



The Spellbound Curse: Book 1 The Vessel of Ranok



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Preface

Magic. It is not a thing that children pretend to act out in adolescence. It is not a wish made in a well, or a dream conjured up at night. It is not a thing that originated in folk tales, or something thought up by businessmen in corporate suits trying to lure you in with the gimmick of their imagination. Magic is not the sum of our literary ideas, our fantastical images, or something that manifests itself among members of a cult. It is not the achievement of technology, and neither is it an idea thought up in a printing press. It is spiritual energy; nothing more, nothing less.

The thing you call magic was a gift granted to us once; a gift and a curse.

In ancient times, long before the wars recorded in history books, my people lived in a civilization far more advanced than the primitive cultures thought to have roamed the land hunting wild horses, bison, and other modern-day creatures. We developed sophisticated languages, agriculture, and spawning nations to rival those that had come before us. It had all been made possible through magic. But that was so long ago. Back then it was the only way that anyone could make sense of the world. Then...came the curse. No one knew how it began, but the darkness that followed would soon claim us all.



The Fields of Memradonia

Five hundred Centronian soldiers waited among the evergreen forest. They were agile, valiant-looking men. Many of them were mounted on large steeds, bred for strength and durability. In the past they had guided the soldiers into countless battles won, but the rigors of their current mission had left them dirty and worn.

Trulaine wandered among them, passing by on a light, brown mare.

He wore a wool cloak secured by a large silver medallion. It was the badge of Centronus, engraved with the royal emblem – the symbol of a Pegasus prancing near an open gate.

He was a tall man. His frame was strong, his presence was fierce, and his eyes were toned with the rich hue of experience. They were thorough, heavy eyes that penetrated the soul of every man he looked upon as he searched for strength in each of them. Being their captain, it was among one of his top priorities.

He pondered how it had all been inherited to him: the respect, the authority, the legendary reverence. He was not the current king of the Centronian throne – a title that he had never pursued in the first place – but he was however one of its' highest ranking captains. It was a fitting role for him. He had been so well groomed in the art of combat, with decades of experience behind him, and a drive that would afford him even more decades of greatness to come. It was his lineage; being raised in a royal family, expected to lead a realm that was on the verge of becoming the first great nation. It had always been his duty to defend his

home from the most dangerous hordes, time after time. And although this campaign was said to be nothing more than just another one of those times, something about it seemed very odd to him. His superiors had granted him a very small amount of information, and all possible signs of the enemy had eluded them. For all he knew they were searching for a tribe of ghosts.

The old trail was a rugged path of withering shrubs on the outskirts of Centronus. It was a place where few men ever had reason to travel to unless they were brave miners looking for lost treasure or perhaps foolish adventurers seeking to make a name.

There had been a string of mysterious disappearances near the vicinity of the trail, and many people had disappeared without explanation. No one had ever seen the attackers for the bodies had vanished without a trace. The abductions had sparked political debates about what new dangers the commonwealth of Centronus would face if they continued to do nothing. Therefore, the king and the royal courts convened that Trulaine and his men confront this threat, or at least identify it. So here they were far beyond the old trail, deep within the dark forest, searching aimlessly. For nearly three days their efforts seemed fruitless.

Trulaine ordered some of his men to set up tents along the edge of the forest. Work was getting along quickly because there were many hands to spare, although if they were going to camp here, Trulaine needed to be sure that the area was safe. He sent four scouts to search across the hillside. But as the afternoon hours waned, there was still no sign of them. And now here they were with four men missing, a quickly setting sun, and the unknown out there stalking them. Something was not right.

A gallop broke the silence behind him, and an aging, bulbous man on a bulking steed approached, giving him the royal salute. His face carried a thick beard. He was Trulaine's second in command as well as one of his closest friends. He had fought side by side with him in more battles than anyone, and they shared a certain camaraderie that became unbreakable through years. It was for this reason that he was one of the only people – outside of his family – that Trulaine had ever really been able to trust.

“Golondred,” said Trulaine. “What news?”

“What news?” Golondred said. “None of them made it back. It’s likely they’ve been captured, or worse. Unlucky fer them of course, but it’s a good sign fer us.”

“You call that good news? And I thought your genuine lack of humanity was just a birth defect of yours. I didn’t think you actually enjoyed it.”

“Well, if it means we’ll finally get a look at the bastards, then so be it; its damn good news then. I’ve had enough of this blasted time squandering. It was the council’s decision to drag us out here in the first place.”

“A wise decision, considering the fact that we are sworn to protect the only realm that we call home.”

“That’s the problem with the council, too much action, not enough preparation.”

“Sometimes that is a risk one must be willing to take.”

“Well we’re blind out here, and we haven’t a clue of what we’re hunting. Fer all we know, we could be the ones being hunted at this very moment. Besides...” he said, raising an eyebrow. “...I told ya’ this would happen, didn't I?”

“Yes, Golondred,” Trulaine said, making sure to give him the credit he had demanded. “You did.”

Golondred had bet Trulaine a hundred gold coins that they would find nothing but a pack of hell hounds, perhaps a wandering heard of behemoths. Trulaine on the other hand had claimed that it would be one of the cursed races.

“Do ya’ think the scouts lost their way?” asked Golondred.

“It’s possible,” was Trulaine’s only response.

Just then a commotion broke out between his men far off in the front of the line. Trulaine and Golondred made their way over to where the soldiers had recovered one of the missing scouts.

Several soldiers carried him from his horse, and placed him in the nearby brush. They checked him for injuries.

Trulaine dismounted his steed, Deylemen, and lowered himself to one knee in front of the wounded scout. The young man was in a state of shock; the terror of whatever had occurred was still etched on his face. All he could do was stare straightforward, terrified, not a blink to his eyes. Large gashes streaked across his chest where his armor had been torn, and blood trickled in large amounts. Trulaine's shamanic warriors tried to mend his wounds, but he already looked close enough to death that it might take him at any moment.

Trulaine roused him, and the young man opened his eyes slowly, fluttering and blinking hard. He wrenched in agony as if he had just remembered he had been wounded. He looked up at Trulaine with a delusional look in his eyes: delusional but still coherent as he managed to speak in a very low, crumbling voice. "Captain..."

"Brenin," said Trulaine, recognizing the young soldier. Brenin was the son of a soldier that Trulaine had trained with in his youth. A man he had recruited into his army. A man he had lost just a few years ago in battle. It was decided that his son should take up the honor of his late father, which was how Brenin had joined Trulaine's army in the first place. If the boy died here, today, then it would be yet another child of Centronius that he had let die under his watch; another family he had let down.

"Where are the other scouts?" Trulaine asked Brenin. "What happened to you?"

There was no response. Brenin could only manage a comatose expression of blank stares and a slight twitch of the jaw. It was as if he wanted to say something, but no words would exit his mouth. He just sat there, frozen in place staring idly over Trulaine's shoulder. Then, eerily, his eyes widened with panic, his breathing became heavy, his mouth opened agape, and suddenly he became hysterical.

"D-demons!" he shrieked. "Demons in the caves!"

Suddenly a shrill sound could be heard far off in the distance. It began as a blaring siren until its crescendo revealed the living pitch of something far more menacing.

“Werewolves,” said Trulaine. “It must be.”

Pure terror leapt into the air. It was the kind of terror that lingered, chillingly. It was heavy, gloomy, and eerie; eerie to the point where Trulaine could feel the morale of his men sink low. They were frightened by the news. Werewolves were without a doubt the most savage of all the spellbound races, and a confrontation with them would not bode well for any of them.

Many of Trulaine’s men began to whisper to each other in hushed voices, and a sense of panic swept among them. Small debates broke out and soon the questions began to pop up.

What shall we do? How many were after you? What did they look like? Did you see their faces? Do you think they could be here among us?

“Back as ya’ were!” shouted Golondred. He then addressed Trulaine quietly. “And we don’t know fer sure that they are werewolves.”

There was silence once more. The only clear sounds were the grunts coming from the wounded scout, and the steady fluttering of the leaves that ruffled in the subtle wind; an eeriness of their own creation now pervaded the air. It was a moment of pure trepidation. No one spoke a word, and all eyes were now fixed on Trulaine. He now knew the strength that he had sought from them earlier had just taken a major blow.

“Who found him?” Trulaine asked the crowd of soldiers.

“I did,” said one of the lower ranking soldiers. His face was drenched in sweat and he was still out of breath from the rigors of carrying the wounded soldier back to safety. He was jittery and spoke quickly due to his nervousness. “He came up from the east, round the mountains. He looked like he could barely hold on to his horse, sir.”

“Did he say anything about what he saw?”

“I asked him that several times, sir. He didn’t make no response.”

“Well,” said Trulaine. “You heard what he said, didn’t you? There are demons in the caves, and I bet they are all primed and ready for a fight. Why should we disappoint them?”

Trulaine looked up at the sun, which quickly began to set over the trees behind them. Shaking his head, he jumped back onto his steed and turned to address Golondred. “We have to hurry and finish this now if we plan to live to see the sun rise again. If night falls before we find what we’re looking for, we may not make it out of this forest alive.

“We move forward,” he addressed everyone in the camp. “We will proceed on to the river, past this mountain toward the east until we find our brothers. And if the very face of death manages to smile upon us this day, then we shall smile back but with shattered teeth, still gritting!” There was a reassured chuckling among his men in response to the joke, and he could now see hidden confidence rising from beneath the surface of each man.

“Well!” Golondred silenced them with a shout and mean look on his face. “What are ya’ waiting fer, maggots? Ya’ heard yer captain. Mobilize!”

They all sprang into motion. The generals made hasty orders to their units. Men scurried to abandon the tasks previously appointed to them, and they left the campsite as it was.

Moving on, they pushed through the forest. Their surroundings began to change considerably. The trees here were old and thick. The ground, which before had been full of fresh meadow, was now a moist, muddy terrain. The many hoofs that passed along sank deep into the mud and the horses had a difficult time moving steadily. Soon the trees disappeared, and the mountains revealed their peaks just below the withering sunset. They bulked out ominously like a pack of giants marching out to meet them. The sight was enchanting indeed, but there was still a foreboding feeling to the place. There were even more mountains far off in the distance, scattered throughout the dark region that lay ahead.

“What do you think?” Trulaine asked Golondred to his left.

“Well, we have no direction. And there’s no way in hell that I would suggest we split up.”

“Neither would I. If we keep going in one direction, then we could be subject to an ambush.”

“Perhaps we could try to track down the hoof prints.”

“Hmm,” Trulaine chuckled, his eyes focused on the horizon.

Far off in the distance, near the edge of the river, two heads perked up; water flinging from their indistinct faces. They paused, gazing at Trulaine and his men with sharp ears pricking up in attention.

One of his soldiers pointed forward urgently. “Sir!”

“I see them,” Trulaine said with squinted eyes, his vision better than that of most men.

“What are they?” asked another.

“Wolves. There are three of them.”

“And a few don’t stray far from the pack,” added Golondred. “Do they?”

“No,” said Trulaine. “They never do. Perhaps if we pursue them we’ll find something interesting... at least a lead.”

A howl pierced the air, echoing throughout the mountain halls and caverns. Immediately the two wolves stood up and darted back across the misty valley, returning to some unknown retreat near the shadows of the mountain.

“Forward,” Trulaine shouted. “We must not lose them!”

He leaned close to Delemeney and whispered into her pricked ears. She pounded her front hoofs in the river, and with a furious charge she bolted forward with astonishing speed. All the men behind him followed, creating a swift moving mass along the plain until they reached the entrance of a chasm. They passed on steadily, slowing to a saunter in order to maneuver through the rocky gap that did not prove to be as long as Trulaine had initially thought it would be. Still, the wolves were smaller and therefore able to move at a faster speed.

By the time Trulaine and his men reached the end of the chasm, the two wolves had nearly disappeared ahead of them, but it did not matter, because more wolves began to pop up here and there. They appeared to spring out of nowhere, jumping out from behind bushes or scurrying deftly down the rocky mountainside. They were well aware of these unfamiliar visitors and the air all around was alive with threat. They were savage, bloodthirsty wolves. Some of them broke off from the pack, daring to contend with the charge of the horses. They barked and snapped at the passing onset. Some of them were so wild and fueled with excitement that they leapt into the line of horses, and were trampled continuously by stampeding hooves.

Trulaine threw his hand into the air, signaling a stop as they approached a cavernous path that opened up into yet another field which had a much more eerie look to it. Here, the trees grew long. They sprouted into many thick, curving branches that hung low to the ground with huge leaves, shaggy and drooping. Behind the trees and to the far sides of the open field were many entrances that appeared to be large tunnels built into the mountainside. Red markings of some sort – perhaps blood - were streaked across the cavern walls, and on the sides were symbols of indistinct signs.

The wolves no longer seemed interested in the intruders. They all ran close to the side of the rocky walls, howling in a steady pitch: an act, which seemed eerie enough considering their synchronous pattern. Most wolves did not behave this way, whether they were in danger or simply warning outsiders to keep away from their pride. It was almost as if they were using their voices to create an alarm system of some sort.

“What in the world is this place?” asked Golondred.

Trulaine gave no answer. He could only stare forward, held by captivation.

At the top of the trees sat a group of large, hideous vultures peering down at them. They bore no feathers: only dark, wrinkly skin, and long skinny wings that were also marked red at the tips. They raised their sharp beaks, and just as the wind began to show its’ ugly face, gusting through the trees, the vultures croaked ear piercingly toward the caves. The croaking resembled that of a throng of large

turkeys or roosters, clucking desperately in a cacophony of alarms. First it was the wolves, now the vultures. Trulaine had a feeling that this would not end without some type of confrontation, one that he wasn't quite sure if they were ready for.

In the brooding shades of the cave temples, where the wolves huddled protectively, larger, erect shadows came forth and walked out on two bare feet. Their backs were clothed with long, wholly garments; the furs of some great bear perhaps, slain and completely skinned. Trulaine figured they might be some lost tribe of men staking their claim to the Memradonian wilderness, but as more of them emerged from the caves in hundreds, and as they stepped farther into the moonlight, he could tell that his first hunch was right. They werewolves indeed. Still, more of them stepped farther out into the moonlight emerging from the caves and even from the top of the hills. Soon it became obvious that their garments were not the fur of some creature, but it appeared to be the hair from their own backs. Their hands were tipped with large, sharp claws, and their mouths revealed a rack of savage teeth. They began to chant in a thunderous chorus that echoed off the cavern walls around them, flooding valley around them.

This was no haunted burial ground where evil spirits lurked in shadows waiting to take wayward travelers into the pits of the unknown. Neither was it a pack of hellhounds, hunting for prey. This was a dwelling place for one of the spellbound races: a savage tribe of creatures that feared no man. Their short snouts, hunched postures, and gnarly, dog-like appearances, indicated that these creatures belonged to one of three tribes of werewolves known as Memradonians. They were known for their ferocity, brute strength, and lithe speed. They massed out of the caves, swarming before the battalion of Centronian warriors. Trulaine's gut instinct was correct. He figured that they might come across one of the rouge tribes, but he had never expected anything quite like this. An entire horde of werewolves ready for open combat was indeed a sight to behold.

“You'll get yer money,” said Golondred, his voice trembling. “That's if we leave with our lives.”

Golondred often had a peculiar sense of humor at times like this, but there was nothing humorous to the flat tone in his voice. Payment would only matter if they

survived through the night, and now, the possibility had suddenly looked very bleak.

The three missing scouts made their way out onto the cold, rocky surface near the caves by the werewolves who had held them captive. They were beaten beyond the ability to stand: lying on the rocks naked and shivering, stripped of their clothing. Their bodies were almost completely covered in blood. One of them cried continuously - his tone marred in agony, his screams wavering and barely audible in the distance. It was apparent that the werewolves had held them as hostages. This was surprising behavior by the brute savages Trulaine thought them to be. They had shown a considerable amount of intelligence: waiting their enemy out, exhibiting patience in their bloodlust. They had held the scouts alive just long enough to lure Trulaine and his men into a well-conceived trap.

Just as the thought had crossed Trulaine's mind that he might possibly escape this accursed land with all of his men still left alive, the werewolves proceeded to dive into the three missing scouts, devouring their flesh. Their savagery was uncanny. Those closest to the scouts had the privilege of tearing them apart first. They snapped at each other for pieces. Right before Trulaine's eyes, his men were eaten alive. The screams rose up into the air, creating a horrifying sound that became a stain on the psyche of Trulaine's men. It rattled the core of them.

The horde of werewolves shouted and howled in a fervent rancor. This was indeed a war chant, a challenge for battle, one that could not be ignored. Fight or die, they seemed to say.

“Prepare to charge!” Trulaine shouted.

His men moved quickly into battle formations, extending along the inner rim of the field, coming together in rows. Trulaine could feel their spirits dwindle, their courage tested now more than ever. He wanted to speak to them, rile them up, bring them back into the reality that they were in Trulaine's brigade, and no foreign terror on the face of the earth - man, demon, or creature - would ever sink their morale so low that they would forget that they were a part of the greatest military unit in the world. There was no time for wise words or humble speeches.

A clash was about to begin; one that would not be soon forgotten in the annals of Centronian warfare.

Trulaine's brigade moved across the field, submerging their fear beneath a spirited charge, hooves rolling like thunder. Trulaine watched the werewolves as they began a charge of their own. They stormed head on with a blurry swiftness, running on all fours.

The two forces clashed in a colossal wave of energy that devastated every man or beast confronting the first two rows. The werewolves caused most of the damage with their brute strength. They attacked fiercely, tackling men off their steeds, gnawing the flesh from their faces, and ripping limbs completely off the soldiers. Even the wolves had joined in the battle, biting the heels of the soldiers. They were not much of a threat against Trulaine and his men, but they had distracted them long enough for the werewolves to make successful attacks. It was a brutal exchange, but the Centronians struck back harder with sharp blades, piercing through thick flesh and loping heads clean off. The veterans held up the strength of the brigade. The shamans in particular had done plenty of damage, creating fissures from the earth, and causing roots to rend from the ground as if they had suddenly grown minds of their own. The tree roots were powerful enough to either crush or strangle some of the werewolves while others ensnared the creature in branches long enough for the soldiers to slay them with their swords.

Trulaine himself had always fought with a skill that was unmatched, swinging his sword gracefully through the crowd of madness. Some of the werewolves tried to knock him off his steed, but Delemeney withstood the blows, bucking and maneuvering. He could see Golondred fighting in the distance, and the rest his men appeared to be having trouble. The battle began mere moments ago and already the field was a bloody mess. It was as if every time he looked around, he saw someone being eaten, decapitated, or dismembered. The werewolves were too fast, too strong, and far too ferocious to contend with. This was a nightmare, one that they would not survive through if Trulaine failed to find a solution, fast.

Terrifying and larger than life, the werewolf chief stepped out of the caves. Much taller than the other others, he emerged and was accompanied to the battle-

field by a dozen or so of his minions chanting wildly beside him. The chief attacked with huge claws, slashing at men and horses, spilling guts and severing limbs with the grace of ease. His power was immediately distinguished from that of the other werewolves, and Trulaine's soldiers were mindful to stay away from him. Some of the riders had found their mark with their bow and arrows, but he chased after them, picking them off like helpless prey. He tore heads off and pulverized corpses, littering the ground with mangled soldiers and large pieces of flesh. At this point, none of them would dare continue to attack him, for his prowess and brute strength could not be matched by any man. Killing them did not matter at all to him; he would leave that to his brethren. Only one man could satiate his blood lust. He was longing to feast on the flesh of their finest warrior, which was likely to be their leader, the Centronian captain.

