to me, Istara. For what purpose do they seek my audience, my child?"

"I will let them speak. You know they are some of the ones I spoke to you about."

Cassandra looked at Alexis, who nodded for her to be their spokesperson.

Again, Cassandra bowed. "Queen Glynmenor, Viceroy Bellin from the Dh'oine Province sent you this message." She then pulled out the letter and put out her hand.

Istara took the letter and handed it to her mother.

Opening it, she read, her face indiscernible.

The Queen stood contemplating for a long time. The others stood still.

At last, Istara broke the silence. “Mother, what I saw disturbs me greatly. Yes, the Dh’oine are warring on each other, which is a fact—it is what else I saw. Elf-kind and Dwarves, mutilated and skewered on long spikes, and not just a few but many. I told you of what this party spoke of; the Dh’oine who incite this rebellion are using hatred against the Elder races.”

The queen looked over Istara’s guests intently. “It is unusual for an Elf to speak with mixed Elder and Common tongue. My daughter has told me about you, and your party of misfits. It is very strange that you all are here.”

The Queen’s gaze penetrated the pretend-Elven women. Cassandra felt helpless; Alexis, terrified.

“Both of you, come to me and bow down.”

Cassandra and Alexis approached the Queen and did as she asked.

The Queen whispered a spell. “*Evelienn tedd anna.*” As she spoke, she put her hands on their heads.

The Cleric and Rogue froze in place, but the Queen jolted up, eyes white in a trance.

Lensa Glynmenor, Queen of the Elves, went through time and space, her mind wandering, and then she settled in: She could see Alexis in her real form, with Kitt, the one who now rested on the Alter of Light, in his real form. They were sitting together, eating a meal in a strange place. Booths together, glass glaring, streaming lights flashing horizontally beyond a wall of glass, a sign stating “Happy Hour drinks half price”—they were smiling at one another—they were Dh’oine. Then another apparition: Cassandra with another woman, arguing, and she was also Dh’oine, outside a strange structure, rain was falling and a loud noise rumbled above, looking up, the Elven Monarch had never seen such a raging beast—an extremely long, iron carriage racing by. It was another world...

She let go of the falsely Elven beings. It was beyond her knowledge.

Queen Lensa Glynmenor then cast a spell. The Cleric and Rogue stood still, oblivious of their surroundings, frozen, but still able to hear.

“Istara, you must take them to Dithynth. Only he will know what to do.”

Istara’s eyes widened, startled momentarily by the command. “But, Mother, you know the journey. Even with my powers, we could be in danger.”

“I have no doubt in your abilities, my daughter. You are one with the power of light. I see no danger for you, but you must protect these beings.”

Istara cast a bitter glance at the Queen. “This is your answer, Mother, to silence these beings? What are you hiding—or, rather, what do you not want to tell me, or them?”

With a subtle strain in her voice, the Queen responded softly, “You will find your answer with your father. Now don’t be difficult, go.”

Before Istara could respond, the Queen snapped her fingers.

Abruptly cast back into use of their bodies, Cassandra and Alexis looked at one another, slightly shaken. It was the first time anyone in this realm other than Istara had questioned their origin. The Queen was right: they were beings, not Elves or Elf-kind, and in a place they shouldn’t be. They felt indifferent yet whole. This was not surreal—it was very real, and terrifying.

Queen Glynmenor nodded toward the doorway, where a pair of her Elite guards were waiting, and they stepped forward.

Recognizing that this was their cue to leave, Cassandra and Alexis bowed respectfully to the Queen and Istara, then made their way to the door.

When the non-Elf beings left the presence of the Queen and were being escorted to their resting quarters, Istara turned to her mother. “Why are you not with my father? Or, better yet, why is he not here with you?”

The Queen looked at her daughter sincerely. “It is a long story, my child. Perhaps you should ask him.” She looked down at her hands, clasped loosely at her waist, and added, “And to your hidden concern, yes, I miss him dearly.”

*

King Regnar Baltharm looked despondent after reading the letter. His brownish-red beard ran below his waist, and in style, his mustache was braided on the sides. He had a barrel of a chest and thick, strong arms. His small, dark eyes could fool, as they conveyed a gentle aura, but he had been living in this realm for over four hundred years. He had been involved in wars, seen it all. The coming of man, the downfall of the beastmen...he wasn’t one to be trifled with.

His advisor, waiting valiantly, asked, “My King, what perplexes you so, and can I aid in this situation we find ourselves in?”

The King was regal, but still a Dwarf. He suppressed a belch; it wasn’t kingly to belch. Perhaps a silent fart, yes, but not a loud, embarrassing one. A loud fart certainly could be covered up by an even louder proclamation, but of course, his Grace would have to blame someone for the smell.

The King loudly announced, “Kadmek Barrelmain of the Copper Clan wants me to reconsider opening the gate at Ben Boldir. He says closing it is hurting his business. Hell with that son of whore. He is threatening to march on Ben Boldir’s gates and riot! Screw him, I say, what an oaf he is. Ha, he has not a clue of why I closed the gate, that son of a bitch. Does he not know how the game is played?”

“As usual, Sire, he is trying to blackmail you.”

The King often reflected on matters with his cousin, his top advisor, Wilhelm Baltharm. Wilhelm was almost a spitting image of Regnar, except his hair and beard were a dark brown, and his eyes, though sharp, were also brown. They were cousins and kin and had shared a very long friendship. Their fathers were the first to discover the vast mines in the Emerald Mountains, long before they were born.

“Economics isn’t his strong suit, your Grace. We all know the Copper Clan are not refined, and certainly are the low of low in our society.”

“Yes, and would you please stop with ‘your Grace, Sire, my King’—for bloody sake, Wilhelm, we are family, and when we are alone, call me by my bloody name, would you? You know, sometimes I would like to go out, visit a common tavern, pound down a barrel of ale, fart, belch, and laugh, but no, I always have to be Kingly...I can’t even be me.”

“Well, Cousin Regnar, why don’t we have a barrel brought up from the cellar, gather a few more cousins, lock the door, and play dice and get hammered? Just be ourselves for once.”

“Good idea, Cousin, once we get red-nosed, we can then answer that asshole Kadmek’s letter.”

*

Dithynth sat by the shimmering pool, pondering. It had been some time since he had called forth visions from the White Domain. He stood tall in the large, circular chamber, with runes carved into its walls, and statues depicting great Elven Lords of the Past, those who had passed into the ether of the world beyond, surrounding the pool. Standing over the glittering pool, he invoked the words, “*Caemm hen lchaer seidh.*” The pool began to swirl and spin, and rising out of the glistening water, a form took shape, translucent and shimmering white and light blue.

The figure looked down upon Dithynth. “It has been a long time, my son. What ails your heart?”

Dithynth bowed deeply. “Father, I grow weary of my duties, or rather...I have become jaded. I sit here in the protected area, alone, with only rare visits from those I love.”

His voice echoed around the great stone chamber. “My son, it was a great gift bestowed on you, and it came at a cost. You have an offspring, which also has been granted the gift of Light, and she will continue the line once your destiny has been fulfilled.”

“You speak of destiny, Father, what is my destiny?”

“You are the Lord of the Eternal Realm, Dithynth; you have ultimate power from the God of Light. You have been given this gift to protect Hen Caed, and help the others in the Realm, if needed. The Darkness forever invades to swallow the Light.”

Dithynth looked at his father in earnest. “I feel a great disturbance; something is not right. If the connection is ever severed between the White Domain and the Eternal Realm, I fear Darkness will devour this world.”

“So now you know your destiny—yet you knew it all along. You are Elf-, Dwarf-, and Humankind’s Protector and you must only emerge when Evil and Darkness threaten Hen Caed or the other Kingdoms. War is not unknown in the Eternal Realm, yet annihilation at the hand of Darkness and Evil is something wholly different. You will know the difference.”

“What of Istara, Father? What is her fate?”

“Her destiny is to become you, the God of Light.”

*

The de facto Viceroy’s spy had ridden long and hard the entire day since leaving Darumburgh Castle. Viceroy Iain Leoideach, the Rebel leader, had been true to his word: the Chiffen steed was a strong animal with great stamina, yet all animals needed rest, as well did spies.

The stable hand took the reins. “A fine horse, sir, we will brush ’um down and feed ’um. Don’t worry, he’ll be well taken care of.”

Belfour had read the sign; he flipped the stable hand a coin. “Keep the change, and be discreet. I will be setting off just before dawn, so have him ready.”

“Yes, sir, I will have ’um ready.”

As Belfour headed for the Crowded Bull Tavern and Inn, the stable hand looked at the steed’s branding, and grinned.

Discreetness and a low profile were traits of the trade. Being a spy wasn’t easy, but for Belfour, he had always found the path effortless. One had to, at times, strike up conversation to soften someone into divulging needed information, without ever letting on that one was fishing.

Sometimes it was necessary to use other means.

It was of great importance that he delivered the message to Lucas Alasdair. The plan of the Brothers Leoideach depended on it. There was no doubt his confidant and friend would become the next Viceroy of Drehin Wood, and the position as Master Spy, and leader of the new Viceroy’s Secret Service, would be Belfour’s payment for fine services rendered. He deserved it.

After a fine meal of braised boar ribs, sweet potato, and fresh peas in butter with ale, Belfour made for the stairs. It was time to get some rest.

On his way, a drunken man bumped into him. Not wanting to cause a scene, the spy gently grabbed the drunk and nudged him along, but the drunk held on to his wrist. “Hey, friend...sorry, friend. No harm done.”