The chief stalked the battlefield the way a giant cat might stalk a room full of terrified mice. This afforded him some time to search for his true enemy whom he soon spotted far off in the midst of the field plowing through his brethren. Reflecting off the dwindling sunlight was Trulaine's distinct, silver helmet shining in the distance. It was more than enough for the chief to recognize the Centronian leader. Completely submerged in the fight, Trulaine was far too occupied to notice their mighty chief stalking him.

With a powerful charge the mighty Memradonian broke the distance between he and his nemesis, crushing everyone in his path along the way.

Trulaine watched the bodies soar into the air, but with so much going on, it was difficult to get a glimpse of what this mobile battering ram was, heading straight for him. It was a great bulk of mass indeed that jumped from the crowd, and tackled him right off Delemeney's back. He crashed to the surface, squinting in agony, winded by the force. Before he could catch his breath an unbelievably heavy frame, one that pinned him to the ground, pounced him on.

He looked up. Large eyes of terror glared back at him; red, veiny eyes with black pupils, narrow like slivers of darkness. The mighty werewolf began to sniff Trulaine as if examining a delicate treat to be eaten. He snarled long and nasty; his teeth large and sharp like knives, and his breath flowing as hideous as death.

Then, to Trulaine's complete surprise, he leaned close and spoke clear Centronian with a rugged, miserable accent. "Die, god-kind!"

He stood to his feet, lifting Trulaine into the air, holding him in an inescapable bear hug. Trulaine tried to wriggle himself free, but the chief's grip was superhuman. He tried to squeeze the life from Trulaine, but his Centronian armor was well made, keeping his bones from being crushed. When he saw that Trulaine held no fear in his eyes, he growled furiously, overwhelmed with anger. He opened his mouth to gorge on the face of his captive, and Trulaine bashed the side of his helmet straight into the brute's snout, shattering all of his teeth. The great werewolf stumbled backward, still holding onto Trulaine's garb, tearing the royal emblem right off of Trulaine's uniform as he fell.

The mighty werewolf howled and bellowed in agony: his great, powerful hands now covering his snout as blood gushed between his trembling fingers. His many minions stared in disbelief as their master spit out tiny fragments of teeth. He glared down at Trulaine with a grim expression; his face spattered with blood.

There was one thing that only Trulaine could account, for, something that he could barely explain himself, something that he had kept a secret from most people in his life, especially his opponents. There was a fervor within him, one he had never been able to fully explain. It was a rage that stirred in him at battles like this, one that increased his strength twofold, perhaps even tenfold in some instances - he could not tell. He could tell that his opponent could feel that strength. Perhaps he even feared it. But these were werewolves. It was possible that they had never known fear to begin with.

With his sword now raised high, Trulaine challenged the wounded chief who roared and howled in anger. With astonishing force he attacked Trulaine, lunging at him. Trulaine responded with a quick sidestep, slashing the werewolf chief on the back with his sword. Trulaine had indeed wounded him, but the great werewolf was not stunted. The strike was not much, and it had told Trulaine one thing about his opponent; he would need to cut much deeper to wound him mortally.

The chief lunged at Trulaine once more, this time going head up with him with a series of clawed attacks. His strength was uncanny and his speed was in-

credible for his size, but Trulaine was the best fighter among his people. A twang of sparks showered between them as claw met sword again and again. Trulaine deflected most of the attacks, and those that were too close to block, he evaded with blinding fury.

Many of the werewolves and even some of the Centronians paused to witness the great duel, stopping in the middle of battle just to observe it. Every time the chief struck, he failed, for Trulaine's skill was impeccable. The great werewolf however was endowed with stamina long and enduring, like all savage animals - primal adrenaline flowing through his every vein. Faster and harder he attacked until Trulaine could barely keep his balance. The Centronian stumbled, letting the tip of his sword drag along the ground. He spread the distance between them. His hair was matted with sweat, and the blood from broken teeth now stained his cracked helmet.

The great werewolf took a moment to stalk Trulaine yet again. It seemed as if he had questioned his strength as he paced cautiously trying to find a weakness in Trulaine's defense. It was as if the chief himself - as physically dominant as he was - could not understand how a mortal man could have withstood his onslaught. There was a look of surprise on his beastly face. Trulaine had baffled him; a giant who now had doubts, a giant who now gazed upon him as if suddenly realizing that he was fighting a god rather than a man. He could see fear working in those wild red eyes, could see the chief marred in doubt while trying to muster the courage to convince himself that Trulaine was still his inferior. Trulaine had felt him out, seen his weakness, and now knew his opponent to a tee. The standoff had nearly silenced the battle completely as the two circled each other.

With a menacing growl and an uncanny thrust of energy the great werewolf leapt into the air, springing fiercely toward Trulaine with a final death strike, his target standing still and unwavering. In the next instant however, Trulaine became a spinning blur of motion, and the Memradonian chiefs' head was seared clean in half. The slaying was so quick that the other werewolves were still cheering before they realized what had actually happened. His body crashed to the ground with a thump; limbs still twitching, blood soaking the grass and his head lie nearly ten

feet away with half of his jaw still moving, slowly gnawing to a stop. Trulaine rose standing tall before his fallen foe.

There was a pause.

Although the werewolves had just watched Trulaine slay their leader, the Centronians were still outnumbered three to one. They glared down at their slain chieftain. Then cautiously, almost fearfully, they began retreating into the caves, group by group. They could have remained, could have continued fighting, and still probably would have killed Trulaine and his men if they worked hard to overwhelm them. But to his utter disbelief, and for a reason unknown, they actually retreated. Most of them scurried, vanishing into the caves, while a bold few remained, attacking the soldiers with final, spirited efforts, but they were all either slain or driven off.

An odd feeling began to come over them. It was a spine-tingling feeling, one that was neither comfortable nor terrifying. They were still rattled by the encounter of course, but it was strange to suddenly be resolved of the situation, without foe, and left alone. Mere moments ago, the plains were filled with chaos, certain death, and primal savagery. Now all was calm. Not a sound had disturbed their awed silence except for the grunts of wounded men and the werewolves who had been cut down and were still dying. For a brief moment, which felt more like an eternity the soldiers, all hushed and held their breaths, fearful of another attack. It was an odd feeling indeed as they struggled to understand the meaning of their encounter with the werewolves.

“So what do we do now?” said Golondred, his cracked voice nearly down to a whisper.

“Well,” said Trulaine. “I don’t think our friends are quite ready for a war.”

It had been a suspicious victory. There were no chants, and no cheers. They could have hailed and applauded Trulaine with excitement, but the feeling of backing away humbly was the only thought to cross their minds. The battle was too soon removed from reality, and the question of why their foe had deserted them so quickly was still lingering in the air, but they were just thankful to still be alive.

With the last sliver of sunlight that crept through the trees, they quickly gathered their dead – or at least those who were left in one piece. For many riders, there was a corpse placed on the lower back of their horses. Trulaine would not allow their dead to be left behind. It was a Centronian custom of war to salvage the dead, particularly those who had died in battle. They vacated the area, leaving the Memradonian fields deserted, accompanied only by death. They had won the battle. It was now time to ponder what the encounter meant to them and to the realm of Centronus. They would not rest easy.



The Bequest

The evening sunset created a spectacular view from the island of Tovien.

Maurelan watched from the mountaintop, peering over the cliffs below. The horizon was a light, pink haze stretching along the skyline. A flock of birds relished in the warmth as they flew in swarms silhouetted against the sky, and the great wales made giant, playful splashes in the tranquil sea below. It was a breathtaking scenery, one that she had never taken for granted; not in all her years of coming out to enjoy the beauty that the cliff always offered. The breeze could not have been more pleasant as she felt the ocean air spray cold mist upon her face. The world was a true wonder to behold. It had survived the test of time, along with all the harsh centuries of man's enduring presence, and still it had kept its' splendor intact.

She sat, perched on the branch of a tree for nearly an hour. The moments had dwindled quickly as she drifted into a meditative state, a trance that came upon her with such subtlety that she had barely noticed herself slipping into it.

Her connection with nature was a strong one. It was the kind of bond that she had only ever heard master mages speak of. She had never quite understood how it worked or how it was even possible for her to have inherent knowledge of such things. She had received no formal training on the evocation of nature spirits or that of earth whispering. She had never even imagined what it would be like to taste the faint, grumbling murmurs of the earth, but slowly, throughout the years, she began to sense it all around her like heavy tendrils tugging on her very essence. The energies were there - profoundly minute energies that could hardly even be said to exist. She could feel them pushing and pulling on her from within.

It was the earth that was speaking to her. It had used a subtle yet extremely powerful voice; one that had sent vibrations of anguish from beneath the ground, had rippled sentiments of pain through the ocean, and mastered hymns that whistled chords of discontent in the wind. It was a beautiful day, and although the creatures were jubilant and the many colors of the sky worked gracefully to enhance its attributes, there was a faint suffocation in the air. Something was not right.

In the east the clouds grew thick, and soon, the first crack of thunder rumbled across the sky. Storms were brewing.

“Enjoying the view?” a deep, booming voice came from over her shoulder.

It startled her, jolted her so much that she lost her balance and slipped. Deftly, she reached over the side of the branch, hanging low, and dropped to the ground with lithe skill, like that of a cat.

She turned to face the owner of that voice, Bernarsu. He was a big, burly, toned man with a clean shaved head and tribal tattoos covering both of his arms. He was her bodyguard, disciplinary, on occasion her trainer, and as much as she sometimes did not want to admit it, he was also one of her closest friends. Possibly her only friend; at least the only one she ever really had inside the tribe. There were many children in Tovien who admired Maurelan despite what the elders thought of her, but no one had known her quite the way Bernarsu did. The problem was times like this when his mandatory services clashed with her natural candor.

He looked down at her, his huge frame shading her from the sun.

Oh, get it over with, she thought.

She could have asked him what she had done wrong, but she really didn't have to. There were plenty of mistakes she could have made in the course of a single day. It would not have been an issue if Maurelan were an ordinary girl. But she was no ordinary girl, and she did not have an ordinary upbringing.

Maurelan was the priestess of a highly disciplined covenant, daughter of the tribe's chief, Nelo, and a person who was held in high regard by many of the locals in her homeland. Her stature had provided her with many freedoms and even

more responsibilities. An average day for her was stock full of chores. She would start her morning with a set of rigorous training routines, followed by spiritual training. In the noontime, it was charity with the elders, mealtimes in between, and the small moments she had for herself. Being a person of prominence – or at least as prominent as one can be in a land full of poverty - there was still much expected of her. A young woman with a high social status to a people that had a small military unit, resources dependent on neighboring tribes, and very little to do with the outside world had to see herself as being older than she really was. She had to portray a sense of sovereignty over her people, yet at the same time be humble enough to connect with those stricken by poverty, disease, and neglect.

At all times she felt the watchful eye of prominence looking over her, searching for imperfections, waiting to scold her. At the moment, Bernarsu was that watchful eye, glancing down at her, not saying a word as if trying to stall out her nervousness.

“What?” she asked.

“Master Nelo knows that you were in his relic cache this morning.”

“No!” she thought. “How could I have forgotten to close it?”

It was a simple thing really. Curiosity had led to her snooping, and snooping led to her searching in the tribe’s reliquary. She had not broken in with the intent to steal anything, and most of the artifacts belonged in her father’s possession. But that did not matter. The reliquary was the holding place for some of Tovien’s most well guarded possessions. To break in was considered a criminal act, even for Maurelan. Now that she remembered, she had been distracted by one of the elders during her break in. She had almost been seen and snuck out through the back, but she forgot to close the cache box.

Inside the box were a slew of artifacts, ancient blueprints, jewelry, and weapons. They were special things, important things. She had just wanted to take a look. She couldn’t even remember what she had been looking for in the first place, but she did remember what she saw in the cache before making her escape. It was something small, round, and shiny, but she did not have enough time to examine it to know exactly what it was.

“I-I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Don’t apologize to me,” said Bernarsu. “Apologize to him.”

She turned to run off, but he stopped her.

“There is no hurry. But, you also forgot to meet with your instructor concerning next week’s coronation.”

“Oh!” she clapped her head in disappointment. She began to walk off in the other direction, but he stopped her again.

“You were supposed to do it in the morning. The scholar is gone now. I would expect that if you wanted to become high priestess someday then you would at least adhere to its requirements.”

“I’m sorry.”

There was a pause, and Bernarsu shook his head in mild disappointment.

“This can’t continue,” he said. “First you performed unsanctioned magic in public.”

“That was only a demonstration,” she said in defense.

“Then it was the horse herd you forgot to round up. And it took Seris and Cadma all day to find them all.”

“Oh. Sorry ‘bout that too.”

“This is not a large tribe,” he scolded her. “If it were, we would not be in this position and perhaps you would have the luxury of sitting on a golden throne.”

Maurelan frowned. She looked at Bernarsu with a squinted eyed look and then smiled. Her charm was persuasive.

“You know that’s not what I want,” she said, with a chuckle. “So...is he mad?”

“Surprisingly, no,” he said. “He does want to see you though.”

“About what?”

“I don’t know. But he wanted me to test you first...see where you’re at.

“A demonstration, please. And not just a flash light...a slow enchantment...a molding.”

Maurelan sighed, her shoulders drooping low in disapproval. But after a moment, she straightened her posture, rolled her neck, wriggled her hands, and the expression on her face became serious. With her hands held high, she took a deep breath and shouted.

“Gloominus zidiki!”

In the blink of an eye, a blue spark emitted from deep within her. It leapt out, traveling through her arms, changing color to a shimmering gold as it hit the air and extended down to her fingertips. She flexed and writhed, charging the energy, trying to shift the sudden life that had burst from within her and was now yearning to be released. Out of her hands it ripped like electricity, and a bright, luminescent orb formed into the air before them. It was a mighty force. The air all around had suddenly erupted in activity, and silence had been interrupted by its' loud, roaring interior.

The leaves blew away from the orb and Maurelan's hair ruffled wildly in the wind. It was difficult to hold a force such as this; a spell of such power, such purity, such unbridled potential. Both mentally and physically it was like flexing a muscle continuously while holding ones' mind perfectly still. In the core of her heart however, it was like holding an ocean or even the sky itself in the palm of ones' hand, like touching a piece of the heavens; serene and beautiful beyond comparison on the inside.

To wield such energies took an incredible amount of dexterity, but just like using a muscle, the more it was worked, the easier it had been to manipulate. Maurelan had worked out her magical stamina for years - since she was a child - but her ability to control such a thing as an orb was still taxing on her.

Bernarsu walked around her, studying the exuberance of the orb and how well she was coping with it.

“Make sure to feel out your core,” he said. “And don't forget to breathe. Fix your stance.”

She heeded his instructions as best she could, and tried to follow them while keeping her spell afloat, but for her it was nearly impossible because of the mental strain. She could have let go and the orb would have remained floating in the air - still, calm, and with no tumultuous forces emitting from it – but this was a demonstration. Bernarsu wanted to see how well she could mold something. How long could she keep it up? How hard could she push herself?

Molding was an important aspect of wielding magic. It involved the caster to do exactly as Maurelan was doing, to hold an orb steadily with strength, focus, and confidence. This in turn would give its wielder the ability to change the orb's shape, alter its frequency, or shift its intensity at any moment. It was a routine that must always be observed under a watchful eye, for its' effects could be disastrous for both the spell caster and any other observer.

Bernarsu was no mage. As far as Maurelan knew, he had never practiced magic a day in his life. And of course everyone in Tovien knew that Maurelan had grown quite adept to the art of spell casting. Unlike any of the mages or elders in Tovien however, Bernarsu knew Maurelan better than most people in the village. That is why after a while; he had been granted permission to oversee certain aspects of her training.

She was having enough trouble just sustaining the orb, and she hadn't even molded anything yet. But the test would be pointless without a little pressure.

In the passing moments the display had caused somewhat of a spectacle. People were stepping out of their huts to see what the commotion was, and soon all the little children came out to catch a glimpse. They ran toward her, cheering and shouting her name along through the mountain valley. The added distraction was almost more than Maurelan could bear.

By now, the orb was beginning to expand and grow out of control. It had become so large that she and Bernarsu had to take several steps back just to keep their distance from the deadly sphere. What was worse, the children were almost upon them.

“Shrink it!” Bernarsu shouted. “Stay focused!”

“I’m trying!” she screamed, hoping that he could hear her over the tumultuous roar of her enchantment. But she could not shrink it gradually, gracefully. She already felt as if she might lose consciousness the next few seconds.

With a final thrust of energy, she dispelled the orb, and the children arrived just in time to see it dissipate into the air, leaving behind a faint mist.

Standing where the orb had vanished, the children were still marveled, but a bit disappointed.

“Maurelan, Maurelan,” said one of the boys. “Do it again.”

With a flick of her wrist, Maurelan produced a small orb and tossed it into the air where it hovered above the children. Graciously they jumped, trying to reach for it, but eventually they settled for simply gazing up at the thing in admiration. She had left the children with her last good deed of the day, a deed that cost her awkward glances from Bernarsu as they departed.

She knew what that looked meant. It was yet another question of responsibility. She should be scolding the children for seeking magic, not encouraging them. But she did not care.

The two of them made their way down the slope, back into the village.

There was still much going on in Tovien, even in the afternoon hours. Families were still out enjoying the last vestiges of sunlight, and beggars were still posted on the street corners, soliciting for food.

Of all the things Maurelan had valued about her homeland, the amount of poverty that had plagued her people was not one of them. It had been the reason why she tried so hard to please her father.

There were nine realms in the known world, six of which were governed by the Leadership. The ruthless Stenetian warlord of the seas governed the rest. Tovien was one of those realms. It was a humble village; resilient enough to function on its own - given that all of its inhabitants played their part - yet it was dependent on the sovereignty of a tyrant. Stenetian coin was the only currency that the people of Tovien could afford to barter with. They did not have access to their own re-

sources, they did not own a very large military presence, and for the most part they did not have much to do with the other realms. Economically Tovien was obscure in the eyes of the Leadership, but it had its uses. Unique uses that only a person of Maurelan's stature could have knowledge of.

Of all the people, she was surprised that she did not see any of the elders. By now they were all either at evening prayer, or perhaps joining her father. She hoped that it would be in private, unless he intended to soon crown her and delegate witnesses.

Maurelan and Bernarsu passed through the marketplace – the central location for Tovien's agriculture and export – which was still quite active. Food had been sold and distributed to many different families who inhabited small, adobe huts along the village. Like most tribes, agriculture was Tovien's greatest triumph, and right about now it was calling Maurelan's stomach. In the late afternoon light, merchants were busy trying to make last minute sales, and so it appeared that at every stop, the final meals of the day were being prepared.

Maurelan walked slowly behind him, sniffing batches of food, taking in the wealth of the smell. Fried rabbit stuffed in pelt, fresh vegetables, and smoked ham here, crisp rice, broiled chicken, and roasted turkey there.

“Maurelan!” said Bernarsu glancing over his shoulder. “Orbs are a very dangerous form of magic, and you must be careful when practicing it around children. You know the laws are strict in the realms. I would not be able to speak on your behalf if something were to happen. Are you listening to me?”

Maurelan was listening, but a verbal response or a quick nod of the head was slightly beyond her at the moment. Of course she knew how strict the laws against magic were in the nine realms, but they were not strict enough to keep her mind from wandering over all the food she was seeing. Besides, a Stenetian warlord oversaw Tovien. And in her mind, no Stenetian warlord would ever care about the bans placed upon magic by the Leadership. Besides, she was starved.

She stopped to make a purchase, ignoring his attempt to discipline her about magical safety.

She received her meal; a vegetable wrap filled with rabbit dices. As she took a large bite, Bernarsu looked down at her before they moved on.

“And your manners lack restraint.”

“When my father summoned me,” she said. “Did he seem at all odd to you?”