Belfour tried to shake the man’s grip, but then the drunkard grabbed his other arm—and this time, it wasn’t a sloppy grab, but with full force. The drunkard’s eyes glared, suddenly sharp, and mean. Two others jumped up beside them, and for a moment, Belfour thought perhaps they were intending to intervene on his behalf, until one pulled a black cloth sack over Belfour’s head. He kicked and screamed as they dragged him out of the tavern, but another man covered his attackers with a distraction, tossing a handful of gold coins to the barkeep and yelling, “*Drinks are on the house!*” The patrons roared and rushed to the bar, and the little scene, which had barely caused a fuss in the busy watering hole, was quickly forgotten.

Belfour was blindfolded, and hog-tied. He rode on his belly for half the night, arms and legs tied together below the horse’s underbelly. His captors continued to crack the whip on the horse, as in unison they galloped toward Resolution Tower, a nickname given for Hayden Keep, known for its reputation.

The Spy was confined to a steel chair, neck, hands, and ankles anchored with thick metal clamps to the device—even he had to admit, a superb interrogation armchair. His eyes were black and blue, and blood ran from his nose, mouth, and ears.

Rafael Nighthawk, Emperor Themenfal’s top spymaster, looked more like a poet, a man who one would think graced the taverns and fine halls with lute, singing poetry and song. He was devilishly handsome, with natural, tightly curled chestnut-brown hair, green eyes the women adored, and a dimpled smile that any mother would cherish. He dressed like a minstrel, but beneath that fabricated exterior was a cold, calculating bastard. Very loyal to his Emperor, when necessary he did what it took to wrench information out of the enemy.

“Come now, Belfour, we know your name. You are the famous spymaster, and the one who does the bidding of the murderer, Lucas Alasdair. We know our Emperor would never send an assassin to murder his true friend in Viceroy James. Speak, or this simple beating will become much worse—much, much worse.”

Belfour, ever loyal, didn’t whisper; he proclaimed, “You will get nothing from me. I know nothing, I swear.”

Belfour didn’t even flinch, not so much as a twitch of his eye, when they inserted razor-thin blades under each of his fingernails and toenails. He withstood the pain.

Then they brought out the razors, cutting deeply into his flesh. Belfour screamed, spittle flying with the force of it. Still, he yelled, “I am ever strong, you sons of bitches!”

Yet, when it came to his balls and the important appendage that hung above them...he sang like a canary. One's manhood had an effect like that, even with the strongest of wills.

*

William Themental strategized over the large war map, making calculations and moving pieces around. Security had been beefed up all over the Capital, especially concerning the Emperor's family and his officials. This war had caused suspicion, and shadows were imagined everywhere.

A loud knock came at the door, and then it opened. The Emperor's Captain at Arms of his Royal Guard announced, "My Emperor—Rafael Nighthawk to see you."

Nighthawk bowed. "I have important news for you, my Emperor."

"Relax, Rafael, when my top Secret Service spy comes to me, I know it must be of grave importance. Let us sit, as I am sure you have come a long way."

"Yes, I come from Hayden Keep, my Lord."

"Ah, the Resolution Tower. And what information of such importance do you bring?"

"We captured a man named Belfour at an inn on the border, between Upper Chiffen and Drehin Wood. He is Lucas Alasdair's top spy and confidant."

"The usurper's top spy, very good work, Rafael; I assume he had critical information."

"Yes. He was very tough, and it took almost a week, but eventually, they all break."

Rafael thought through the darkness. Yes, they did get the information they needed from Belfour, but it was gruesome and cruel what they did to him...not things the public should know or learn about, but it was done for the good of the Kingdom. It was done for his Emperor.

"Indeed, I don't need the details, just the information."

Rafael bowed his head slightly. What he had to report hurt him dearly, as Viceroy James had always been good to him in their interactions, which were necessary at times regarding the matters effecting the Kingdom, and the relationship between the Imperial Province and the other provinces. Noble houses were known at times to scheme against one another and against the Emperor. Viceroy James had been a great ally.

"Belfour rode a Chiffen horse. He had come from Darumburgh Castle, where he had conference with Viceroy Iain Leoideach and his brother. He had delivered the message from Alasdair that Viceroy James had been eliminated. The response was that it was now time to act, and to march on Fort Adwick on the second full moon, which is roughly thirty-five days from now."

The Emperor rubbed his chin, staring hard once more at his war map. “Interesting intelligence, Rafael. This gives us a great advantage, as we can now prepare a three-prong preemptive attack, not only on the border of Drehin Wood, but also go on offense in the southern and western sectors. Well done. Now, take a few days’ rest in Kilburn, then come back to me, for I have something in mind for you to serve our cause.”

Emperor Themental sat comforting widow Tesla James. She was dressed in black.

“You can’t be serious, Tesla; going to Drehin Wood will be dangerous for you.”

She looked at him with pleading eyes. “Please, William, I must. I cannot miss my husband’s funeral. It will only fuel the outrageous gossip that I or you were involved in his assassination.”

Again, the Emperor urged the widow James, “You run a great risk to yourself and your children, and I plead with you. I will send an emissary to Drehin Wood to ask for his body to be brought to Kilburn. You can bury him in the Verdain Family Crypt.”

Her gaze reddened and wet, her bottom lip quivering, she said, “I am deeply grateful of your concern for me, William, but Tomas is a James. He had lived in Drehin Wood his entire life. His family is there. He must be buried with his ancestors at their crypt.”

The Emperor sat silent, Tesla with head bowed.

“If you insist on going to Ravenwood, then you will be escorted by several dozen of my Royal Guard. They will protect you if anything goes awry.”

She put her hand on the Emperor’s arm. “Thank you, William, and don’t worry—what would Lucas Alasdair gain in harming me or my children? Nothing.” With wisdom, she added, “Alasdair has gained more than my husband’s Viceroy title—he has gained an enemy in you.”

“I will deal with Alasdair to avenge Tomas.”

“Again, my Emperor, I thank you, but I must see my children and see how they are coping.”

The love William Themental felt for Tesla Verdain James was strong. He mused that, perhaps, with his ailing wife incurable, and her health waning, once again he and the Lady James could bring back the love they had once shared years ago.

*

Istara reached the top of the hill on her pure white mare before Cassandra and Alexis. The Cleric was the first to reach the Elven princess on a very calm and disciplined whitish-grey gelding. Alexis was the last to reach, barely getting used to riding a horse.

The ride the last several days had been race pace. They camped, talked little, and rested. The forest had changed slightly; the familiar trees now mixed with coniferous. They were very tall and slender, not like the giant oaks and maples of the forests to the east. The terrain had become very hilly, among other noticeable things; many more cedars and smaller pines were present, and several rocky granite outcrops.

“These are fine horses we ride, my young ones. I thought it best for you to ride geldings. They are not so spunky, like stallions.”

Alexis heartily agreed—she was starting to like riding, sort of. She gave Cassandra a glance, a thin smile gracing her face.

The Cleric knew what she was thinking, and she was right. Riding a gelding did suit her; male horses that had been castrated behaved very well—tame and gentle—and the Cleric pondered, *Perhaps most aggressive males should be treated the same way.*

From the top of the hill, the view was spectacular. Off in the distance to the northwest, a mountain range sprang out of the forest. At its center, over the mountain range, a grand plateau with towering oak trees rose with distinction, much bigger than those they had seen in Hen Caed. They were the Sacred Oaks. The view which outstretched itself for their scrutiny confirmed the reason rock and granite were evident in the land’s topography. Although odd, a giant plateau amongst peaks of granite and well-mixed forest blended well in a picturesque painting.

Istara noticed the Cleric and Rogue, in admiration of what they were seeing.

“The mountain range is called the Everlasting Peaks. They act as guardians for the birthplace of my people, the Grand Plateau Oak Shadow. But don’t get caught up in their beauty—there are dangers and terrors in those mountains.”

There was nothing to respond to; Cassandra and Alexis just glanced at each other.

Cassandra, still in wonder, pointed to the Grand Plateau. “That is where we are going?”

“Yes, it is where Dithynth, my father, lives.”

“It is perhaps the most beautiful place we have seen in Hen Caed,” Alexis said quietly as she stared out across the land. Drawing her gaze back to Istara, always the inquisitive one, she asked, “Why out here? We have been riding for days and are far from Livien Tuare... Why would he not live with your mother?”

A soft smile graced Istara’s lips, but her eyes were solemn as they swept the landscape. “It is, truly, but also the most dangerous.” The Elven Princess looked dearly at Alexis; she was getting used to the curious Half-Elf. Letting out a sigh, she answered the inquiry: “It is a long story, my dear child. It is between him and my mother, and there is also his duty.”

The Cleric, as the Elven princess was beginning to understand, had a dislike for men. “His duty? Isn’t his duty to be by your mother’s side? After all, he is the King, is he not?”

“Oh, my dear young ones, you have much to learn. Dithynth is the Lord of the Eternal Realm and the God of Light. Now, we must push on!” Before either could protest, Istara dug her heels into her mare and yelled, “We ride!”

*

Acting Viceroy Lucas Alasdair signed a declaration which stated: *Any act against the Province of Drehin Wood, by the Empire, would be an attack on our own sovereignty. Due to our preliminary investigation, it has been established that an agent from the Imperial Province did assassinate our Viceroy Tomas James, and until all facts are known, there must be consequences.*

Flyers went out, and the proclamation quickly grew widespread...Drehin Wood was now under Marshall Law. Anyone known to be in league with the Imperial Province would be dealt with extreme consequence as a spy or traitor. The citizens of Ravenwood and the entire Province of Drehin Wood lusted for blood to avenge the assassination of their Viceroy James at the hands of the Emperor.