“No!” he called over his shoulder with a scowl. She could detest a bit of annoyance in his voice. “All was normal, but he did appear to have been lost in a very contemplative mode of thought.”

“Well, when is he not?”

“Good point.”

They exited the marketplace – which was positioned in the very center of Tovien, making it the quickest way across the village – passing several orchards and a few vineyards before arriving at the elder’s temple. It was a relatively short tower, considering the fact that it contained only five levels from top to bottom. Its old brick layout had begun to crumble at its foundation, and its many walkways had been subject to decay throughout the years. It was a place where her father, Nelo remained throughout most of the day, lost in meditation. This was his dwelling place, where he slept.

“I will wait out here,” said Bernarsu as they stopped near the entrance.

Maurelan nodded, stepping into the temple. It was quite dark as usual, the only light source being that of candles burning along the walls. It was silent, save for the sound of the elders, seventy of them, sitting side by side in a circle along the interior of the tower wall; some of them humming meditatively, and some of them grunting as Maurelan made her way through the center. She ascended the second level, where she saw him sitting there on a great mahogany seat.

Nelo was not an extremely old man but he was much younger than he looked. His face had wilts, showing signs of stress. His frame was small, giving him the look of helplessness, and his clothes were worn. He could not stand all the way up on his own, so he used a cane stick to support himself, and subjugates nearby to aid him. Being a master psychic and succumbing to many decades of stress had

caused his mind to dwindle. Luckily, he was able to retain most of his mind, but there were times where his sickness had plagued his mind severely.

She stood before him waiting to be seen, but his eyes were closed, and he appeared to be meditating. As he sat there, she could not help but wonder if his mind was being plagued once more by his illness. It was a horrible business and she did not like to be around when it happened.

“Father,” she said.

There was no response. Nelo just sat there, ignoring her for minutes on end, his mind in another place. All Maurelan could do was wait for him to finish. Finally he opened his eyes, squinting at her.

“Ah!” he yelled. “After all these precious years, still you make an enemy of patience.”

Maurelan said nothing. She took one step back, holding her head down in shame, but she quickly straightened her posture to regard her father.

Nelo was a humble man, and could be quite jolly at times. If he appeared to be angry at her it was either because she had done something horribly wrong, or because he was testing her demeanor; a custom he had developed over the years to keep her on her toes and well-disciplined outside the teachings of the elders. It was his way of monitoring her progress as the future heiress to the throne. Lately however – with all of her mishaps and breaking of the rules – perhaps he felt that she was distracted. She hated trying to figure out what he was thinking in regards to her behavior. Maurelan was rebellious indeed. But there was no rebellion when she was in the presence of her father. Before him she was a different person. She was always obedient and eager to please him. Even now, while expecting to be scolded, she kept her stance as firm as a statue, willing to prove to him that she was not only his daughter, but a loyal guardian of her people. It was all for the honor of her father. Nelo was one of the most revered psychics in the nine realms, and in the entire world for that matter. She respected him even more for that reason as well.

“I’m so sorry about opening the cache,” she pleaded. “I-I was only curious...”

“Yes, indeed you did,” he said. “Congratulations for being able to pick the locks without using magic to break them. I commend that.”

“Wait,” she said. “You’re not angry at me?”

“A cache is only filled with material things...you are my daughter. Besides, there are far more pressing matters at hand than scolding you about how well your thieving skills have been coming along.”

“Oh,” she said, feeling a bit surprised.

“So you can loosen up a bit.”

“I can?”

“Yes, I don’t want you standing in front of me, frozen like some Lidalian statue. It makes me nervous.”

“Oh, okay.”

She dropped her shoulders, wriggled her hands, and rolled her neck to work out the kinks and rigors of the day. She then hopped into the seat adjacent from Nelo. Pulling out a piece of her wrapped meal that she had saved in her side pouch, she quickly began to finish it off. Nelo looked at her with squinted eyes.

“What?” she said with a mouth full of rabbit. “You said I could relax.”

There was a pause as he considered her.

“Do you know how the nine realms were first established?” he asked.

“Ah,” she began. “The war that freed the people...”

“Not its common history, my dear child. Every street urchin from here to the north borders knows that. I’m talking about its undocumented history. At first I would have thought that your time spent with the elders would have revealed to you some portion of it. But instead, you seek solitude, roaming the peaks to be amongst yourself. Perhaps that is why you have missed the opportunity to understand it.”

“That’s not the reason why I don’t know the undocumented history... It is because you have not told it to me.”

“Well I will tell you now.”

He rose to his feet and began making his way through the chamber to a table, lighting a few candles to brighten the dimness, for the sun was already beginning to descend in the sky.

“The first settlers of Tovien were disciples of the Leadership. That, you know. And they were optioned with the task of founding one of the nine realms. That, you also know. What you do not know is that this province used to be a cursed land.”

“Cursed?” she said, looking around in fear.

“Ha!” he gave a spirited laugh. “Oh, the threat is long since removed. This was centuries ago, my dear child. Not decades. The fleeing populace had desert the province, either due to the curse, or. As a result, the Leadership was forced to destroy all mandates needed to prosper for this land. It had been left to chance. Had it not been for the great warlord of Stenetia, we would never have been able to claim this land. And that is exactly why we must preserve its worth.”

“But, we have the help of the Leadership.”

“Yes, we do. But the Leadership is not as strong as it used to be, when it was ruled by men not only stronger in magic, heart, and virtue, but also in combat. In these times, their greatness withers.

“I will no longer hold the truth from you, my dear daughter. We are approaching dark times indeed. And when I am gone, you must be the one to lead this village. Tovien needs a strong leader, one stronger than I. You are my only heir. Were you able to lead now, perhaps I would not need to go to such drastic measures to ensure the survival of our people.”

“Am I not ready now, father?” she asked.

“Are you ready, child?”

“I am not a child,” she exclaimed in defense, raising her voice and standing back with the same solid stance she had used before. “I have passed the trials, my

discipline is fair. I am far more athletic than any man in the village. And many of the elders have told me that my magic is nearly just as good as theirs. I am ready.”

Nelo didn't say a word. He just sat there looking at her, perhaps contemplating the point she had just made. Perhaps this was a small test that she had just passed. That was the way her father worked; testing her with words, seeking the proper response. She was unsure if she had passed this one. He gave a quirky smile – remnants of his psychosis emerging through humor – and turned to address her.

“I have raised you into a fine woman, and hopefully some day you can raise this realm into a great nation and proudly wear the title of queen. That day will come. However, there is a task... One that I have appointed for you.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“You will go to the land of Centronius.”

“Centronius?”

“Yes,” he chuckled.

“But that's nearly a days' ride.”

“You know the path, do you not?”

“I do,” she said, a look of confusion stamped on her face. “So does Bernarsu.”

“Good. You will leave at the edge of morning, when the sun is nearly at its peak. I want you well rested and well fed before you depart. Oh, and feel free to search the reliquary for any weapons, rations, or anything else you may find useful.”

“The reliquary? But I thought I just got in trouble for-”

“And finally,” he said, cutting her off. “Make sure you are not too social with the Commonwealth of that realm. Only members of the royal council are to know of your true identity, and I would rather you not display a high profile for now.”

With his usual, odd wobble, and a hint of urgency, he made his way over to the old repository. The left side of the case was filled with stone, slab documents with

historical texts engraved on them, and ancient jars posted as Nelo's personal relics. And on the right side was a series of scrolls, each packed neatly into the large case.

He searched the case, leaving Maurelan a few seconds alone with her thoughts. Centronius was the closest neighboring populace to Tovien. It was known for its aid in Tovien's economy; bringing extra soldiers, weapons, and supplies in time of war. Centronius had even played a role in Tovien's agricultural shipments, for without the permission of the Centronian king, the Northern Seas would not be allowed to open trade routes. Centronius had been instrumental in the survival of her people and still she had never been there. There was never any reason too. Messages going to and from Centronius were handled either by a messenger or a homing pigeon if there could be any to spare. For Nelo to ask her to go was almost beneath her, given her status. Perhaps he wanted to give her a chance to get out. Maybe there was sensitive information that he only trusted her with. Whatever it was, she did not question it. Besides, it was a new challenge, and she liked new challenges.

With the same, quick wobble and a slight stagger, Nelo made his way back over to her, handing her a small package wrapped in a smooth, red cloth.

"Deliver this to the king of that realm," he said. "And tell him, that the Northern Seas are being occupied."

"The Northern Seas?" she said, looking even more confused than she did before. "But that is not far from here."

"Yes, I know. The Centronians will be convening. Wearing my seal of authority, your presence may be granted. You will remain there until the delegations have concluded. And following that, if there are any services you can provide the king, then you will offer them. Understood?"

"Understood," she said, somewhat reluctant.

"Good," he chuckled, taking the seal of Tovien from his own vest and moving it up toward her collar.

It was an unexpected gesture, and she was not sure if she understood what it meant. Her knees buckled, her heart fluttered, the soles beneath her feet felt as if

they would go plunging through the floor, and as she took a deep breath all she could ponder in her mind was a single question. Is he passing the title to me?

“But, father,” she began. The sound of nervousness in her voice was one that she could not hide very well. “I-I can’t take this.”

“Did I say that you are to be crowned this today, in such an unholy fashion, with no elders, priest, without every citizen from here to Centronius to bare witness the coronation of my beloved daughter? Of course not. I am simply stating that you shall enter the council as my trusted representative...as an extension of myself. The Centronians do not know you. Therefore, you will need special invitation to attend if you are not myself. This title will ensure that.”

He took a thin, red shawl from the table, ran it through the pin on the badge, which he attached to her collar, and let it drape over her shoulder. Maurelan looked down gravely at the badge pinned to her chest, and then briefly examined the scroll he had given her.

He wobbled off to rummage through a shelf full of old jars and relic containers, this time moving with even more urgency than before. Fidgeting and muttering to himself, he fumbled over random items in the shelf. Then suddenly, he paused; his figure silhouetted by the afternoon light creeping around the shadows of the repository. It gave him the appearance of a leaning ghost, the upper half of him swaying in the dim light, and his lower half not visible in the darkness.

A flask went crashing to the ground and Maurelan jerked her head up, startled. He was still mumbling to himself, even louder than before as if some terrible debate was erupting within him. He didn’t even appear to notice the mess on the floor, and he was already stepping in it; sharp glass cracking beneath his bare feet. Maurelan didn’t have to guess what was wrong with him. For the past several months it had happened once every other week. He was going into one of his episodes again. The last seizure was bad enough, but there was something about his sudden, awkward lurch that alarmed her.

“Father!” she said. When she approached him, he turned to her, his face bearing the grim combination of anger and insanity. It startled her and she gasped.

“Help!” she screamed over her shoulder and immediately she could hear a multitude of feet charging up through the chambers below them. She grabbed his shoulders, trying to steady him. “Father, father, can you hear me?”

“Run, child!” he said, looking her right in the eyes.

“What?”

“Flee this...blasted, cursed realm, now!”

“But, you told me that there was no hurry. To go when I am ready.”

“No!” he shouted to her. He began to writhe in agony as if fighting a deep pain within him. Then quickly, eerily, he jerked his head, and began speaking again as if he were in some sort of trance. “There is no time to waste! I have seen this in my dreams far too long! Go. Go now! Go to Centronius, where the fate of the world shall be decided; where the red serpent shall make his final stand.”

“What?”

“Go! And pray to the gods...that mercy will be swift!”

He fell unconscious in her arms. She nearly fell over onto him, and probably would have had it not been for her quick reflexes.

She took a step back, bewildered and barely aware of anything that was going on around her. All of her senses had become overloaded. She hadn't even realized that the chamber was already full of disciples, elders, and very soon, physicians. The only thing to remind her that she wasn't dreaming was the watery blur that began to build up in her eyes. It was the pain that brought her back to reality ever so gently. She felt a heavy, yet gentle hand touch her shoulder. Bernarsu was by her side, looking peculiarly at her badge, shawl, and the message that was clutched in her hand.

“What did he say?” he asked. His voice was deep enough for her to hear over the ruckus.

Maurelan looked down at the package in her hand, then she met Bernarsu's gaze with a humbled expression on her face.

“We must to go Centronius,” she said gravely.



The Voranth

Fortress Keep was a forty-foot tower perched on a tiny island of rock in the midst of the Krelenic Sea. It was positioned just below the water line to look as if had raised from the water itself.

Inside the tower, in its peak chamber was the vampiric-sorceress, Saskia - leader of the Voranth coven - sitting comfortably on her throne room. She ran her fingers across a goblet of blood, pondering the information she had received. For days she had been hidden away in the peak chamber, lost in meditation, and she was not to be disturbed.

Using psychic energy she had managed to link herself to the minds of various prophets. These prophets each dwelled in different regions around the world. Some of them were obscure and others were well known among the common world, but all of them had come together in mental unison over the past number of days. There had been a psychic congregation between among them, and much had been called into debate concerning activity from the earth's energy fountain. Saskia had been in and out, probing their gathering, but none of them had managed to sense the presence of her mind. The magic block she conjured up had made sure of that. What she had been able to do was an extremely difficult task to maintain even for a high level mage. On many occasions she had prided herself on how good she was with magic, but the information she had discerned from the gathering had her dumbfounded, bewildered by the possibilities of what would come next.

“So it is true,” she spoke to herself with a thick accent, piercing through the halls. “It must be.” She stood to her feet, revealing a tall, slender figure, wrapped

in draping, silk garb. She walked toward the open balcony, stopping to look out into the night. For the past several days there had been an unnatural breeze brewing along the shores. It was that strange wind that had initially warned her, for she was well in tune with the earth's weather patterns. The prophetic senses flowing through her blood had sensed it. The time had come. She stared deep into the night sky, and slowly, a long smirk streaked across her dark, red lips. Her face was gorgeous in the moonlight, yet devious and evil looking. The top of her head was creneled with a small crown, which rested lightly upon the thick of her hair; her eyes being the pinnacle of some soulless jewel, ancient in years and terrifying to gaze upon. She began to drink the blood in her goblet, slowly savoring every sip. Glaring up at the full moon, she smirked in delight.

“Marishka,” she uttered a name under her breath. “Our great clan shall rule once more.”

“Mistress,” called a voice from the entrance behind her. It was the voice of one of her brethren, but to her, he was more of a peasant. She gazed over her shoulder and glanced at him with a restless, aggravated look as he continued. “The dactyls are on the prowl again. I hear they've come streaming off the warlord's ship by the dozens.”

“Still here to scavenge flesh from the dead I see,” she said walking back to her throne where she sat. “As if this world were not wretched enough without the incompetence of such vile creatures.”

“We have word. They may have found something that might be of interest to you. Some of us believe it may be proof of what you have been seeking.”

She glared at him with a new found interest, somewhat perplexed to hear him speak of proof. She was almost equally perplexed by the notion that he pretended to know what proof she was looking for, since she had never discussed such matters with the likes of her subjects. Or maybe, it was an early sign that the other vampires of the covenant had been conspiring behind her back. She could care less. Besides, conspiracies had become so boring to her, and so had her covenant.

“Proof?” she said. “I do not need proof. What I need is to hunt. There is not enough pure blood on this pathetic rock, and unfortunately the dactyls are a bit un-

clean for my taste. Still, I suppose whatever information they have to offer shall be sufficient.”

“And what about lord Shallemeign?” he asked. “Are you really going to the eastern shores with him? We hear he is going to the-”

“Fool!” she suddenly snapped, tossing the goblet clear across the room where it clattered near his feet. She stood up, trying not to appear as angry as she truly felt, but by now, it had been apparent.

Her influence over him was impeccable. At any moment she could order him to jump from the balcony outside and plummet to his death if she wished, and he would willingly sacrifice himself for her. It was not because he was fearful of her, or because he desired her more than anything (even though both were obviously true.) It was because she had cast a spell over him days ago. It was a psychic spell, her specialty: a dark abomination creeping beneath his notice, seeping into mind, manipulating his thoughts. She did not need to cast mind spells on her subjects to win their loyalty, but it did provide her with some amusement. If he was beginning to question her or assume to know about pieces of information that she had not given, then it was a sign that the spell's effect could be wearing off. She wanted to make sure that was not the case.

Her demeanor had changed from wicked to gentle as she walked over to him. A smirk on her face, fabricated a reassuring kindness as she ran her long fingers over his cheeks. She was searching his soul for fear - genuine fear - the kind only detectable by the faint quivering of flesh, a wavering shift of the eyes, or offbeat rhythms in the pulse. She examined him subtly, but his expression however, remained blank. Now she could tell without a doubt in her mind that he spell was still working on him. As a result, she concluded that his questioning was genuine, and it was something that had only grown out of his undying infatuation with her.

“Clavius,” she spoke his name softly. “Do not question my motives. Everything I have ever done has only been for the sake of the covenant, you know that.”

“Yes milady,” he said, realizing his mistake shamefully. “I should have never questioned your intentions.”

“Good,” she said. “Now we can move on to our next order of business.”

Her lips moved close to his. She kissed him for a while, giving him a treat, and then bit deep into his bottom lip. He shrieked as blood flowed all the way down his chin, and Saskia erupted into malevolent laughter.

Stumbling back, he crashed into the wall behind him, outside of the chamber where members of the covenant could see him on the lower floor. They all stopped whatever they were doing, whether it was sucking the blood from the humans they deceived into being their nightly guests, or huddling in brief groups, talking amongst each other. They all looked up to see what the sudden commotion was.

Clavius held his mouth tightly, trying not to cry in agony; instead, he began grunting in pain. He looked at her in shock, hesitant, unable to do anything except watch her. Saskia stepped forward, intimidating him with her presence. She looked down at the group of vampires in a condescending manner and then looked back at Clavius.

“Tell your heathen guests, they must leave,” she exclaimed. “We have business. Yes,” she continued on aggressively, now looking down at her lower subjects while descending the temple stairway to address them. “You all must leave now, heathens! Fornicators! Mistakes of nature! Get out!! Never return until you have something to contribute!”

The closer she came to the bottom of the stairs, the quicker they moved, picking up dead bodies with desperate haste, and exiting the temple. Within minutes, they were all gone, and the hall was silent again; eerily silent, which was just the way she liked it. Blood stained the floor and death filled the air. The filth was not something she had particularly desired, but the smell did prove to be somewhat rousing.

She could now think clearly. Clavius soon approached her, still holding his wounded lip. He looked up to the sky through one of the large portholes in the wall and gasped, pointing up as he could see something faint in the distance. “Look milady! They are already here!”

“Of course,” she said, stepping outside onto the balcony in front of her. High up in the sky, a huge pair of leathery wings became visible, silhouetted against the brightness of the full moon. There were two other sets of wings that followed behind the first, and it had now become clear that they were indeed dactyls. The shape of the wings, the off balance glide, the shiny, green skin; these were the features of a race she had pitied for years to come.

As the dactyls moved in closer to the temple, Saskia could clearly see an object clutched in the grip of one of their feet, swinging from its claw-like talons. It was human. Saskia’s eyes widened in surprise, and in mere seconds the dactyls were landing one by one. The first dactyl dropped in rather close to her, skipping to a stop and standing nearly eight feet tall. Its face was shaped into a long beak with an equally long crest at the top of its head. A thin tail curled close to the surface, and it flapped its wings; thick sheets of flesh attached from hand to waist.

The second dactyl held the body and dropped it to the surface as it landed with the third. They all stood around what appeared to be the dead body of a human. The first dactyl squawked and turned to look at Saskia. She walked forward, trying to see the face of the body, but it lie face down.

“What is this?!” she shouted as if what she had seen had only wasted her time.

“A drifter,” the first dactyl spoke to her with a deep, hissing voice. “We found him...near the cove...when the mountain exploded.”