*

Bervanlaw sat looking at the fire, flames sparkling in his eyes. Voltac passed him his flask, which he thankfully drank.

The Dwarf coughed and then squinted; the liquor was good. “You know, friend, the entire thing stinks. Why the hell did the Dwarven King closed the border, and why is it so difficult, and why do we have to be so diligent in entering the Elven Kingdom?”

Voltac, after receiving the flask from Bervanlaw, took a swig. “My friends, the Elves are a very private people. Yes, they are articulate, beautiful, and wise, but they are also cautious, curious to learn motive, and speculative. On your other question, King Baltharm is doing the typical Dwarven tactic. War is a great thing for the mines; he is just making it more expensive to buy resources. He is from the Ruby Clan, so it doesn’t surprise me. The border will open as soon as prices of iron ore are reevaluated on their worth.”

Bervanlaw nodded his agreement as he looked at Voltac, but asked, “And that gives them the right to be assholes?”

The liquor and the fine rabbit dinner had helped ease his hunger. Bervanlaw belched.

“I can understand the King closing the border, but for what end? It doesn’t serve any purpose.”

Voltac laughed at his Dwarf brethren, then took another swig from the flask. “Bervanlaw, you haven’t long been here, but you get it. King Regnar Baltharm doesn’t give a shit about us or anyone else; he only cares about the Ruby Clan and profit!”

Fired up, Bervanlaw proclaimed, “Fuck them all, these Humans, Dwarfs, and Elves in this world. We must protect our own and get the hell out of here!”

Knowing he had stepped over the line, the Dwarf reiterated, as diplomatically as he could, “Well, fuck him. I say, once we get my friends in Elderwood, then we will get to the Forbidden Zone as soon as we can. I am getting tired of being in this fucked up world of civil war.”

The three, who had become four, had tested the waters. The border into the Dwarven Kingdom was closed...for now. They had no choice but to join their other party members, as they still had to accomplish the necessary requirement of resurrecting Kitt the Valiant. With Voltac’s bag of gems well protected in Zendar’s bag of holding, nothing could stop them now—or so they thought.

*

The Royal Garrison Protector in Faction group stopped at the gate in unison. They rode under the white flag of truce, due to the de facto Viceroy’s proclamation. The Commander of the Guard dismounted and proclaimed to the Drehin Wood border guards: “This is the Lady Tesla James, your Viceroy’s widow. We are her guardians, and she and her children are here to honor their husband and father in his passing. We have been commissioned by the Emperor to escort Lady James to Ravenwood under a flag of truce.”

The gate opened, and a staunch military man approached. “We here in Drehin Wood accept Lady James and his offspring. Now dismount, as you will be treated with divine respect and courtesy, as the law dictates under the flag of truce.”

*

Supreme Commander Simmond Robasdan of the Chiffen Army marched his army north toward Fort Waterford. This was going to be a decisive battle; win this one, and it was on to the Capital.

What he didn’t expect was miles of trenches that had been dug in rows and filled with pitch. The trenches were set on fire one by one as the army approached. The most disturbing aspect of this tactic was that Chiffen soldiers, which had died in battle, were displayed on spikes. The image of flames and gruesome, dead soldiers was disheartening to his men.

Robasdan yelled, “Extinguish the fires and march!”

His under commander advised, “Sire, we are doing the best we can. The bloody enemy did their due diligence as we sat for weeks. The trenches are wide, and we cannot cross them until

they burn out—it will take days. And as we advance, they continue to set the next trench on fire. Our archers cannot stop them.”

Simmond Robasdan, the Supreme Commander of the United Chiffen Army, steamed as he looked at the battlefield ablaze, which spread out for miles...it would take weeks until his army could drive to the Capital. Just another failure in his command: no Viceroy Bellin, no southern army at the gates of the Imperial Capital of Kilburn—Supreme Commander Robasdan had, in essence, failed his superiors once again.

*

Iain Loeideach brooded. The news was not to his liking. How did he get outfoxed by the Emperor? They dug miles and miles of trenches filled with pitch! Iain had thought he had played a masterplan and marched on Dwydon, only to be outsmarted by that eternal old bitch, Bellin. And now he had to hear it from his ballistic brother.

“I told you, brother, we must act fast and march on the Capital!”

Iain smiled at his brother, but it was a bitter grin. “Oh, if you were not my kin, you bloody stupid, thick-skulled jackass. It is exactly what Themenfal wants, for us to be confused, to fight amongst ourselves and weaken!”