“But I have already seen the explosion at Fountain Cove,” she said, walking past them to get a closer look, flipping over the corpse. “Why don’t you show me something worth-”?

She stopped abruptly, gazing in surprise when she saw the face. It was twisted and had parts of other creatures mixed in, like some unimaginable collage that had been drawn out by the gods. Fur here, scales there; but the face itself was gone. It was a grotesque image, an unthinkable fate, and was capable of terrifying the terrible. Saskia was a revered sorceress of the dead, unable to recall the last thing she feared, and it was possible that she did not know fear itself, but this truly spooked her.

“Well,” she tried to speak, but didn’t quite have the words. She knelt down to get a closer look; the expression on her face was mesmerized. “What...what happened to him?”

“When the fountain cove erupted...” the second dactyl hissed. “...He must have been near the explosion. We found him...drifting in a small boat near our fortress.”

Saskia stood up, her eyes glued, staring down at the abomination before her, still lingering in disbelief. She looked over her shoulder at the dactyl as a brief smirk cracked upon her face. “Take me to your master, Shallemeign.”



Centronus

On the evening of Trulaine's return, all of Centronus was alive with talk and gossip. Those who were concerned primarily with the everyday issues of Centronus – politicians, scholars, and leaders – lined the cobble-stoned streets debating the rigors and losses of the battle, while the commonwealth – mothers, fathers, and children - marveled as hope prevailed.

Nothing could have prepared Trulaine or any of his men for the warm welcome they received on their return to Centronus. He was aware that he and his men were among the most revered citizens of Centronus, and that the Commonwealth had always paid homage to the sacrifices they had made for the sake of enduring freedom, but the reception on the morning of their return was unexpected.

The legionnaires entered on weary steeds, and commands could faintly be heard among the roaring of the crowd. Reserve legionnaires (a portion of those soldiers who had stayed behind to defend the realm) had formed columns on each side of the road. All of them held up long banners to welcome the brigade back into the royal sanctuary. Trulaine saluted them as he passed, and the soldiers dropped to one knee, and bowed with a fist over their chests.

Thousands of Centronian citizens flanked the main road, waving and cheering. The reserve soldiers acted as an enforced barrier to prevent anyone from entering the road, agitating the soldiers or disrespecting the soldiers' plight. A chorus of praise echoed throughout the city. It was as if all of Centronus had emptied out to greet them. Even people who still had no idea what was going on began to poke their heads out of windows. Children poured out in clusters, skipping down the

slope. They broke from the refuge of their parents, becoming lost in the crowd to get a better look at what was going on.

Trulaine's brigade halted, dismounting their horses before a gathering beneath a great stone pavilion. Slowly they dispersed, blending in with the crowd, reuniting with loved ones. Their horses were taken by another group of soldiers, followed by a few dozen handmaidens. The women greeted Trulaine's men with fresh provisions; fruit picked from the ripest trees, and tusks filled with selections of wine and water. They also helped tend to the wounded. When the maidens saw the extent of some of the injuries of some of the soldiers, they gasped, darting back and forth to send for physicians. Some of the unwounded men from the brigade saluted the maidens with flirtatious winks and grateful smiles. The women blushed back, chuckling and chatting amongst each other excitedly.

Golondred made sure that he was taken well care of. Trulaine barely had time to wonder where his second in command had gone before spotting him slouched in one of the chairs that had been set up beneath the shade of the pavilion. The large Centronian took two handmaidens for himself, one to feed him grapes, and the other to wrap his arms around heartily.

Soon the cheers died down as more people looked among the faces of the brigade, and did not see their loved ones. There were still many men arriving and onlookers could not be certain just yet, but some of them began to weep as they already suspected the worst. The reality of it had quickly turned sour for some, but the overall mood was still joyous. The cheers abated and discussion broke out in a myriad of family groups, but the surety of death had settled in for others. Children wept and mothers wailed as some families came to the realization that their sons and fathers had lost their lives.

Trulaine felt a sting of responsibility with every shriek of sadness that came from the crowd. He felt responsible for creating a string of new widows, torn parents, and fatherless children. He wanted to go out and comfort those families, but it would not change anything. The tragedies of their mission would still be there, and there were other issues that required Trulaine's attention. As much as it pained him, he could not be bothered with tending to the bereaved. He could

have said a silent prayer to wish the men he had lost in battle a safe trip to the afterlife, could have reached out to the heavens with his voice and whispered out for forgiveness. The gods would have surely heard him. Prayer; it was yet another language of the divine that man used to forge his way through the madness of the world. Like the work of spells, to beseech the gods was said to have profound effects in the world of the living. But Trulaine felt no need to pray to them. Deep down, he wanted to curse them. The thought did cross his mind, not only on this day, but countless days before, as well as the curse, which they had allowed to spread across humanity. But something in him had always stopped him from doing it. He sighed deeply and opened his eyes again.

That was when he saw Deneaden.

She was standing there under the stone pavilion, wearing one of her formal dresses. He recognized her meek posture anywhere. Hands placed together, her frame rocking slightly on the balls of nervous feet, and a face that barely cracked a smirk, but eyes that revealed a young soul smiling uncontrollably on the inside. Her golden hair was tipped with precious bangs, overhanging a pair of deep blue eyes.

He approached, and embraced her tightly. In return she gave him a long, passionate kiss. They stood there, not a word spoken between them for the first few moments. They simply held each other for a while. Finally she looked up at him, concerned.

“Are you injured?”

“Barely,” he said. “I have a gash on my left side; clawed. And a bruise on my leg, when I fell from Delemeney.”

“Clawed?” she took a step back as if she had already hurt him by touching him. “By what, some sort of creature?”

“Werewolves. A horde of them.”

She could do nothing but put a hand over her mouth in astonishment.

“It’s alright,” he said. “No horde, cursed or uncursed has ever gotten through our defenses. And I doubt they would come all this way just to taste our steel again.”

Before Deneaden could speak another word, Trulaine was met by Tilian, captain of the Centronian reserve forces, in charge of defending the city. He was an admirable leader and a man whose experience on the battlefield was well trusted by Trulaine. He was the only other man in Centronus with executive authority to mobilize troops in Trulaine’s absence. He was a tall man characterized by the eye patch he wore after losing an eye in battle. Behind him was Valindolin, high elder of Centronus, and orator of peace for the people. She was also the consultant to the king. She had an heir of youthfulness to her that defied her years, and traits of wisdom that exceeded any living person in the realm. Beside her was Ursilus, the high prosecutor of magic within the city. He was a thin man, whose sharp, aging facial features could have passed him as a scoundrel at first glance had it not been for his noble efforts for prosecuting illegal magicians fairly, and his overall kindness to the citizens of Centronus.

Trulaine gave a salute to the two men, and received a warm hug from Valindolin. There were two women in the world that stayed on his mind; Deneaden was one of them, Valindolin was the other. She had been something of a surrogate mother to Trulaine for many years. Being in the presence of both of them reminded him of what home really was.

“Welcome back, sir,” said Tilian, noticing a portion of the men gone. “Was it really that bad?”

“Werewolves,” Trulaine said.

“Yes,” Valindolin interjected. “We heard.”

“So the word is out then?”

“That is not the only word out in this realm,” said Tilian. “Nor is it the most pertinent.”

Valindolin glanced at Tilian, and Trulaine glanced at him peculiarly. Clearly there was another issue at hand, one that Trulaine had no knowledge of.

“Well,” Ursilus interjected. “The casualties were far less than expected, given your encounter with the savages.”

“Not few enough,” said Trulaine. “There are many families left to mourn this day. And savages would not have been able to kill forty of our finest warriors. What we fought out there was an abomination.”

“Judging from what you’ve seen,” said Tilian. “What do you suggest?”

“I suggest you to set up fortifications around our perimeters. We must be on guard at all times.”

“Do you really think it will come down to a siege on our front?”

“I do not know. But we must make preparations for securing this realm. I must speak to my uncle.”

“The king is indisposed at this time,” said a familiar voice from the top of the steps. “He is resting, weary from travel.”

Trulaine looked up to see his younger cousin, Romulus, who made his way down to greet them.

Romulus was the king’s oldest son, and as the king’s first born, he was expected to take up after his father. Everything about prince Romulus revealed a king in the making. His garment was made of the finest silk, outlined with strips of gold. Two guards flanked him, his noble posture lightened by the casual manner in which he met Trulaine with.

“Cousin,” he said with a smile. “You had us worried. It took you long enough to make it back.”

“I am glad I could be back.”

The group of royal members walked up the steps, making their way around the exterior of the palace. Romulus went on about the norms and conditions of the realm, conversing mainly with Valindolin about the daily issues, hoping to put Trulaine up to speed about the current affairs of Centronus.

“There is much to discuss,” Romulus began.

“Such as?” Trulaine asked, curious.

“Well,” Romulus said, glancing over his shoulder at Trulaine and Deneaden who walked hand in hand. “You have just only returned. However, I did want to inform you of what you missed while you were gone.”

“Such as?” he said, this time he asked with a hint of sarcasm.

“Well for one thing, Mandaelion has begun his processing into the courts.”

“The courts,” he said, surprised and quite frankly impressed to hear the news. “But I thought it was your father’s wish to see him a fighter.”

“He would make a good fighter indeed. But I’m sure that would not suit father well.”

Romulus was referring to his younger brother, Trulaine’s younger cousin, Mandaelion. It was a shock hearing that he took up education in the c, which was something that many young boys did not do willingly. Trulaine’s upbringing was slightly different. He was the son of the legendary Trumandius, and he was raised as a fighter, well versed in all areas of combat, leadership, and politics. He had never really questioned why he had been groomed so thoroughly. It had always simply been the path of his life. His father helped found Centronus, and he supposed that that was a good enough reason. But Romulus and Mandaelion were the sons of the current king; why had they not had such an extensive upbringing as well? The answer to that question was deeply embedded in their heritage. Still, Trulaine never objected. He considered himself lucky to be raised so closely in the dealings of Centronus. It made him smarter, stronger, and better prepared.

Romulus had shifted the subject several times, from Mandaelion, to the economic concerns of the city. Trulaine tried to pay attention but Deneaden who had been constantly yanking on his wrist as they walked hand in hand behind the rest of the royal council, distracted him. He turned sharply in her direction to see what the fuss was about, but once he saw that enchanted smile on her face, he knew the truth of it. She had missed him so sorely that the concerns of Centronus would just have to wait, and she did not feel ashamed that she was pulling him away from his duties.

She pulled him around the corner and the two of them disappeared from sight. Before he could object, she kissed him long and passionately. He tried to fight the urge, but he could not ignore to her embrace. He kissed her back, and the two of them smiled at each other.

“But what about the council members?” he asked.

“They’ve been without you for over a week, I’m sure they can wait for one evening to have you. I had to wait.”

With a smile on his face, he kissed her again. He could hear the disgruntled council members speaking in surprised tones as they struggled to make sense of his sudden disappearance. Soon however, they continued on without Trulaine and Deneaden, their voices escaping through the palace halls.

“I feel like I have been gone for an eternity,” said Trulaine.

“You have been,” she said. “And now that I finally have you again, you’re not going anywhere.”

“You haven’t forgotten my status, have you?” he said with a chuckle. “You know the council will never let me rest for too long. They will always have me.”

“Well now I have you,” she said with a delightful smile as she kissed him again. She looked into his eyes, and that was when he felt it again. It was that long awaited feeling that he had nearly forgotten which was alive. It would never die to him, and their love had remained utterly undiminished. Although he had only been gone for a week, the horrors were enough to cause any man to forget the comforts of home, even one so enticing a bride as Deneaden.

“I have you,” she repeated. “And there is no force in this world that can tear me from you. Not again.”

“Trulaine!” the young voice of Mandaelion came echoing loudly through the halls.

“Any force?” Trulaine asked her jokingly, and the two of them burst into laughter.

Mandaelion approached, flanked by two of his friends. He was a tall young man, strong and fit, with a meek personality. His carefree attitude made him appear clumsy as he skipped through the hallway, but underneath, Trulaine could see the natural balance and the dexterity of a born warrior. He was beginning to look at his younger cousin in a new light now. Not quite battle ready but Trulaine would keep a watchful eye on his training. Perhaps Tilian's instructors and trainers could make something of him; and if Trulaine had time in the near future, perhaps he would train him as well.

Mandaelion's two friends, Dalon, and Folleti were nervous and cautious about approaching the revered captain. Folleti was a young girl, younger than Mandaelion by about a year. She was a playful one indeed, giggling, her face covered by Dalon's back as she hid behind him. Dalon was about the same age. His expression was a nervous one, and his face was frozen in fear as Folleti pushed on his back, forcing him forward.

"We are so happy you have returned," said Mandaelion. "How was your venture?"

"Treacherous," Trulaine said in a flat tone and the three teens burst into laughter.

"Trulaine," blurted Dalon. "The handmaidens are throwing a celebration for you."

"Shut up," Folleti said, punching him in the stomach.

"A celebration," said Trulaine. "Why was I not made aware of this?"

"Because it's a secret."

"It's not a secret," Mandaelion admitted. "We just thought that it would be better if it were a surprise." He cast an angry glance at Dalon before turning back to Trulaine with a smile.

Already he could feel Deneaden's hand slip away from his. She gave him a glance as she stood a few feet away. He knew what it meant. She would be up in their tower waiting for him when they had a proper chance to be alone. There

would be time, and the children could have their fun now. Besides, it wouldn't be long before he would embrace her again.

Trulaine spent the last stretch of daylight – which was maybe only about twenty minutes – with Mandaelion and his two friends. They took a walk along the garden pass where he regaled them of his full account with the Memradonians. After that, he was able to get some one on one time with his younger cousin as Folleti and Dalon began chasing each other through the garden's great willow trees, climbing their branches. Trulaine and Mandaelion stood beneath the willows. A huge gust of wind swept through and caused the tree to sway. Folleti could be heard laughing from one of the branches high up in the tree.

“Your brother tells me you want to be a politician,” said Trulaine.

“Yes,” said Mandaelion, shaking his head. “I do.”

“And what made you decide so promptly?”

“Well, my brother of course.”

“I encourage you to follow your heart,” Trulaine said. “If you are to be a politician, to speak to the people in times of need, and perhaps someday be known as a herald of this province, then I hope for you to be the best one there is. Understand?”

“Oh, to be herald, like my brother,” he said, enthusiastically. Mandaelion nodded his head, his hair ruffling as the wind continued its' constant barrage of gusts.

Trulaine watched him, delighted that his young cousin had found something in this dire world worth becoming. It was a noble enterprise indeed, if one had the heart for making a positive change in the world, and Trulaine was sure that Mandaelion had such a heart. He was worried however, about how the biased world of politics would affect him. Men were desperately trying to keep their power in the world, and Mandaelion would need to be aware of that now if he were to be a herald someday.

Trulaine spent the rest of the evening sparring with Mandaelion while Folleti and Dalon watched from the branches above. Since Mandaelion did not have a

sword, and since Trulaine still carried the sword he had left the battlefield with, he showed his younger cousin how to defend against a sword when unarmed. It was a difficult concept to grasp. Mandaelion failed to see how one could be skilled enough to defend against a sword without one to defend with. Mandaelion was thrilled to be under his tutelage, even if it was for only just an evening.

He took to Trulaine's instruction well, even though a real training session would be much more rigid, both physically and psychologically, Trulaine took it far easier on him. Trulaine did however show him the movements; how to dodge, how to dive, how to roll.

"These movements may not seem significant," Trulaine told him after the lesson. "But they just might save your life someday, if you ever feel the need to recall them."

Mandaelion nodded, slightly out of breath, acceptant, even intrigued by the unorthodox lesson.

The edge of day went on, spilling over into night, and they parted for the evening.

Trulaine quickly found his way to the palace grounds where Deneaden waited in their tower. They spent the rest of the night together, hand in hand. It was a long awaited moment for Trulaine to be with the one he loved. They caught up, laughed, romanced, and slept. All of his worries seemed to melt away in her arms. This was the way he wanted his life to be. Just like this, forever.



Uneasy Alliance

Saskia was growing impatient. Waiting in the lower decks of Shallemeign's great ship - the Valora - longer than she cared to, she had been pacing idly about for minutes, wondering why someone of her stature had been made to wait in the first place. Shallemeign had been made aware hours ago by his dactyl servants that she would be arriving on his ship. He should consider himself lucky that she was even here at all, considering how unfavorable her transportation had been. Being a vampire, she could fly over short distances, but his ship was hundreds of miles away from her tower. For this particular trip she had to rely on the dactyls to take her there, and she despised them more than she could bear. The very idea of allowing any dactyl to touch her had sent chills up her spine, but the fact that she had to clutch onto one of them for so long had angered her beyond measure, and her frustration didn't end there. When she had finally landed (disgusted and brushing herself off), she could see that the ship's crew was full of Shallemeign's vile pirates, both soldiers and servants who were all scurrying about, manning the ship, shouting out orders, and casting unwanted glances at her. Captivated by her presence, the servants paused in their chores until they were all ordered back to work by the soldiers who could not keep their eyes off her themselves. Even worse still, she had made her way down to the lower decks only to be halted in front of Shallemeign's personal quarters by two of his guards. And now, here she was, at the mercy of someone else's time. She was angry, but it did not weigh on her conscience. Deep down, it was the exhilarating thrill of ambition that had smothered her anger, for she was positive that this meeting would go in her favor.

There was a sudden commotion on the other side of his chamber. Shouts rang out in sharp echoes, a metallic clang crashed against the wall, and the sound

of massive footsteps jolted rhythmically, pounding so hard that the decks began to rattle all around. The two guards stepped aside. The doors swung open, and out walked a large half-giant, grunting and mumbling under his breath. He was so massive that his body became wedged between the hinges of the doorframe and he had to wriggle himself through, chipping small shards of wood to the floor as he exited.

“Watch it, you clumsy buffoon!” Shallemeign's voice came blaring through the room. “Every day this ship withers because of your incompetence!”

Glancing over his shoulder, the ogre made his way past Saskia, barely acknowledging her presence as he continued mumbling his way through the corridor. After the ogre's exit, Saskia proceeded with a swift stride through the chamber-room quarters, and a sense of urgency entered with her.

The room was large, with ample space to walk around. Judging by the sheer size alone, she could tell that it had been custom-designed to portray a sense of grandeur in the likeness of its owner. It was decorated with a great, elegant cot, two oak dressers, a six foot mirror, a full-sized model sculptured to resemble the warlord, and positioned near the far end of the wall was a metal-plated throne resting on a platform heightened by several steps. There he sat: Shallemeign, captain of the ship, warlord of the seas, and a fierce sorcerer whose name had been revered by most of the world's population. Saskia had heard the stories about him, but she never had the chance of meeting him before this moment. There had been no need for a proper introduction since he knew of her reputation and she had certainly known of his. They had also been in contact several times with both the magical use of viewing portals and by word of traveling dactyls.

In the dimly lit room, Shallemeign glared at her - his head resting on a fist - regarding her with wide eyes. He hadn't had the pleasure of even knowing a female fearless enough to even board his ship unless it was the likes of his own daughter whom he rarely saw since she was always on crusades to recruit soldiers to his cause. Saskia on the other hand was not his daughter. She had the beauty of a goddess, the temperament of a warrior, and if he played his cards right, she would become a frequent visitor; perhaps even take up temporary residence

aboard his ship. She was alluring indeed, but he refused to empower her beauty. And so he remained seated.

“Welcome,” he said. His voice was deep and loud, but his smooth tone had graced him with a hospitable kindness. “You'll have to excuse Brog,” he continued, referring to the ogre. “His meddling causes me plenty of wasted time, so I apologize for the delay.”

The apology however was not needed. She could have mentioned several other inconveniences he had cost her, but there were much bigger things about to unfold and she planned to get straight to the point. She stopped not far from his throne, placing her forearm upon the head of his statue.

“I assure you,” she said. “The delay is the least of our concerns.”

“Our concerns?” he asked peculiarly.

“Well,” she said in a correcting tone. “Not just our concerns...everyone's concerns. The entire world.”

“You're referring to the energy fountain.”

“It has erupted,” she confirmed, a serious expression etched on her face. “All the magic in the Northern Reach has been unleashed...but I am sure the dactyls have already informed you of this. By now, the psychics will be looking for solutions, perhaps even banding with the Leadership to prevent incoming disaster.”

“So, you believe that the Leadership has a plan, do you?”

“Well of course. Do they not always have a plan? They are the very institution that foresaw this, and they are guardians of forbidden knowledge. Surely they have long prepared for something like this.”

“And you think that perhaps if we act now, we can intercept this knowledge from them and hatch our own plan of survival. Is that it?”

His expression was concealed in the darkness, but through her heightened vampiric sense of vision, she could see the outline of a smirk beginning to form on his face, and there was a stale pause between them. As she looked up at the mysterious, nonchalant man before her, Saskia began to wonder whether or not Shalle-

meign knew the gravity of the things to come or perhaps if he was just simply insane. Yes, he was aware that the energy fountain had erupted, but he did not know the inner workings of the energy fountain the way she did. For decades she had visited the fountain, studied it, harvested and broken down its magical energies. She had made a career out of understanding its properties, and it was Saskia, not Shallemeign who knew the full extent of the danger it posed. It was a situation that could not be taken lightly, even by a mind as devious and bent on planetary domination as that of Shallemeign. He may have been the greatest living tyrant in the known world, but this was far beyond even him, and she had to be sure he understood that.

She raised her hands in the air, moving them in an aesthetic motion similar to that of a composer conducting a symphony. As a sorceress, manipulating dark magic was effortless, but light magic was naturally for the humble at heart, and the incantation had taken a considerable amount of energy for her twisted soul to conjure. Nonetheless, a thick spark of light sizzled at the top of the ceiling and spread out in both directions. The light spark streaked out in a circular motion, descending to the floor and taking up the space of the entire room. The result was a great sphere of illumination between them. Suddenly images and protrusions began to emerge from the sphere as it shimmered and blossomed with detail. Shallemeign watched in interest, as he had never seen such an expression of light magic. He was impressed.

“This is the earth and everything we know,” she spoke while walking around the sphere, stopping at a point where a thin shard of light shot out towards the deck wall. “This is the fountain eruption. Every minute of every day, the eruption is releasing untold amounts of energy into the atmosphere; these are magical energies that were never meant to intertwine with the forces of nature. Soon...it will take its toll, the damage will be done, and every living thing will die. Afterward, the entire planet will be nothing more than specks of dust littered among the cosmos.”

As she explained all of this, the beam of light that had represented the eruption on the sphere formed into a heavy blanket of energy, until it slowly began to consume the entire breadth of her magical miniature of the earth. Shallemeign

stood and watched in awe as he could see a myriad of explosions ripping into the air in front of him. Soon, the miniature crumbled and imploded into a thousand pieces, showering in every direction; each particle cast out and suspended in the air all around them. The light spell ran its course, and the scattered particles of light evaporated into remnants of ash.

Saskia watched him as the dying light from the spell cast a new shadow upon his face. Shallemeign's eyes revealed a devious glow as the dying light faded. It was clear that his demeanor had changed, but she was having a difficult time telling exactly how it had changed. She watched him, waiting for a response.

“Spectacular,” he said, smiling like a child who had just seen a batch of exploding fireworks. When he saw that she was not amused however, his smile faded. “I was referring to your brilliant abilities to create light magic, Mrs. Voranth, not the impending doom that awaits us.”

“This is not a joke, warlord.”

“And what then would be your suggestion may I ask?” he shifted amusedly, ponderously on his throne. “Surely you did not come all this way simply for a shoulder to cry on.”

“There is a prophecy. Perhaps you have heard of it.”

“There are many prophecies said to occur, darlin’. And there are a very small number of them that I would ever be willin’ to accept as possible truths. Of which do you speak?”

“Drago’Mystellion,” she said in a flat tone.

Shallemeign gave her a dull look followed by a speculative one.

At this very moment she was using psychic energy to blanket his conscious mind beneath his notice. Mesmerism. If she wanted to, she could ensnare him, make him agreeable to things that he would be less likely to agree with. And by directing his every thought, she could make him succumb to her will. Unlike the weak psyche of Clavius however, she could already tell that Shallemeign's mind was a formidable one. Most men would have already foundered under the pres-

sure of her spell, but his mind felt so dense and focused that she could not even read his thoughts. Perhaps he did possess some degree of telepathy, but perhaps not, for this type of magic was a tricky business, and if one did not understand the many ways of the mind, one might be fooled into misreading the thoughts if they are trying to invade. If he became suspicious of her intentions in the slightest, then even her most subtle attempts would be hindered and possibly noticed by his mind's eye. However, there was also the possibility that he did not notice her spell. Perhaps it was merely mention of the name that had caused his mind to become so active. Mystellion... it was a name that was sure to incite fear in any man. Whatever it was, she would use the reverence of such a name the way a surgeon uses an instrument for performing surgery. She would breach his will. It was her only real reason for agreeing to strike this alliance.

“Mystellion,” he said, repeating the name. “Advisor to the first Centronian king.”

“Correct.”

“Supreme betrayer of The Leadership...”

“Yes.”

“But he was killed many years ago when the Centronians took back their city.”

“Is that what the surface dwellers believe?”

There was a pause, and Shallemeign smiled at her humorously.

“Let me know if I am understanding this correctly. You traveled halfway across Krelenic Sea. You left your covenant behind, leaderless. You risked certain death by boarding the ship of a sworn enemy-“

“Former...sworn enemy,” she said with an adorning smile. “It has been quite some time since our clans last quarreled, has it not?”

“Well,” he said, resisting her charm. “Even so, it would seem that you are in a quite desperate situation indeed. Despite the fact that our clans have never been at peace with each other, you would come to me now to strike an alliance? It baffles me.”

A chuckle followed his response and he poured himself a tusk of wine from the table beside him. It was common knowledge that vampires only ever thirsted for the taste of blood; therefore he did not bother to offer her any. If she were not a vampire, she may have been inclined to believe that he was being rude. But she cared not. His hospitality was not of priority to her. She was still trying to figure out how to invade his mind. It was essential that she have his obedience; at this point, her very life may depend on it.

“You did send the invitation,” she said. “Did you not?”

“You could have declined, but you didn’t.”

“Because I know what is to come,” she said fervently. “This world was never meant to exist with the forces that have been unleashed, you know that. Magic itself will destroy the world and I do not wish to wait until it is too late.”

“But that’s not the part that surprises me,” he said ignoring her concern. “Seeing how your kind has always been a vile, prideful lot of scavenging creatures, it does not surprise me that you seek refuge in the safety of my arms. What does surprise me however, is that you would actually deem it wise of me to put stock in such a fairy tale as Mystellion’s resurrection.” He chuckled slyly. “You must be in a desperate position indeed if you were willing to fly all the way out here to propose that we spend our last days huddled in hope of being saved by a myth.”

“It is not a myth. What you call myth just may be our only hope in the end. This is not about land or riches. And it is not about your illustrious ego. Everyone will fight, and the realms will come crashing down in the end. We must band together and act now.”

“And why should we band together?” he said. “Our two clans have never actually been able to see eye to eye in the past.”

“I was hoping you would understand by now that the past is nothing at this point. The future and everything with it will soon be gone. You know this,” she urged. “What has changed? Why are you not concerned?”

He just sat there is on his throne, his eyes twinkling as he remained focused on her. She could almost see his willpower escape through his pupils, and although his

mind proved to be a struggle indeed, she could feel his psyche slowly opening up to hers.

He stood to his feet, and for the first time, Saskia had gotten a good look at him. He possessed a tall, muscular frame that had now become visible in the moonlight, which crept in from the portholes on the deck walls. He was dressed in a green, Stenetian clad outfit covered in silver and gold armor. He wore a blood, red cape that extended low to his ankles. His aging face was marked with a scar on his left cheek, and his dark hair was damp from the humidity of the air outside. He stepped down from his platform and made his way over to one of the portholes, casting a thoughtful glance out into the calm seas.

“Are you familiar with the cradles of creation?” he asked, breaking the awkward silence.

“No,” she said. “Actually, I have not.”

“That is because knowledge of their whereabouts is forbidden, so you would not have heard of them, now would you?”

Saskia was lying of course. She had heard of the cradles, but vaguely, on occasions while visiting the outer provinces. She had heard of their reverence among The Leadership, and stories of those who had defied sacred law in search of them, but other than that, she did not know much about them. She would maintain an air of ignorance only meant that she was watching out for her own safety as much as possible. There were many people foolish enough to seek out such sacred objects of the world, and she did not want to be identified as or associated with any of them. It was wise of her to appear oblivious when conversing about the cradles, especially with someone who influenced the courts as much as Shallemeign did. And even though she was here to bid an alliance for survival, it did not mean that she trusted him in the slightest.

“Cradles,” she said. “What does this have to do with our survival?”

“Everythin’.”

“How is that so?”

“Each cradle corresponds to one of the primordial forces of nature.”

“So you would gain control over nature.”

“Not nature, nature’s cradles.”

“And what are they for?”

“Yes,” he said, still casting a thoughtful glance out into the sea. “They are the spiritual conduits of nature. Each one corresponds to a glyph made of stone. Each holds a unique property within...and there are very powerful properties that govern this world. I do not yet know what these properties are but I will seek them out until I find all of them. Then, and only then will I be able to wield the true power I seek.”

“Which is?”

“The power to create...the power to destroy...and the power to reshape.”

“Reshape?”

“With such power I could have complete control over whatever population I chose to spare. Now do you see? Not only do I tend to survive the destruction of this world, I intend to reshape what is left of it,” he spoke with a look of thirst in his eyes. “I shall enslave the survivors of those realms who had once challenged me. Architects may have spawned civilization under the tutelage of kings, and alchemists may have made them better with the help of magic...but it is I that shall bring society to its true epoch of greatness.”

“The entire world?”

“Whatever is left of it, dearie...”

“And what if there is nothing left to reshape? What if the cradles exhaust themselves? What if they exhaust you? And how do you even expect to find all of them in time?”

“If I hadn’t already thought of all those things, do you really think we would be having this conversation?” he asked, defensively.

“And what of my coven? Would we be sharing in that plight as well, or are we too low to pass beneath your notice?”

“All will be revealed in due time, vampress,” he said, approached. “All that you need to know now is that Stenetia requires your allegiance. You came here to escape the fountain’s wrath. Stick with me and you shall accomplish that.”

Stenetia. The place did not even exist. In fact it was merely an idea of a nation, one that Shallemeign filled the minds of his pirates with on a daily basis. For he and his men were true blooded Stenetians in every sense of the word, but being the beleaguered pirates of a seafaring maniac who accepted no truces to legally have a nation of his own, he and his Stenetians only called the seas home, and never once did they establish a province within the jurisdiction of the Leadership. It was Shallemeign’s iron hand that had made them the most feared of all the mortal races.

But it was obvious that he did not trust her. Even the most basic details of his plan he had only partially clued her in on, biding his time with her, keeping her in the dark for as long as he could. She was beginning to wonder if her subjects had felt this way under her mind controlling abilities. It was expected of him. This would be the perfect opportunity to produce her next spell. Perhaps if she provoked him just a little, she could shift his thoughts.

“So that is your plan, no doubt?” she expressed in a flat tone. “You want to search the world for missing relics and hidden magic, squandering the precious time we have left for a few artifacts? By the time you are able to harness the power of these cradles, it will be too late. You won’t even be left alive to master the magic. I say we follow my plan, and start seeking out oracles.”

“Ah,” he said as if remembering a small footnote. “Mystellion.”

Remaining silent, Saskia rested her arm back on the head of Shallemeign’s statue. A smile on her face seemed to say, ‘precisely.’

“And even if your myth happens to be a solid fact, how do you expect to form yet a second alliance with such evil?”

“I have my ways.”

He chuckled, and there was a pause. Saskia still leaned against the head of the statue. Surely a man of such greed and ego would have naturally said something about, but he did not. She figured that her spell must have been working because he did not say anything about it.

“I am curious,” he said, pondering her in depth. “You are leader to a very powerful clan of Voranthian vampires. You have more subjects willing to die for you than I have ships to spare. If Mystellion is feelin’ ungracious then what of your brethren?”

“You’re referring to the other vampire clans, I suppose. The Sauria are no brethren of mine, and the Nosferatu are nothing more than mindless creatures. It would not hinder me in the slightest if their entire existence were eradicated.”

“Harsh words for someone of such...etiquette.”

“I am Queen of the Voranth, greatest of the vampire clans. To not be harsh is to be weak, and in these times, fairness is often akin to stupidity.”

“Spoken like a true tyrant, I must admit,” he said with an amusing chuckle. He appreciated her cold sentiment which had obviously matched his own. “But if you believe that the other clans are not worthy of survival, then what makes your clan, the Voranth such an exception?”

“The same thing that makes your clan worthy,” she said. With an enchanting smile on her face, she approached him slowly, a web of allure spinning from her mind. “Powerful leadership. You are a powerful man, Shallemeign. And I...I am quite resourceful. With your strength and my supremacy, we can be magnificent.

“Now,” she said grazing his cheek with the back of her fingers. “You will abandon this ridiculous plot to find the Sources, won’t you?”

“Yes,” said Shallemeign. He squinted his eyes and shook his head; a look of confusion stamped on his face, followed by a vacant easiness. At this point, Saskia could not tell if she had succeeded in ensnaring his mind completely or if he was still trying to make sense of the phenomenon that he should have recognized by now. But it would be too late to resist, for her spell was already locked on. She no longer had to be subtle about her invasion if the spell was beginning to take effect.

“Yes...what?” she asked kindly, a world of psychic energy flowing between them.

“I will...” he began slowly, forcefully. “Abandon...this...ridiculous plot...”

She could see his mind, sense his heartbeat, and feel his loyalty toward her blossom to a new level. He was hers, to do as she commanded - one of the most powerful men in the world at the mercy of her every whim. The excitement swelled within her to a point where she could hardly force her smile back. And then, right at the apex of her finest moment with him...

“Or...” he said, grabbing her wrist. With a backhand, he slapped her across the face. She hit the table, knocking over tusk of ale and crashing to the floor. She held her cheek in tightly, looking up at him as he continued. “...You can keep your mind in that pretty little head of yours, right where it belongs.”

“Wha-?” she could hardly gather her words, stuttering in confusion. “You broke free of my mental grasp. But...that’s impossible. The amount of psychic energy I used would have induced a coma in any mere man.”

“But I am no mere man.”

“I-I do not understand,” she cried nervously. “How did you intercept my magic? Only skilled psychics can repel-“

“What...telepathy?” he exclaimed, taking slow, menacing steps toward her. “For the better half of a century I have had every scholar at my upmost disposal. That would include psychics, Mrs. Voranth. Of course I am not as talented as you are at ensnaring minds, but I am just as adept at keeping them out.”

“Impossible.”

“Did you really think that I, Shallemeign, warlord of the seas, could be duped by a member of one of the spellbound races, much less a woman?” he chuckled. “You may share the vampiric, immortal bloodline of a failed god, but you are still one of them. One of the spellbound races...cursed...condemned...low!”

Saskia hissed angrily at him, revealing a set of fangs. Moving so fast she had become but a blur, she rose and dashed in for an attack. It was the distance between

them however that gave Shallemeign the advantage. He was able to pull out one of his long swords that she nearly ran into, the tip of the blade touching her neck.

“It would be unwise to play this game, milady,” he said. “You are surrounded in the middle of the sea, on my ship.”

“I could kill you before any of them would ever notice.”

“Is that so?” he said with a smile.

Suddenly the doors burst open and the chamber was filled with guards.

Saskia dropped her offense reluctantly. She was livid with anger. But what could she do? Her plan had failed and she was now subject to the will of Shallemeign. He could enslave, torture her, kill her if he so pleased, and she could not protest. Since she had no weapons however, she could not be charged.

“You would not hurt an unarmed woman?” she said. “Would you?”

“Only one there is no need for.”

“And what need do you have of me?”

He looked at her for a moment, perhaps pondering if he had any need for her at all. He put his sword back in his sheath, motioned for his guards to retreat and go back to what their tasks, and soon it was just he and Saskia once more. He walked back over to his throne and took a seat, making her wonder what her involvement would be for a little longer.

“Well,” he said finally. “Now that I have your undivided attention...in light of the grand scheme, it would appear that there is some use for you after all. But that is not why I will let you live...that I do out of my own kind heart.” He smiled at her.

“You are a psychic vampire,” he continued. “That gives you the ability to see the memories of your victims, correct?”

She did not speak, but there was a pause followed by a smug nod of approval.

“Good,” he said. “Then there is a small order of business I have for you.”

With that, the room fell silent. Saskia was already enraged due to her failed attempt to straddle his mind, but now he was leaving her in the dark about what his intentions for her would be. From the sounds of it however, it appeared as if she would need to kill which was something she only did for sustenance or revenge, and psychic vampires did not need to feed in order to survive like the other vampiric races. Sometimes she needed to feed on blood, maybe once or twice every full moon, but most of the time, feeding on the psychic energy of others was enough to satiate her thirst. It was one of the main traits that separated her clan from both the Sauria and Nosferatu clans. She had rarely ever desired taking innocent lives, but on this particular trip, if she did, then it would be out of necessity, not hunger or sport.

The Valora gave a quick chug as manpower from the rowers ceased, and the ships' inner mechanics jolted, applying its breaks. It was a big ship, and with two sources of acceleration, it was quick at gaining speed, but slow at creeping to a halt. Commands could be heard from the top deck as feet shuffled outside along the roof of Shallemeign's quarters.

“Ah,” he said rising from his throne, peeking through one of the portholes. “We have arrived.”

Saskia did not need to ask where they were. They were still somewhere in the Krelenic Sea, and there was not a great number of provinces left in this area which narrowed her guesses. She knew that it couldn't be far from Centronius itself, but why Shallemeign would want to challenge the Centronians on their own ground was beyond her. But she knew that they had to be close to the great realm.

Walking over to the porthole where Shallemeign stood, she took a quick glance out into the sea. There, in the distance directly ahead of them were a series of large mountainous peaks rising high into the air from the base of the shoreline; tranquil peaks that reflected the natural beauty surrounding them. On either side of the mountain were a series of small islands that were full of tropical plants and trees where exotic birds spent their time peering over the morning sunrise. Water crashed upon rock violently at the base of the mountain, throwing up large jets of water that formed thin clouds of mist before them.

“Tovien,” said Saskia, barely aware of the words escaping her lips.

She glanced at Shallemeign who nodded with a smile. She had no idea what business he had in such a place. It was not a land of great military power, monetary wealth, or an abundance of magical properties. Tovien was only a minor realm and therefore had very little political power in the courts. Why then – she wondered – did Shallemeign gaze upon its shores so greedily as if it were stockpiled with riches? The warlord of the seas was about to tread on the doorstep of Tovien, and something inside of Saskia told her that this would not be a friendly visit to recruit more allies. He had plenty of those already. This was an invasion.



Blood Memory

The next day Maurelan started her morning the same way she had always started it; sitting at the peak of her cliff, eyes closed, feeling out the world around her. Before today, she had only been concerned with only two things, pleasing the elders and thinking of the earth's splendor. Today she was facing uncertainty. Uncertainty about what lay ahead. Uncertainty about how she was to fulfill her father's oath.