“I will forgive you this one time, brother, but you are the weak one. We will conquer and Themenfal’s head will be on a pike, mark my words. Our United Chiffen Army will march forward. We will abandon the pitfalls of the plains of the Imperial Province pitch trenches, and instead drive north in Waterdale toward Lakewood. We will disguise this march and attack Fort Aterberry as a diversion, continue on and meet the Drehin Wood Army from Ravenwood, and then march on the Capital!”

Iain stared hard at his brother, a mixture of disbelief and challenge in his expression. “So easily done, brother? I hope you know what the hell you are doing.”

Angus spread his arms wide, hands upturned. “What can get in our way, Iain? Your plan has died in the pitch trenches.”

“I hope you are right, my ballistic brethren.”

*

The Emperor’s advisor smiled. “Our scouts have reported, my Lord, that the Chiffen Army has receded back to Dwydon, resupplied, and now march north through Waterdale.”

The Emperor, with stern concentration, nodded. “So, they have taken the bait. If only they would have waited out the burning of the trenches, they would have been able to march on the Capital and caused us to be sieged on all sides. Now they will try and join the traitor Alasdair to assault Fort Adwick and then march south on Fort Winslow. There, we will be waiting, but we

will also stealthily send troops to dog their flanks and besiege Highclaire Castle to take back the Capital.”

“We could attack them from Fort Aterberry, my Lord?”

“Yes, we could, but they will prepare a feint against us there. It is logical, as they gain nothing without the support of the traitor Alasdair and his Drehin Wood Army. No, they will make us think that Fort Aterberry is their goal, but I am wise to their ill-conceived plan. We will set up our own feint against them, to make them think we are capitulating.”

“How can you be sure, my Lord?”

The Emperor looked at his advisor, the corner of his mouth upturning just so. “It was not difficult, Leon. The Loeideach brothers’ original plan was to march to our Capital from the south with pressure from all sides, including north from Drehin Wood. They have aborted this plan, and why, you may think...It is the impatience of Iain’s dim-witted brother, Angus. He somehow has convinced his brother to abort and march with Alasdair, together against us. The only problem with this reasoning is the long line of supply, which will make things difficult for them. It also takes away their advantage of us having to fight on multiple borders. Yes, they will prod and poke from Upper Chiffen from the east, but they will not dare give up their defenses in Lower Chiffen. That is where we crush them.”

Bemused, Leon frowned. “How so, may I ask, with your indulgence?”

“We move to take back Highclaire Castle, suppress their supply line, and then their entire main United Chiffen Army is in severe trouble. Men do not fight well on an empty stomach. This will lead to dissatisfaction and turmoil.”

“Splendid plan, my Lord, now all we have to do is wait diligently.” He paused, then said, “Yet, I do have a concern. If chaos consumes the United Chiffen Army, they may turn to other means of gathering food and supplies. Looting and pillaging, to be exact.”

The Emperor knew an army in chaos was a dangerous one. “Send out directives to all farmers and merchants ahead of the marching Chiffens. The populous must abandon their lands and take whatever food supplies and animals to Four Falls and Lakewood. Guarantee the people they will be taken care of at these two locations, and prepare food and makeshift lodgings for all.”

Slowly, as he thought this through, Leon nodded. “Yes, we can do that, and then we let them walk right into our trap.”

Emperor Themenfal walked away from the map and looked out onto Kilburn. The Imperial Provincial flag, with its silver, crisscrossed longswords and golden crown above, fluttered in the wind. “One last thing, Leon: we need every able-bodied person available and forced conscription, if necessary. We need men to join the Imperial Army, women to man the hospital tents, and even young lads to be used as runners.”

“Yes, my Lord, your dictate is my command.”

*

The Emperor’s Royal Guard escorted Lady Tesla’s carriage through the gates of Ravenwood. Their destination: Pevenshire Keep, the Viceroy’s estate and what had been the Jameses home for many years in Drehin Wood.

With pomp and courtesy, Lady James, her two children, the eldest daughter Clare and younger son Jeremy, were greeted at Pevenshire Keep by Alasdair’s men. Lady Tesla thought it odd her husband’s normal guards were nowhere to be seen.

The Emperor’s Royal Guards were treated with respect and honor, yet there was one request, due to the assassination and the civil unrest that had ensued: they were asked to leave their weapons with the quarter master at arms. At the time they would be leaving, all would be returned. The head Guard Commander was hesitant, but with assurance from Lady Tesla, he relented.

The Royal Guards were escorted to a very lush and comfortable barracks. These used to be occupied by Viceroy James’s elite guards. In the main hall, there was a grand table filled with fruits and dishes of appetizers that the group could feast on.

Looking over the eager Emperor’s Guard—it had been a long march—Alasdair’s head Commander greeted them: “We welcome you, loyal representatives of the Emperor, and we are very grateful that you brought back safely our Lady Tesla James. It is a sad occasion that we are to endure. We should honor our departed Viceroy James, not in mourning but in festival, and celebrate his life as a great ruler and also a great friend of Emperor Themental!”