He had left her with so many questions that needed answers. Who was occupying the Northern Seas and what did that mean for the people of Tovien? What did he mean about Centronus being the place where the fate of the world would be decided? And what help could she possibly provide one of the most powerful kings in the entire world? Surely just delivering the message would already be helpful enough. But she wore the badge of Tovien now, and it did not matter that there was no coronation to crown her. The Centronians would see her as a regent, and therefore a sovereign of Tovien.

There was no one who could give her any more information about what was to come than her father, Nelo. Following his psionic seizure however, his mind was left in a comatose state for the remainder of the night. Earlier in the morning when she had just arisen she had received word that he had recovered consciousness but his mind was still in an altered state. Even if she could stir him from his rest, even if he could see her, recognize her, his eyes would be dazed over. He may not even have knowledge of who she was at this point. It would be a useless act. Besides, he needed rest. Her only choice was to travel to Centronus and carry out her mission, however vague the information he had given her.

It seemed that there were no more answers to be given at the time, and so she sought them deep within the earth, just like she had always done. For the better half of an hour she sat there with her eyes closed, using the same mysterious intuition she had become so accustomed to using over the years. She felt herself go; slip into that state once again where mind and body link with the spirit of the earth, and the outside world seemed to shrink into a haze of blurry sounds and vibrations. There was only the spirit of Lidalia. She could feel it, sift through it, and even latch onto it as if she were on a speeding ship and her soul were a hand lapping softly in the waves of a great ocean. It spoke to her. Help, it seemed to say. It was not a voice that spoke to her, but a rhythmic chime. Boom...boom...boom. The chant continued to drone deep within her mind. Something was horribly wrong for now she felt it in her heart. Boom...boom...boom.

Faintly she could hear the cries escaping through the world around her. But they were not coming from the earth beneath. And the rhythmic chime had not been a plea rippling through the earth, but one that came from the very halls of Tovien behind her. They were the cries people, mounting in panic, and she now realized that the ringing was indeed the sound of Tovien's alarm drums blaring across the valley. BOOM...BOOM...BOOM.

Maurelan opened her eyes, looking around to see what the commotion was. If it had not been for the clearing mists fading with the break of day, she would not have seen them. Ships. Several of them.

She did not understand. Were they here to collect a debt, or simply to inspect? And if that were the case why were they arriving in such menacing fashion? Messengers who arrived by sea usually only ever traveled in small boats, not a set of massive ships like the ones steaming toward them this very moment. The people of Tovien did not need such a confirmation to commence panic. It was the language of war being spoken from afar, a language that everyone was familiar with.

Instinct took over and she sprang to her feet, heading directly for the village. She was surprised to see how fast the panic had settled in. By the time she had reached the marketplace people were running in every direction. Parents were scrambling, trying to find a way to get their children to safety.

Suddenly she ran into Bernarsu. His bulking frame had nearly knocked her to the ground. Somehow he was able to find her with ease.

“What is going on?” she asked as they stormed through the marketplace together.

“Invasion.”

“Invasion?”

“But, how can you tell? They have not yet landed.”

“They have already begun attacking us on the other side of the island.”

“What?” said Maurelan, shocked.

Sprinting over to the edge of the marketplace, she took a closer look ahead, and far away, nearly a quarter mile down the civilian path where simple huts made up the small communities within Tovien; she could now see where the heart of the commotion was. It was right in the thick of the population. Homes were being raided by strange men in tattered attire, with swords and torches, carrying on, their sole intent was to pillage Tovien and leave every building burnt to the ground.

“No,” she whispered as a sense of sheer panic erupted within her.

Running to the mountain’s edge, she peered down at the shores all the way on the other side of the mountain to get a better look. There at the base of the water, she could see dozens of men parading off of more ships, attacking people in large crowds.

“I knew it,” said Bernarsu. He was now standing next to her, looking down at the shores as well. “Those ships are Stenetian. I can tell by their masts.”

“Stenetian?”

Maurelan had never seen a Stenetian ship before, and now a cold realization dawned upon her. She now knew what her father meant when he had told her that the seas were being occupied. But Tovien was not only being watched by the Stenetian horde, it was being invaded.

She commended Bernarsu on his ability for noticing such things. It was at times like this that she favored his intelligence, resilience, and his ability to keep a cool head. He could think well enough for himself and sometimes for the both of them. She wondered what she would ever do without him.

He gave her a peculiar look. It was the same kind of look he had given her on so many occasions...the scolding look; the kind of look that he was so used to giving her.

“What?” she asked nervously.

“I need to know what Nelo discussed with you.”

“Well, not much of anything. H-he told me about the new mission he asked me to undertake. We are to head to Centronus and inform the king about the seas being occupied.”

“And you are just now telling me this?”

“Uh,” she said, searching her mind for a plausible excuse as they continued on, pushing through the crowd. “Well, there was no urgency at the time. H-he told me that we did not have to leave until the eve of tomorrow.”

“Yet, apparently he had a psionic episode shortly afterwards?”

“Yes,” she said nervously. “He told me that Centronus would be the place where the fate of the world would be decided.”

“And that did not strike you as odd?”

“Yes, but...it happened so quickly. And he was not in the right state of mind. Oh Bernarsu...we have to get as people as we can to safety.”

“I am afraid there is no time for that now. If Nelo intended for you to go to Centronus then that is our top priority.”

“But...what about my father? I have to at least make sure he is safe. Where is he?”

“He is still in his private chambers.”

“What?” she said again, this time, her voice shrieking in alarm.

“We tried to rouse him...some of the other priests and myself. He seemed to be fully aware of the situation, yet he insisted on remaining.”

“We have to get him now.”

“Maurelan...”

“That’s an order!” she screamed. “I won’t leave without him!”

There was a pause in which time seemed to stand still.

It was a profound moment between them. Being the regent’s daughter, Maurelan outranked Bernarsu considerably, but up until this moment, he had usually been the one to order her around in the interest of her father. But things were different now. Their entire way of living had changed drastically in just the past several minutes, and Maurelan was suddenly called upon to take up the mandate she had been raised for.

With a face full of tears, and a heart braced for courage she broke into a sprint, pushing through the crowd. Bernarsu was right behind her.

On the way to Nelo’s quarters, they now saw the extent of this invasion. In less than five minutes nearly the entire village was crawling with Stenetians. They did not seem to be as interested in killing people as they were in burning down huts, and ransacking temples of worship. Some of them slaughtered women and the men who tried to resist. There was no time for any preparation. They were all cut off guard. Whatever military forces could be mustered were greatly outnumbered and swiftly cut down. The alarms were still blaring pointlessly in the west tower. **DROOM...DROOM...DROOM!**

Soon Maurelan and Bernarsu reached Nelo’s temple. Surprisingly it had been untouched by the invaders, for they were farther east and only a few of them had managed to make it this far yet. There were a few guards still posted outside the temple, looking to defend their leader, but Maurelan could see the fear on their faces.

“The city is lost!” she said. “Go and save your families! Now!”

With that, they gave one glance at each other bolted. Maurelan entered the temple, which was relatively dark as usual; dimmed from the narrow window from where slivers of sunlight crept onto the walls in thin slivers, and still lit by the prayer candles placed too far away from each other to make the room bright.

“I’ll go round up the horses,” said Bernarsu.

“Bring three of them!” she called over her shoulder.

“I will be back soon. The two of you should hide if you can.”

And with that, he was gone. She did not worry about Bernarsu as much. She did not need to. He was a skilled enough combatant to watch his own back, and his thievery skills made him good at avoiding a clash if he wanted to. It was her father that she was mostly worried about. If she knew him well enough, he would have certainly ordered the priests and guards away, being the selfless man she knew him to be.

There he was, on the first floor of the temple all the way on the other side. He had somehow managed to move his chair from the second story, and there he sat, comfortable and complacent as if calmly awaiting a friendly visit. He did not stir when Maurelan walked in, and his blank expression did not change. She was wondering if he even knew that she was standing in front of him.

“Father?” she called to him softly.

She approached him slowly, cautiously, but she still did not know why. Perhaps it was way he sat there, eerily, as if might sprout forth wings and talons, and pounce on her at any moment. And the way he was sitting there sent chills up her spine; he was not hunched over, but listing to the side, his hands placed in his lap, his eyes looking up blankly at the ceiling. And although Tovien - home itself - was being ransacked, still, the sight of her father sitting there like that sent a unique array of chills up her spine. Nelo should have been one of the first people to flee Tovien. But instead, he was selfless. He had elected to stay behind while other men of the land scrambled to get their families to safety. She had to save him.

“Father,” she said again, touching his arm lightly. “We have get out of here as soon as possible, okay? Can you walk?”

He looked up at her, somehow appearing older than he did just the day before when she had last seen him. It was due to the effects of his seizure that had obviously done more damage to him than seizures that had come before it. There was a brief moment of confusion in his eyes, but soon enough, he had recognized her.

“Maurelan,” he said, apparently competent. “Oh no. What are you still doing here?”

“I’ve come to get you father. The Stenetians are already here. We have to leave now.”

“Wait,” Nelo said jolting upright as if he had heard a sound that she did not. “Hide. And do not say a word.”

Before she could even respond, he stood to his feet, whipping up several spells. First, he turned her completely invisible, and then using - what felt like to her - telekinetic force to push her backwards. Her feet slid along the ground until her back hit the wall with a thud. The invisible force held her there, so that she could not move, pinned and completely unseen by the human eye. She was unaware that her father could do such things, did not even know such things were possible. And even if he could, she did not see how he managed to do it so easily, and in the condition he was in due to the seizure. She could not even speak unless he released his spell. All she could do was watch and watch. Watch and wait in silence. It was then that she heard the footsteps.

Seconds later, Shallemeign stepped into Nelo’s private chamber, flanked by Saskia and Brog. There was Nelo sitting in the far corner of the chamber. Shallemeign had expected the chamber to be deserted; expected Nelo to be gone, or at least patrolling his private quarters with every last guard he could muster. The last thing Shallemeign would ever expect was to see the leader of Tovien standing there, complacent as if waiting a friendly visit.

Maurelan went crazy trying to break free. She could see the effect it had on Nelo as he struggled to keep up the spell. Noticing this, she ceased her efforts.

“Nelo,” said Shallemeign in a great booming voice that echoed loudly through the chamber. It was a cheery voice, an entertaining voice; a voice he took much de-

light in using when inciting fear in others. “Old friend. It has been such a long time, hasn’ it?”

“We were never friends, Shallemeign,” Nelo proclaimed fearlessly. “But yes, it has been a long time.”

“You don’t look so well. Mind been runnin’ amuck, eh?”

Shallemeign gave a quick chuckle and Brog snorted in laughter. Saskia showed no reaction to the humor.

“Yes, it is true,” Nelo admitted. “I have been busy. Busy in preparation.”

“For this day?” said Shallemeign, slowly approaching.

“No, not for this day. For the days that are to come.”

“Ah, preparation...for the glorious days to come. Now I come to offer you salvation. And all you have to do...is hand me the map.”

The map? Maurelan thought to herself. What map? The question popped into her head with much intrigue. Could it have been the one that her father gave her? And why was Shallemeign looking for it?

“It is not here,” said Nelo.

“You lie! I know you have it...I know it is here!”

“Ha!” Nelo laughed. “Soon the world will be in ruins. The pillage of my small kingdom is nothing at this point. I have no reason to lie to you.”

“Of course you do,” said Shallemeign, nodding his head toward Saskia.

In the blink of an eye, she rushed Nelo with a blur of speed, but something repelled her. She bounced back as if she had just hit an invisible, malleable wall. She gasped, appearing to be somewhat surprised by Nelo’s sudden show of power. He had created an invisible barrier, one that could not be penetrated by brute strength alone.

“Want to play some of that old man?” said Saskia. With that, she spun her hands quickly, vividly, creating several concussive blasts, each with the effect of a

silent, sonic boom working to crush his enchantment. They were so strong that the air all around jolted with every pulse struck.

Nelo could not hold the spell any longer and his telekinetic shield was broken with a loud clink and a flash of light. His hold on Maurelan had broken as well. She felt herself drop to the floor, and even though Nelo released her, she had still been rendered invisible for a short time, crouched with her head up, watching the scene unfold.

Saskia approached Nelo slowly, confidently, almost amusingly.

With his hands clasped, he produced a powerful bout of light magic, one that Maurelan had never seen before. It was as if he were siphoning all the light from the room: not taking anything away from it but instead, replicating its properties. With a great strain of physical effort and a sharp cry, he channeled it into harmful, multi-colored bolts of energy, and hurled them forward his adversaries. While Shallemaign managed to narrowly avoid one of them, several struck Brog: his massive figure crashing violently to the ground hard. Nelo's primary target however was Saskia, the fastest and most deadly of the trio. She was so quick that she would somehow dash in between one attack and continue walking calmly before dashing between the next. She had not even broken a sweat. Nelo however, was drained of energy, and could hardly stand.

“Pathetic,” said Saskia, poised for an attack. She did not want to use magic this time. This time, she went through a slight transformation. Her nails grew into sharp claws, her iris' turned white like that of a snowy winter, and her mouth widened agape to reveal two long fangs that she stroked with her tongue.

Maurelan watched in horror, realizing that the sorceress who had just tried to use psychic magic against her father was now poisoning to kill him the way that savages do...the way vampires do. Maurelan had been frozen in fear just a moment ago, but something had built up within her, and before she realized what she was doing she responded with an attack to save her father. It was a bout of light magic, a flash explosion. It had taken her years to learn how to create one properly, and it was one of her finest attacks. She could have produced a Gloominus charge, but inside the temple it may have injured everyone, including her and her father. In-

stead, she opted for a moderately powered light spell. She charged it for a few seconds before releasing it, trying to remain as quiet as possible.

There was a crack, and then a sparkle.

Saskia glanced to her right as she caught a glimpse of something flash through the corner of her eye. Taken unaware, she was struck by an explosion that stunned her, burned part of her face, and temporarily blinded her. She cursed in several vampiric languages, turning fiercely in Maurelan's direction. Even with her enhanced senses, Saskia could not see with her. Before she could take another step she was struck again by one of Nelo's enchantments. This one sent her straight to her back.

"Run child!" shouted a weary Nelo, already whipping up another spell.

Maurelan did not need to be told twice, as the effects of his invisibility spell were already beginning to wear off, and Saskia could already see her. She threw several blasts at Maurelan, but all of them hit the side of the wall and she barely escaped the chamber. Saskia tried to go after her but was blocked by another invisible field.

"Face me now, evil witch!" Nelo shouted.

He demanded her attention with a shower of magic attacks that she could barely avoid. One of them hit her, and she screamed, her body thudding against the temple wall. The attack afforded him some distance, but the time that it took had allowed Shallemeign to sneak around to his side, getting in close before he could react.

With a great thrust of his blade, Shallemeign impaled him through the back.

Nelo cried in utter agony as the vicious warlord put his foot against his back to pry the sword out of him. Nelo dropped to the ground, mortally wounded and gasping.

Shallemeign stood over him. The sheath on his hip had a groove laced with a long cloth running along the interior of it, so that when he put his sword back in, it caught the blood. Sometimes he wiped the blood on the cloth first to get a better

cleaning, but there were times where he did not care how much of the blood lingered. He placed the sword back in the sheath without cleaning it off. He would clean it later.

“You know what to do,” he said to Saskia.

She had finally made it back to her feet, brushing herself off and turning to face Nelo with a delightful anger stamped on her face. Being coerced into taking his blood memory, initially she did not take much delight in the kill, but the battle had gotten her blood rushing, and the few strikes that Nelo struck her with had brought the fury out of her.

She grabbed him by the neck, lifting him slowly off the ground with one arm. He tried to release himself from her powerful grip, gagging and spewing blood from his mouth, but there was no point. Her brute, vampiric strength far exceeded that of any mere man.

“Did you really think that you could kill me?” she said, thrusting him against the temple wall, crushing his windpipe. “You are pathetic. And now, you will reveal to me all that I desire to see.”

She sank her sharp fangs into his neck, and he cried in agony as she fed from the blood flowing from his jugular vein. She could feel his energy spilling into her. She truly did enjoy killing in this manner, but her reputation in contrast to the savagery of the other vampiric clans had always caused her to uphold an air of sophistication around her peers and subjects. The truth was, she had feared what she and her brethren had become. The animal curse had driven her clan farther and farther away from sophistication, from dignity, from humanity. But there were times like this where she could not help indulge in it.

Nelo quivered helplessly as she drank his blood. She could feel his life force flooding into her, coursing through every vein. Like the effects of a drug, it permeated her body before it hit her mind. In little streams of information began to flood in the depths of her psyche. She had felt this sensation before when drinking blood and gaining blood memory, but from the mind of psychic, it was an overwhelmingly exhilarating sensation. Her eyes perked wide open with a start as her

thoughts were connected to his dying brain. She could barely hold on. In mere seconds, she released him, both of them dropping to the floor.

Saskia now lay crouched over, holding her head in agony.

“So many thoughts...” she said slowly, trying to sooth herself. “So many thoughts...”

Shallemeign glanced over at Nelo’s dead corpse with a scowl. “Well? What did you see?”

“I-I saw many things in his life,” she said, trying to collect her thoughts and energy before going on. “But the memories of the last few days...seemed to have clouded from his mind.”

“What?” Shallemeign shouted in anger. “Clouded his mind?” He retorted disgustedly. “No! It is an enchantment. It must be.”

“Of course it is an enchantment,” Saskia said, making her way back to her feet. “He is a psychic.”

“How could he have done that?”

“It is not difficult for a psychic to erase a portion of his memory, especially if there is something he did not want us to see.”

“He must have known that we would come.”

“Yes, I believe so. He seems to have blocked out anything I could have read about the map.”

“No! The map is the only way to find the Sources!”

“Well,” she said looking up at him defensively. “He blocked his mind from revealing it to me.”

“I thought you had already monitored his mind!”

“I did, but that was days ago, when the psychics first convened over the issue of the fountain eruption. That is how I know that he purged his own mind, because even those thoughts are no longer present.”

“Dammit!” he shouted, knocking over Nelo’s table sending a shower of personal effects to the ground.

“Calm yourself, warlord,” she hissed. “There were other clues that I was able to retrieve from his mind.”

“Other clues? What clues?”

“Memories that were still in his subconscious,” she paused as if still receiving new bits of information in her mind. “Sometime in the past he was in possession of a relic that housed one of the five sources. He met in secret with a high member of the Leadership not long ago. He handed it over to this person...Brandeis.”

“Brandeis?” Shallemeign perked up with newfound interest, his anger subsiding. “He is the ambassador for the Leadership, is he not?”

“Yes. He is also the regent of the Leadership’s third tower, and his fortress is not far beyond the Isles of Shardrock, just east of the Krelenic Sea. It is just two days ride from here on horseback, but with the speed of your ship...we could be there in just under a day. That is, if we left now.”

One of Shallemeign’s soldiers walked into the room holding a blood tattered sword.

“We have finished securing the village, my lord,” the man said.

Shallemeign looked over at him, anger resurfacing on his face. “Can you not see that I am busy with Mrs. Voranth? We have important matters to discuss, and you’ve interrupted my train of thought!”

“The seas are most turbulent during nightfall,” Saskia continued on with Shallemeign as if the now baffled soldier – who was now staring down at Nelo’s body - had never walked in. He became even more baffled when Shallemeign motioned him to stay when he was about walk out. “It is early. If we leave now, then perhaps the trip will not so unbearable.”

Shallemeign considered her for a moment, looking down at the floor thoughtfully. He then glanced up at the clueless soldier who still standing there, dumbfounded and curious as to how he fit into the situation.