The Royal Guards pounded the table and cheered as they ate. The march had made many parched mouths, and the ale was good.

“We also remind you that you are guests of Drehin Wood, and our acting Viceroy Lucas Alasdair. He appreciates your effort and due diligence to bring Lady James and her children back to Ravenwood and to safety.”

Most of the Royal Guard paid little attention to the speech, as the entrees began to come forward. Large platters of roasted boar, venison, and pheasant decorated the table, along with carrots, leeks, potatoes, and cabbage. Ale jugs were refilled. The room’s air was perfumed with the savory aroma of sage, rosemary, and garlic. Just to smell the aroma made one lust to dive into the wonderful fare.

Yet, one guard, the Royal Commander, took offense to the speaker’s speech. He stood up and proclaimed loudly to his men: “Listen to me, men, we appreciate the food and drink, but we will not stand for the accusation that we bring Lady James to safety!”

Alasdair’s head Commander nodded to another in his troop to be aware and at the ready. They had had a plan all along. He proclaimed, “Why, sir, please don’t construe my words in the

wrong way. I meant no offense to you or your men, and certainly not to our beloved Lady James. I was just implying that we are grateful Lady James is safely here in Ravenwood, that is all.”

The Royal Commander picked up his knife, which had a chunk of boar meat on it, and chomped down, devouring it. Looking out over his men, he had noticed in his periphery Alasdair’s head Commander motion to another, who then left the hall. “Men, we have been stripped of our weapons, and now stripped of our pride. Yes, the food is very good...” He glanced around at all his men, who had switched from gorging to listening. “We may not be armed, but”— he picked up his knife, again piercing a piece of boar—“we do have weapons.”

Then all hell broke loose.

Men poured into the large hall. Crossbow quills soared and swords flashed. The Royal Guard had taken their Commander’s cue and attacked with what they had—knives, which earlier had been used to cut boar meat and venison, and were now desperately and wildly stabbing at human flesh. It was gruesome; many died, and many more were wounded. Yet, in the end, all the Royal Guardsmen were now corpses but one, the Royal Commander on his last breath.

Alasdair’s head Commander looked down upon him as he coughed blood. “Yes, you heathen bastard, the one who is the hand of the Emperor, know this now, you defiler of the just: we will rid the Kingdom of those who are loyal to the wicked Emperor!” Then, with a strong fell swoop of his sword, the Royal Commander’s head rolled a great way along the tattered, blood-stained floor, littered with bloodied bodies...

The head Commander’s men roared in approval.

Alasdair’s head Commander shouted orders. The hall was cleaned up and the traitorous Royal Guards of the Emperor were taken to a well-hidden place and burned.

Hedman Lichfell, Alasdair’s head Commander, made his way to the acting Viceroy’s chambers, and after a brief chat with the guards, knocked and went inside.

“I assume all is in order, Hedman?”

“Yes, my Lord, the first part of the plan has been completed.”

“Very good, and a fine breakfast has been prepared for my honored guest?”

“Indeed, then shall we get on with it?”

Hedman Lichfell, although thin like a rail, with long, black, stringy hair, and frail-looking, was quite the opposite. He, in a word, was diabolical in thought and actions; he was the perfect advisor to Lucas Alasdair, and he knew how to conjure up things to make even those with the hardest of wills crumble.

*

Today was the day of her husband's funeral. Tesla James sat across from Lucas Alasdair dressed in black, with only two pieces of jewelry on: Her wedding ring and a simple gold necklace, which was the first piece of jewelry Viceroy James had given her, many years ago. The black veil had been neatly folded, allowing her to enjoy the fine prepared meal.

Alasdair watched her every move. The widow Tesla was a beautiful woman; he had even contemplated perhaps a forced relationship, but it would not serve a purpose. "Is the meal to your satisfaction, my Lady?"

Like a little bird, she had pecked a bit of the food. Hog's bacon, eggs, and fresh strawberries were all to her liking, but she had little appetite. "I am not up to my usual morning appetite, Lucas, and I am used to eating breakfast with my children—where are they?"

"I thought it would be wise to have them join the James family. It is a trying time for them, and you, of course."

With a bit of cynicism, she was quick to reply, "Thank you, Lucas—or shall I call you 'Lord' now?"

Lucas Alasdair narrowed his eyes, thinking, *This holier-than-thou bitch, she probably was sharing the Emperor's bed.*

"Lucas is fine, my Lady. I never wanted to impose a title on you or anyone else in the James family. It was tragic what happened to your husband, and my great friend."

Tesla James fought the shiver that was desperately trying to crawl up her back. She knew the two-tongued words Alasdair spoke were contrived.

Alasdair got up and motioned to the widow. "Come. Let us join your children."

Tesla followed Alasdair down the hallway, down the stairwell, and into the foyer of the Keep. There were a dozen of Alasdair's men waiting to escort him and Lady Tesla to the funeral.

Suddenly, Alasdair stepped away from Lady Tesla, and she was seized by two powerful guards. Another approached and ripped at her dress, tore off the black veil, and yanked off her necklace, flinging it away as she screamed. He continued to rip at her undergarments until she was totally naked, her body covered with red, puffy scratch marks from the guard's roughness. Another guard approached, and as Tesla tried desperately to cover up, he threw her what looked like a burlap sack. It was a dirty robe. The two guards then forced themselves on her, throwing the sack-like robe over her body and tying a strip of cloth around her head, covering her eyes, and then did the same to her wrists. They pushed her forward. "Move, wench."

Lucas Alasdair smirked. *Yes, she is a mighty fine little waif, and now she will be used for the cause.* With a sinister voice, he leaned in close and whispered, "Come, Widow, it is time to greet your children."

Lady Tesla was prodded and poked, and then she was lifted onto a wagon, guards on both sides. As the wagon headed toward the main square, hundreds of people lined the road, shouting and throwing horse dung and rotted vegetables at their disgraced former Lady of Ravenwood.

Throngs of people gathered at the main square, lusting for blood and vengeance. Three pyres were center-stage, surrounded by pikes with heads on each. Tesla was thrown to the ground. The crowd roared their approval. “*Death to the Witch, death to the murderer. Death to the Emperor’s whore,*” they railed. She was then roughly escorted and tied to one of the pyres, and her blindfold removed.

Tesla James, the late Viceroy’s widow, was sickened by what she saw. Her two children, with sacks covering their heads, were also tied to pyres. The pikes, all conveniently arranged for her to see, contained the heads of the entire James family. Tomas’s father, mother, two brothers, sister, and all the James family grandchildren were grotesquely displayed, their skin gray and purple, eyes bulging, horrific grins on their faces.

Acting Viceroy Lucas Alasdair addressed the mob. “Citizens of Ravenwood, citizens of Drehin Wood, we now seek justice for our slain Tomas James. This vile Witch, the Lady Tesla, in league with the evil Emperor Themenfal, and planned the murder with him as she shared his bed in the Capital!”

The crowd, in an absolute frenzy, cried out, “*Kill the bitch, wipe her seed from the earth eternal, burn her!*”

Alasdair shouted, “She will die, but she will suffer first!”

Then, horrified, Tesla watched helplessly as men ripped off the hoods of her children. Great heaving sobs burst forth from her as she watched them gasp in terror at the sight of their family atop pikes, their mother bound to a pyre. Across the roars of the crowd, she could hear them as they wailed, “*Mother, help us, please help, help!*” Their cries dissolved into screaming, their eyes bulging. Tesla had never felt more despair in her life than in that moment. So great was the torture, bile began to rise, and she choked, her knees buckling. Still, they screamed, “*Mother! Mother!*”

Guards approached the children’s pyres, and Tesla screamed, “Have mercy on my children, they are innocent!” Her voice cracked, and on another heaving sob, her voice hoarse and raw, she implored hopelessly, “I am innocent!”

Alasdair waved his arms high in the air, egging the crowd on, and bellowed, “Yes, they all say the same thing in the end, it is always the same, they are innocent—*burn them.*”

The guards put torches to the children’s pyres. Lady Tesla James was now witness to her two children being burned alive. As they writhed and screamed, twisting and straining against their bonds, she was overcome by shock. Spiraling, delirious thoughts cascaded through her mind: *This is a dream, it has to be a dream—what civilized people would do this?* She screamed

until her veins protruded, until no more than harsh, guttural moans could be heard, until she heard the last gasping screams of her children.

Then, with the repugnant odor of burning flesh in the air, there were no more tears, no remorse, no anger; it had been all used up. The widow Tesla, head hung, stared at the wood pyre. She had accepted her fate.

With the stench of her burning children lingering in her nostrils, tears dried to her face, and as the guards put a torch to her pyre and the flames engulfed her, she mustered the last weak threads of her voice and yelled out, “Long live the Empire and death to the usurpers!”

The crowd continued to chant, “*Death to the whore, death to the bitch,*” long after the charred bodies of Lady Tesla and her children had become no more than bone and ash.

Lucas Alasdair was in good hands—evil hands. Hedman Lichfell was the right man to be his first advisor and the lead man positioned to take over the Secret Service and Spy network of Drehin Wood. The other candidate, Alasdair’s confidant Belfour, hadn’t reported back—strange.

The beheading of the James family and the burning of Lady James and her children had been orchestrated by Lichfell; his reputation was crystal clear and diabolical, and it barely scratched the surface of the evil that was inside the monster.

As in all disgusting acts, and like fire itself, word travelled swiftly; the atrocities committed on that day would change the course of things to come forever.