“Burn the village,” Shallemeign ordered. “The survivors can fend for themselves. If your men have done their fair share of killing and sport, then we need not waste another minute. Go ahead. Burn the village, and do it quickly. And tell my men to ready the ship. We leave as soon as possible.”

The soldier darted out of the temple quickly. Shallemeign glanced over at Saskia.

“What happens if this plan of yours does not work?”

“One of the sources are in the possession of Brandeis, there is no doubt about in that. My question to you is, are your men capable enough of overthrowing his forces?”

“You question me?”

“Well, your reputation does precede you,” she said with a sly smirk.

Shallemeign understood that to be somewhat of a snide remark. He was the most powerful rebel to the known world, but his activities of conquering had taken their decline since Centronus had become the most powerful stable in the known world. It was a battle long in anticipation, but he had bid his time for quite a while. Also with the influence of the Leadership protecting the first nations, he had avoided sieges for the past decade to keep him out of the hands of the courts. But these days, the Leadership had dwindled in power, and with the energy fountain eruption now taking place, Shallemeign saw this as the perfect opportunity to lay sieges if it meant getting any closer to collecting the sources of Ranok. Even still, he did not appreciate the insult.

“Brawn is a good ally,” he said, covering his frustration with wits. “But intelligence always wins you the crown.”

With that he grabbed one of the torches from the wall and threw it down, starting a fire. Swiftly, he exited the temple with Saskia and an injured Brog as Tovien began to burn.

Maurelan had made it to the edge of Tovien with Bernarsu, and two horses; her mare Cloverlorn, and a stallion, Swinton. Bernarsu had originally brought three horses for the getaway – one for Nelo – but Maurelan was ashamed to inform him that Nelo was left behind. On the way, they had encountered a few Stenetian soldiers, but between his brute strength and combat training and her skill with light magic, they were able to make it this far in one piece.

They had managed to make it to the old reliquary that had still been untouched by the raiders. There it was, obscure and free of occupants, just as she remembered it being when she broke in. Even the two back doors were still open – the last set of doors she would ever enter in her pillaged homeland - swinging eerily from loose the hinges. It sent a chill up her spine as she and Bernarsu dismounted their horses, walking into the deserted hut.

“Quick,” she said as the sound of nearby huts could be heard igniting into flames just outside. “Take whatever weapons you need! We must hurry!”

Bernarsu grabbed a pair of huge, twin knives from the weapons cache. Meanwhile, Maurelan found her way to her favorite weapons, a sharp dagger that she could use for desperate situations in close, and her favorite weapon of all; one she had trained with all her life, and had gained impeccable skill using. Placed in a booth among swords was an eight-striped leather whip, its tassels hanging loosely in the cupboard. She grabbed the whip, striking it several times through the air.

“I hear something,” Bernarsu said, leaning against the wall.

The clear sound of boots could be heard pacing through the gravel outside. Maurelan and Bernarsu looked at each other with mouths agape, trying not to make a sound. She was hoping that it would be possible to escape without confrontation - especially this far away from the initial buildings that had been torched and pillaged – but now she saw that that would be highly unlikely. She had something for them though; something they would never expect.

Since the horses were on the side of the building, they would be safe, for the soldiers were approaching the front door, which was locked. Maurelan waiting until she heard of the soldiers tug on the door, and in the blink of an eye, she unleashed her magical fury.

“Gloominus Zidiki!” she yelled.

A great explosion burst the entire front half of the hut away and the men on the other side were hurled nearly thirty feet before crashing to the ground. The horses bolted with a start but Bernarsu chased them down and secured them quickly for they were trained and were quick to obey his command.

“Come on,” Bernarsu shouted, looking over his shoulder, watching through the half collapsed hut as Maurelan remained. “What are you doing?”

She was inside, rummaging through one of the caches near the wall. She moved quickly as she can to find something she had been looking for earlier. At the time she unable to fully understand why went back to retrieve it, but whether it was a whim or simple intuition, she reached into the cache and pulled out the shiny silver necklace she had tried to take earlier the other day. With a quick glance – the pendant shimmering in her eye - she pulled necklace over her head, tucked it beneath her fluffy hair, and tucked it beneath her shirt where lay secure and concealed around her neck.

“Maurelan!” Bernarsu called.

She could hear the footsteps of men approaching in the distance. They had probably heard the explosion and were coming to inspect.

Maurelan darted out the hut quickly as it began to cave in on itself. She jumped onto Cloverlorn and began to make a swift escape with Bernarsu, before the wandering Stenetians could see them retrieve. They rode their steeds hard, pushing them as fast as they would be run.

Maurelan could hear Cloverlorn grunting as she pushed her harder and harder. She did not want too, but they had move as fast as they could just until they were well enough out of range to not be detected. They rode longer, faster, and then they rode some more. Finally they approached the outskirts of Tovien.

Out of breath and still panicking from the whole ordeal, Maurelan turned to look back at the smoldering village, which was now nothing more than a large, blazing mound, smoldering in the distance. She had spent the last several minutes trying to survive and escape. It did not hit her right away until she thought of her

father somewhere in there, burning. The thought plagued her mind and her eyes filled with heavy tears piling beneath her lids. She dropped her head into her hands, weeping.

“We have to go!” Bernarsu’s voice became her only link to reality in that moment.

But she ignored him.

She could do nothing but cry and the more she thought about what happened, the more she realized that suddenly, her father had died. Suddenly she had lost everything. Suddenly, she and Bernarsu were on their own; without a home, without a family. They had nothing but a simple task to fulfill - head to Centronus and deliver a message. That was easy enough. Dealing with what had just happened however would be a far more difficult task.

She had just lost everything.

Everything.

With a sniff, a quick wipe of the eyes, and an unbearable amount of grief she nudged Cloverlorn and sped off into the night with her only friend in the world, Bernarsu.



Celebration in Disguise

Trulaine woke with a start. His head was pulsating; a stinging sensation ripped through his skull, sweat poured from his face, and he hand clenched the side of the bedstead. Sitting there for a moment with a trembling hand on his head, he gave himself a moment to adjust his mind to the flux of reality. It was a dream that had stirred him; a horrible nightmare.

In this particular dream he had seen nothing but images of the war that had ravaged his home many years ago. He saw glimpses of the enemy slaying his kin in battle, his loved ones crying out, fires rising above the royal palace of Centronus, and in the aftermath of it all, at the height of the destruction, there was blackness. He saw death, and it came in the form a great void, suffocating him until he felt that he would never wake. He felt as if he would pass into the next world.

The bed stirred to his right, and there, beside him, Deneaden rose wearily. She glanced up at him with one eye squinted and the other shut tight, barely awake but apparently noticing the episode. Obviously his dream had not been a silent one.

“Trulaine,” she said with a drowsy look on her face. “What vexes you?”

“Just a nightmare,” he said. “I-It was nothing.”

He wanted to answer her, wanted to let her know the horrible visions that had plagued his dreams but he had not the heart to tell her. Just like the terrors of his siege against the werewolves, he feared telling her details about that account as well. Some things, he figured were better for her not to know.

“Did you dream of her again? Ionna?”

“What?” he said, pausing his heavy breathing, and casting a thoughtful glance her way.

He was perplexed by her uncanny ability for knowing what ailed him. He had nearly forgotten how close she had been to his thoughts, how well she knew him, and how fervently she would fight to be there for him. She had always been right on point before, but this baffled him. If it had not for the close rapport that they shared between each other, he might have believed that she was using magic to read his mind.

“Ionna,” she repeated the haunting name again.

He looked at her baffled. “Ionna?”

“You spoke her name while you were sleeping.”

“I-I did?”

“Yes, and it didn’t sound like it was a pleasant dream either.” She considered him intently before continuing. “Are you alright, Trulaine?”

“I told you, I am fine.”

Ionna was Trulaine’s first wife, whom he was married to long before he ever met Deneaden, years ago when he was much younger. Back then, the warlord of Stenetia had grown to the height of his power and sought even the destruction of Centronius. She ended up dying in that siege, and ever since Trulaine had been trying to fathom it all. Certain details were fuzzy due to the wounds he suffered at the hands of Shallemeign. Just hearing her name brought him back to that fateful day, and the nasty feeling in his gut – the one that would never be satiated until he saw the warlord dead – festered within him each time he was reminded of it. His day for finding revenge had not yet come. Even though his enemy was still out there conquering the seas, for years Trulaine had been tending to the deeds of his kingdom, which were always pertinent, especially at a time like this when so much seemed to be at stake. His duties no longer afforded him the time to fester on old vendettas, and Deneaden was a graceful distraction. Every now and then however, the vague memory of Ionna’s death would surface, and with it, his anger.

How could he have spoken her name in his sleep when he did not even remember her being in the dream in the first place? It must have been the guilt of his subconscious, still torturing him for losing her. No matter what the case was, Deneaden had noticed. He could try to lie, telling her that he had gotten over Ionna's death years ago, but it would be obvious. Besides, he kept no secrets from each Deneaden.

"Well," said Deneaden. "It's just that...ever since your return you have not been the same. At first I thought it was your wounds, but now I see that they run much deeper than flesh. I dread this dark cloud that has washed over you. I fear it may be from your battles in the wild. I wonder if they have caught up with you yet. And every day I wonder how much of you I have lost."

"I am still the same my love. And if there is anything that you have seen in me that I have lost, then I am sure you will guide me to it."

She smiled, and he leaned close, kissing her lightly.

"So, what did you dream about?"

"I don't remember most of it. But vaguely...the second war."

The second war of Centronus. It was the war that took her away from him; the war that claimed Ionna.

Deneaden nodded her head thoughtfully, and a silence filled the room.

"The dream was nothing," Trulaine said assuredly. "It must have been my thoughts about the battle that triggered it. Clearly there are images of war that my mind has yet to rid itself of. Although the battle in the Memradonian fields was not for the faint of heart, it was not the battle itself that shook me. Well, it shook me course, and the casualties of my men was a heavy burden to bear. I had never lost that many men in a single battle. Still...that is not the thing that truly haunted me."

He paused, staring blankly out at the morning sun, his gaze cold and absent.

“Tell me,” she said. She perked up; her eyes wide open in anticipation. She was concerned and fearful of his hearing his account, and at the same time, so eager to receive it.

“When we fought the creatures...in the thick of the battle, while losing men quicker than I anticipated, something happened that I never thought possible. I was in the grasp of their mighty chief. In a moment when I was sure that I was about to die...their leader leaned forward and spoke to me in our own language.”

“By the gods,” she said, putting her hands over her mouth.

“What did he say?”

“Die...god-kind.”

Deneaden gasped.

“The werewolves,” Trulaine continued. “They are savages, abominations even. But they have culture, they have customs...and their chief was intelligent enough to speak in our own language, which means that they are capable of showing some level of sophistication. Proof, that even the most terrifying and vile of the spell-bound races still share a core of humanity within them. Magic failed us...the gods failed us...failed us when they allowed the curse to spread.”

“Shall everything be perfect between the heavens and the earth?”

“No,” said Trulaine, finding himself in agreement. “But I knew then that we were doomed. Not only the spellbound races. All of us...bound and unbound. I see now in totality the scourge that magic has left behind. Mankind is slipping back into darkness.”

Just then, he heard the palace bells ringing loudly throughout the Centronian capitol. Seven boisterous chimes rang out into the air outside.

Trulaine looked down at Deneaden, perplexed and quickly jumped from the bed, rushing to the window to see what the commotion was. The fighting instinct within him was ready to reach for his blade at a seconds' notice. It was an odd time for the palace bells to be ringing. He turned to face Deneaden, opening his mouth to say something but she cut him off before he could make a sound.

“Relax,” she said calmly. “It is only the palace bells.”

“But they never ring at this time unless it is the annual festival.”

“Exactly,” she said, rising quickly to dress herself. “But today is not the annual festival of course.”

“Well what is it?”

“Trulaine,” she said with a wry smile. “It’s the celebration of your return. Didn’t you hear a word Mandaelion said to you yesterday?”

“I...uh...”

“Well it’s already started, so we’ll want to get ready.”

“Already started?”

Even more perplexed, he took a second glance out of the window and noticed that the sun was not in its morning position. It was nearly evening time, and the sun had just begun to set. He turned to look back at Deneaden, shocked.

“How long have I been sleeping?”

“Well, we’ve been in bed all day of course. I did not want to wake you.”

Trulaine paused, stumped. Of course she did not wake him. This was to be a day of rest for him and all his soldiers, and no one would remind him of that the way she could. Besides, happiness was in the air and he was long overdue for embracing it.

“You are right,” he said with a chuckle. “Well I have rested enough.”

“Good,” she said with a smile of her own. “Shall we prepare?”

They spent the rest of their time getting ready for the gathering. Deneaden wore a flowing, white dress, crafted with thick linen frills, and a large bustle. It was not her most elegant dress, but it was quite nice, modest enough for her to pass for nobility. Trulaine fitted himself into one of his more formal, military outfits. It was a blue vest tucked beneath a black, wool garment. It made him look dashing, and Deneaden looked at him for a while, smiling, impressed.

“You have not lost a single touch,” she said. “Still handsome as ever.”

After nearly a day of riding hard with few breaks, Maurelan and Bernarsu finally made it to the city of Centronus. She had never seen it in person before. It was the first time since regrettably abandoning her father that she could recall being distracted from thinking of him, even if it was only a moment.

Ascending the mount of a moderately sloped plateau, which rose to a peak with a belated Cloverlorn, it gave her a spectacular view of the entire realm. The first thing to catch her eye was the huge set of spiraling towers beaming in the distance; towers she could have only guessed would house the great citadel, their royal palace. Huts and small concrete buildings lined the area for as far as the eye could see with many recreational spaces in between – farms, marketplaces, and ample grassland. It appeared to her to be a peaceful community, a happy community. Losing her own community, she now felt a truth urge to warn these people of the incoming threat, and complete the mission her father gave to her before...

It was no longer a mission to her. It was an oath.

As they halted, she could see that Bernarsu as winded as she was. The gale forces had picked up in the sandy deserts not far behind them, and it had been difficult to keep a steady pace. But they had made it, and they were only late by a few hours.

“Finally,” Bernarsu grunted.

“I hope we have not missed the beginning of their deliberations,” said Maurelan. “Do you think it will be a public council, or a private one?”

“I do not know.”

She said no more, and the two of them rode down the other end of the wide plateau. As the elevation dropped, and the distance between them and Centronus became shorter, she could see just how massive the palace was. The towers rose high into the air, higher than the peak of any man made palace she had ever seen.

They made their way through the outskirts that were populated with people. What little poverty Centronus had must have lived on the outskirts of the city, because these people - as modestly dressed as they were – reminded her of her own people in appearance. They did not look like the wealthiest people around, but she saw nothing but smiles. It had already told her so much about the realm of Centronus; that they were a modest people, a just people.

Before them was a great black, metal gate, which extended for miles around the exterior of the city. It was a tall, black gate, tall; tall enough for archers to shoot down anyone fool enough to be seen climbing over it, and there were many of them. The main road led them straight to the central checking point where the gate connected, and visitors from neighboring realms could enter Centronus. On the other side of the checking point stood two guards clad in Centronian armor, with long spears in their hands, and unblinking expressions on their faces. Maurelan dismounted her steed and approached the gate.

“I am Maurelan of Tovien,” she said. “I was summoned here by the lord of that realm, Nelo, and I must be granted audience with the king.”

The two guards glanced at each other before addressing her.

“I’m sorry,” said the first soldier. “We cannot let you enter.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because we have been threatened by outside forces...”

“It is forbidden at this time, ma’am,” said the second soldier, looking at the man beside him as if he should never speak again. “That is all you need to know.”

“But, I need to deliver a message to the king,” she said holding up her the scroll Nelo had given her.

“Then we will make sure that he receives it.”

“I don’t think you understand. I’m not a messenger. I represent the neighboring realm, and I must not only deliver this message personally, but I must attend deliberations.”

The two guards looked at each other again.

“But...there are no deliberations,” said the first guard.

“What?”

“Tonight is a celebration ma’am...not a deliberation.”

“But, Nelo is my father, and he told me-“

“Look,” said the second guard who was more irritated than the first. “Tonight is the celebration of our returning brigade. Visitors and tourists are not allowed entrance without special invitation...” he glanced wryly over at Bernarsu behind her. “...Especially those who bring suspicious looking men with them. If you want to deliver the message to the king, then I suggest you hand it to me, and I will deliver it to the head of our security so that he can further validate that the contents are safe. Only then shall the king receive it. Do you understand?”

“But-“

“And if you want to visit the grounds of Centronus, then I suggest you come back tomorrow when the celebration has concluded. Failure to comply may result in incarceration.”

She gave the man a salty look and finally turned away. She walked back over to Bernarsu, mounted on Swinton.

“We are denied entrance,” she said.

“What?” he shouted in anger, causing the guards to perk up. “Then perhaps it is time we skip diplomacy.”

“Don’t be stupid, Bernarsu,” she said, lowering her tone in suggestion that he lower his. “If we attack them then they’ll slay us on the spot, or worse.”

“What could be worse than death?”

“Well, being captured, condemned, and tortured before you die could be worse.”

“Good point.”

“Besides,” she said, looking up at the massive palace far ahead. “I don’t think my father wanted us to go to war with the most powerful realm in the world. He wanted peace.”

“So is there a plan in that pretty head of your, or is our quest doomed before it can even begin?”

“There is a plan,” she said with a mischievous smirk. “I just need to work a little magic first.”

When they first arrived, Mandaelion and his two friends Folleti and Dalon who were so excited to see Trulaine that their verbal ruckus caused something of a commotion met Trulaine and Deneaden. Soon they found themselves the center of the party, and were met by popular citizens of the commonwealth: artists, scholars, architects, politicians, as well as surviving soldiers of Trulaine’s brigade. Deneaden received compliments on her dress, which she always humbly denied, and Trulaine was asked by nearly everyone who approached him about the battle in the fields. It was an awkward situation for him, but he had gotten through all the interrogations without losing his nerve. Actually, after a while he had gotten used to it, and was beginning to loosen up and enjoy himself a bit. He drank a few cups of ale, told jokes, laughed, and listened to the tales of others.

Soon the reception room was beginning to fill with people. The music began to serenade the halls, and the aromas of grilled meat and fresh stew filled the halls enticingly.

After sharing a few dances with Deneaden, Trulaine took a seat for a quick minute, watching Deneaden mingle with the Centronian aristocracy. In between, he took quick glimpses at the decorative platforms that hung above; huge colorful ribbons lined around the interior, and long Centronian banners suspended from the high ceiling. It was quite impressive, and Trulaine felt honored to have been the reason behind such talent and artistry.

It took a while for him to notice it, but he hadn't seen a single member of the council since he arrived. He hadn't seen Valindolin, Ursilus, Romulus, or the king. He figured surely they would be present, but perhaps it was still early. It was no big deal, especially being back so soon, but as captain, Trulaine wanted to be involved in whatever the council had been discussing, even if it was in secret. Still, it was an afterthought to all the excitement and merriment.

Suddenly, a heavy hand slammed five gold coins onto the table in from Trulaine, startling him. The table rattled, and he looked up to see Golondred standing there with a scowl his drunkard face; a scowl that soon turned into a thoughtless, blissful smirk. Trulaine was thankful that he remembered to pay him from the bet, but the truth of that bet was that a portion of his men had gotten killed over it. That made Trulaine feel awkward about it, but he held onto it anyway.

Golondred could barely stand. He stumbled off until he bumped into one of the women walking by. She laughed as he swindled her with his drunkard humor, and moments later the two of them were dancing. Trulaine thought it amusing, and began to laugh. The evening was turning out fine so far, and he was glad that he attended. It was a splendid way for him to back into the society in such a time of need. Besides, one night of merriment surely would not hurt. Even for someone as prestigious as Trulaine.

"Trulaine, dear," said Deneaden, walking up to him. "My mother would like to say hello."

"Oh," said Trulaine rising to his feet to be courteous. "Surely."

Deneaden's mother Vera stood beside her, glancing at Trulaine eagerly. The elegant fan, which she was maniacally fanning herself with, showed her royal status. Most of Centronian lower class could hardly afford to wear nice clothing, much less accessories such as this. Trulaine looked at the strange device peculiarly. It must have been a new invention from the East. There were so many new devices and trinkets being forged into existence from that part of the world that Trulaine was beginning to lose track of what was new and what had simply found its way into the market. A hot breeze could be cooled with a terse mentioning of a spell, but now that new laws were being made to prevent use of magic, inventors were

going back to traditional methods of forging objects with steady fire and hard molds or sturdy fabrics to make crafty designs.

Deneaden's family got their wealth from her father who had been one of the chief architects in designing the outer walls of Centronus; walls that had kept the realm safe from invaders for years. Her father had died in battle of course. He was just another soldier out of the hundreds who had trusted Trulaine to lead them. It was part of the reason why he had always felt inclined to answer Vera's questions. He felt the sting of guilt whenever he was around her.

"And how is it that you and your men were able to outmatch an entire horde of werewolves?" she asked during her conversation with him.

"Mother," Deneaden cut in apologetically, making a sly attempt to pull him away from her mother's brooding questions.

"Well, I was only curious."

"It's alright, Vera," Trulaine said with a kind smirk. He looked at her and her delegates, wondering if their expressions would remain the same after he told them exactly how they had survived. "We do not find much use in spells among our units. Other than a handful of shamans we fought them tooth and nail."

"In the old fashion?" asked one of her delegates.

"The fashion is not so old. It is magic that is a dying breed sir. If you haven't noticed, the new laws against magic are bringing us back to many old traditions. And so," he turned back to Vera. "We found ourselves surrounded and outnumbered. It was in the heat of battle that I slew their chief. It seems the enemy had one vital weakness...their inability to function without command. So in light of the value of tradition, we were able to seize the victory."

Silence filled the circle while the celebration went on around them.

"Well," said Vera, barely able to fan herself. "I did not even know it was possible to defeat a horde of werewolves with sword and tactic alone."

"We were lucky madam," said Trulaine.

They all seemed to be quite marveled at the account. They wanted to hear more about the revered captain and his adventures. They wanted to steal a moment with him, and find out from him personally what it was like. But just then, Trulaine caught a glimpse of Tilian passing through the palace hallway.

Finally, Trulaine thought. A member of the royal council other than myself. It was as if all the high ranking council members had vanished over the past hour. He had not been able to find any one of them until he spotted the second military commander disappear around the corner.

“If you would excuse me,” said Trulaine addressing not only Vera and her party, but Deneaden as well. “I will be back in a moment.”

And with those words, he was off, leaving mother and daughter to pick up the pieces among each other.

“Look what you did,” he heard Deneaden say over his shoulder. “The man just returned from battle and already you scared him off.”

But that was not the case. If anything, he would have considered his gesture to be impolite. It was Vera who was probably offended. Trulaine wished he could have spent more time with them, but he had to get to the bottom of this. Something was going on and he going to find out.

He stayed closely enough behind Tilian to keep him in his sights, but far enough to stay unseen. Down the corridors Tilian went, turning a few corners, when he entered a small hatch near the galley. Trulaine had walked these halls countless times in the past of course. It didn't take him long to realize that the hatch led to a secret room; one that few people celebrating in the palace would ever know about unless they were top members of the council. And that was exactly what he saw when he entered not long after Tilian had shut the hatch behind him.

“Oh really?” he thought.

There was something suspicious going on, and he would find out immediately what it was. Walking right up to the hatch door, he gripped the handle and swung it open. He was about to get the answers he sought, and much more.



The Secret Council

The lights were dim.

Just about every council member Trulaine could recall looking for was present in this small room. At a wooden table sat Valindolin, Ursilus, and several other well-known delegates barely visible in the dim light. There was Zargos, a high ranking Centronian representative whose fervent expression suggested that something was amiss long before Trulaine ever even walked in. Drumascius, the prosecutor of magic was also present. At the head of the table was king Cathedeus, and standing beside him was a tall, able-bodied man whom Trulaine did not recognize. The man wore the tribal garments of a shaman. Romulus was present as well. He sat there looking anxiously from Trulaine to his uncle. Tilian himself was just about to take his seat, when he saw Trulaine and froze. Even the centaurs Brontius and Rontaine had managed to fit their bulky frames into the room for the secret meeting that Trulaine apparently was not invited in on. It occurred to Trulaine why they had come all the way from Tiria just to join in on his return. Now he knew for sure that something was not right. They all paused and looked up at him, speechless, unsure of how to continue on.

“What is this?” Trulaine asked adamantly; more of a demand than an actual question.

When no one said anything, Valindolin finally stood up, taking Trulaine gently by the arm. “Come, Trulaine. We were just beginning.”

“Beginning what?”

“Our debate,” admitted Romulus. “Take a seat, cousin.”

Trulaine did as he was humbly suggested. He glanced over the council peculiarly. The meeting could not have been called to discuss the threat of the Memradonian invasion, or else Trulaine would have surely been the first person invited. It seemed as if the subject of werewolves would not even be a footnote in this gathering. This was about something much more.

Tilian walked over to shut the hatch door when Golondred came wobbling in.

“I’m sorry, old friend,” said Tilian, stopping him at the door. “This meeting is private.”

“Like hell it is,” said the large, intoxicated man, jamming his foot so the hatch door would not close. “I’ve been by that man’s side fer decades.” He pointed sternly at Trulaine. “Anything he can be a part of, I can too. Now open the damned hatch!”

Tilian glanced over at the king and then at Trulaine who gave a nod of approval. The general of the reserve forces reluctantly allowed Golondred entrance, shutting the hatch behind him. The two men took their seats, and after a pause, the tension in the room began to rise.

“So what is this about?” asked Trulaine, who did not like to repeat himself.

“Something...terrible has happened,” said Romulus. “We did not want to burden you with such news so soon after your arrival, cousin. But...you are here.”

“And?”

“Well,” said Romulus with a pinch of apprehension. “We know that the fountain of enchantment has erupted.”

The energy fountain? Trulaine thought to himself. Erupted? How? He wanted to remain skeptic and reject the possibility that this day might arrive in his lifetime – much less today of all days - but he could not. Of all the immense issues that Centronus faced on a daily basis, the fountain eruption was the last thing he expected to discuss. How to even prepare for something so potentially devastating was beyond any of them, and now he understood the secrecy of the meeting. A

moment of panic began to wash over him, but he grabbed hold of it before it broke free within him. “What caused it?”

“We do not know. We sent emissaries there to further assess the damage, but...”

“But what?”

Trulaine finally got the chance to notice the silent, intense look on his cousin’s face. Prince Romulus’ eyes were watery and his mouth was slightly agape most of the time. He had obviously been devastated by the news, or worse.

“They have all been confirmed dead. That place has been sealed off, quarantined, cursed beyond all cursed regions. We have no explanation. All we can assume is that after five hundred years of every magician, sorcerer, or sorceress who has ever shed blood...spirit blood upon that fountain, has caused it to burst into the very heavens itself.”

“Yes,” said Zargos, nodding his head in fervent agreement with the king’s son. “Now, we have unbridled, magical energy pervading everything that we know. It has been said a thousand times in the old scriptures that this day would come.”

The other representative cracked a chuckle, clearing his throat quickly in an attempt to disguise it.

The room went silent.

Zargos gasped. Everything about the prosecutor – from his condescending posture, to his small, beady pupils that never looked Zargos directly in the eye - offended the representative greatly. The two hated each other. For years they were political opponents in nearly every issue that the current age of Centronus had ever faced, and their ideologies had always clashed. Zargos’ predictions and mandates had turned out to be true and better for the people of Centronus more often than that of the prosecutor’s skeptic ideals. His fervent attitude and antsy behavior however had caused him to lose more debates than that of the cool, charismatic, style of Drumascius.

“Is there something you would like to add, Drumascius?” said Zargos, staring him down with much agitation.

“Nothing...” said Drumascius in a nonchalant tone that seemed to challenge Zargos’ fervent expression. “...Except for the fact that you are all blowing this slightly out of proportion.”

“Oh? And how is that?”

“It’s all chance and hearsay. You are all forgetting that the fountain of enchantment has erupted on three consecutive occasions in the past. Yes, there were weather changes and rioting and casualties, but nothing catastrophic ever occurred. We panicked to solve this unsolvable problem. In the end, we had a big mess that we could barely clean up, and we had to enlist the help of other realms, several of which, we did not trust. Then came the wars. One thing led to another and several time, Centronus almost fell while other provinces excelled.”

“And what will you say when you’re proven wrong? That your opinions only put our people in further danger? What will you say when this is all on your hands, and the planet is crippled, or worse?”

“If that is the case, do you really think it will matter then?”

“It matters now, you fool!” shouted Zargos. “Only a dimwitted mule does not take caution to its own demise, such as you seem so fond of doing. I curse the delegates who elected you as the magical prosecutor of this, or any realm.”

“See, there you go again, making a fool of yourself like some mindless barbarian. Have you forgotten that this is a civilized council?”

The two of them continued arguing back and forth until Drumascius decided to ignore Zargos, turning his stiff neck in the direction of kind Cathedeus. The ranting representative gasped again, repulsed by Drumascius’ rude behavior.

“My lord,” Drumascius said to the king, shifting to his most respectful tone. “We are not yet sure about what effects the fountain explosion will have. There may be none. I know that the potential threat is great, but if we jump to conclusions based simply on prophecy and myth, then we will drain our resources and currency and that will only insight religious rebellions from our own citizens as well as those of foreign realms. We must seek direct council with The Leadership. It is the only way we will be certain if this threat is real, or if there is even a real so-

lution for it. In the meantime, I implore you to strengthen the home front. It is the best we can do until we know more.”

“I beg your pardon, Drumascius,” said Romulus, an intense sparkle in his eye. “I was there. I saw the fountain erupt with my own eyes. I saw the darkness. I heard the screams of people far off. I saw the very shrubs of the earth wither and die before me...the very sky itself open up and bow in majesty. You cannot convince me, or any other member of this council who has a clear mind, that the threat is not real.”

A brief, yet tense silence followed, but the king soon broke it.

“I did not call this council to discuss our differences,” he said. “I believe that the threat is as real it has ever been, and we must take precautions.”

“Well,” said Tilian. “While I don’t agree with everything Drumascius has said, we should consult the Leadership. They may be aware of things we are not.”

“I agree,” said Valindolin.

“Arknon,” said Cathedeus, addressing the representative for the Leadership. “What can you tell us? What is the Leadership prepared to do about this?”

Arknon was the most nervous person in the room. He was small man, jittery by all accounts. On the Leadership panel, he was well known enough to express something of an opinion in the realm debates, but in this particular scenario he was nothing more than a median between Centronus and the presumed capitol. An issue as big as this should have been presented directly before the Leadership, but there was no time for such grand consultation. Notwithstanding, the situation was far greater than even the Leadership could probably handle at this point, which was the reason Arknon was so nervous. He did not want to say something that would misrepresent the Leadership. Everyone in the room stared at him, looking for an explanation.

“Well...” he stuttered. “Actually I have not been in contact with Zareth, the leader himself, but-“

“Why not?” Trulaine asked curiously, assertively.

“Because he is a coward,” Tilian stated boldly. “We have word that once lord Zareth heard about the fountain’s eruption, he fled the Temple of Leadership and vanished. Why do you think we called this meeting? There is not a prayer that can aid us now.”

Arknon was nearly shivering as he paused with his mouth agape, and his eyes lingering on Trulaine with an intimidated stare. “He has not been seen for some time now.”

“Then who sent you to this council?” Trulaine asked.

“Well,” Arknon looked down with his eyes twitching, trying to remember everything quickly. “The order passes from the top delegate, a-and then several commissions are given out to members of the-“

“It is Brandeis,” said the king. “He is in charge of affairs while the Leader is not present.”

“C-correct.”

“It’s alright laddie’,” said Tilian with his arms folded, chuckling in amusement to Arknon. “We’re not going to spear you.”

Everyone in the room followed with a moment of laughter. It was a strange thing; hearing the sound of laughter so soon after hearing that the world may come crashing to an end. To Trulaine it felt as if it would be the last time he would ever hear such laughter. Even Arknon gave a spirited chuckle. The only person in the room who did not laugh was Drumascius, and although it was a humorous sentiment, the happy moment would be short lived.

“Cousin,” said Romulus, glancing across the table at Trulaine. “Your direction is ever valued. What is your opinion on these matters?”

Perhaps Trulaine would have been more talkative throughout the council, but it was so much for him to digest all at once. He was still trying to wrap his mind around the magnitude of things to come, and he was not even sure if he had an opinion yet. Being one of the greatest captains Centronus had ever known however, he was a quick, effective thinker and he was glad to offer his opinion where it

was needed. “I do not know what to expect from all of this. I do not think any of us do, and there is much to consider. If the fountain’s eruption truly is a threat to the safety of this world, then I want to know not only how we can stop this, but also how we can prevent it from ever happening again. It is not enough to simply combat this threat. We must understand our fallacies against the fountain. Perhaps the problem in the first place was that we did not respect the tenacity of such power...now we must confront it.”

“And how do we do that?” asked Zargos.

“I do not know. But if we are going to have any chance of surviving this ordeal we will need to strengthen our military reserve. That will be our first priority – our only priority until we plan a sound course of action.”

“And what if we do suffer a siege from invading forces?” asked Drumascius. “Our reserves alone cannot hope to combat a hostile realm; or five or six realms for that matter. The entire cursed world could rise up against us in a matter of days. We all know what the curse has done to the psyche of the world.

“They hate us, you know,” Romulus seemed to agree with his sentiment. “The spellbound races...most of them. All but the centaurs have showed hostility toward us, because we rule the greatest realm this world has ever seen. Some of them even think that we started the curse.”

“That is absurd,” Valindolin interjected.

“But true to some extent I am afraid,” said the king. “This world has been a mess for centuries, we all know it.”

“We must strengthen our reserves,” said Zargos.

“Tilian,” Trulaine addressed the one-eyed captain. “In the morning you should rally your troops. Let them know of the situation so they are aware of the importance of manning their posts until we can find a way to stop this. Make sure they are prepared for the days to come. We must be ready for anything.”

“I have already done so sir,” said Tilian. “Just as you asked on your arrival.”

Trulaine nodded appreciatively.

“You can count on aid from the centaurs,” said Rontaine.

“Yes,” Brontius snorted. “We came to this council to speak on behalf of the centaur clan. Our wardens are at your disposal.”

“Good,” said Trulaine, shaking his head in approval. He then turned to the meager Arknon, who became somewhat relaxed, but tensed back up when Trulaine gazed upon him. “What about the leadership? Can they help us?”

“The Leadership is only a shell of its former glory,” said Zargos. “I doubt there is anything they can do for us.”

“Well,” said Arknon. “Zareth may have deserted us but that does not mean that the Leadership is completely useless from a military standpoint. We have a force of five hundred infantry, and something like 50 magicians. That is the best we can do at this time.”

“That will have to do...” Trulaine said, addressing everyone. “...Because if we do not protect Centronus here, now, then there may not be a home left even if we do manage to spare the fountain. We will need to strengthen our defenses if we are to preserve this provinces once things begin to fall apart.”

“And they will fall apart,” added Zargos.

“Arknon, inform Brandeis to send his reinforcements.”

“It is the season of rest for the provinces near the Northern Reach,” added Dru-mascius. “The weather is bad this time of year, so the Krelenic Sea routes should be unoccupied.”

“That is not true,” said a voice from the far corner of the room. It was the voice of a young woman, and one that certainly could not have belonged to Valindolin, the only visible woman present. Everyone paused, looking at each other, baffled.

“Who is here?” said Tilian. “Show yourself!”

But there was not response.

Valindolin and Ursilis, the two elders in the room both possessed the magical prowess to reveal an intruder if there was indeed one hiding under the guise of a magic spell, but it was the tall silent member of the council, the king's new robed mystery recruit, who acted first. He opened his fleece; throwing his hands up and a green bout of fluid magic swirled about his wrists. With a flash of light, a woman they did not recognize stood, twinkling into full view before them.

Maurelan gasped. It was quite an impressive feat. She had been raised by mages all her life and none of them had ever displayed such swiftness and confidence as the man who had just revealed her to the rest of them.

Without hesitation, Trulaine and Tilian both sheathed their swords, while the king's new aid doused his last spell and was conjuring yet another spell, perhaps this time it would be a lethal one.

"Wait!" Maurelan shouted, fearful of being struck down. But they stopped, and there was an awkward pause as each member of the council considered her; mouths hung wide in astonishment.

"By the gods!" exclaimed Drumascius, staring at her wild-eyed as if he were gazing upon a ghost. "How did she get in here?"

"Who is this?" Zargos asked, turning to the king who was just as clueless as he was.

"I am the regent of Tovien," she claimed.

"Ha-ha!" Golondred laughed unexpectedly. It was the first time he had even made a sound since he entered the secret chamber. Trulaine glanced at him peculiarly.

Tilian grunted, rushing to escort Maurelan out with a hand on the hilt of his sword in case she tried something.

"I know the regent of Tovien," said king Cathedeus. "You are not he."

"No," she said. "I am not Nelo. I am his daughter, Maurelan."

"Wait, you are Maurelan?" He held up his hand for Tilian to let her be.

“Yes.”

“If you are acting as Nelo’s representative...” Tilian began. “...Then why did you sneak into our palace?”

“I had to sneak in because your guards would not let me in.”

She exposed the badge on her left shoulder for all of them to see. She then handed the scroll parchment her father had given to her to Tilian.

“Before he sent me here to deliver this message, he appointed me as regent. Now that I see how bad the situation is, I must come forward. The Krelenic Sea will be occupied by the warlord Shallemeign, so the Leadership cannot send reinforcements.”

She stood there while Tilian brought the scroll over to Trulaine first before handing it to the king. If it happened to be something dangerous, the king would be spared. Valindolin and Ursilus gathered to inspect as well. They would be ready with enchantments if anything malignant were to come out of the small scroll casing.

While everyone was focused on the scroll, Romulus just glared at Maurelan across the room with a curious expression.

“You can’t be seriously considering this,” said Drumascius turning his head dramatically from the king to Maurelan. “How long have you been standing there?”

“I have only just arrived.”

“Liar,” he said turning back to the king. “She could be a spy, o-or an assassin.”

“She is telling the truth,” Valindolin interjected. “She is Nelo’s daughter, so far as I know.”

“And how are you so sure?”

“Because I have spoken with him telepathically in the past, and he has mentioned your name several times,” Valindolin looked up at Maurelan with a nod of acceptance. “I had no idea he would have sent his own daughter.”

“Yes,” said Maurelan. “You know my father?”

“Well of course. He worked as a spy for the Leadership for many years, auditing Stenetian warships, attempting to play both sides in order to report the warlord’s whereabouts. Eventually he worked his way up until the Leadership granted him rights to his own province. Is that about it, dearie?”

Maurelan nodded her head.

“How do you know all of this?” asked Drumascius, bewildered.

“Because Nelo is a psychic...” said Valindolin. “...which makes him a highly valued member of the Leadership, and therefore this council as well. If his daughter is here acting as his representative, then I will take her word as his.”

“If he really is a psychic like you claim he is, then why did he not just tell you about the Krelenic Sea being occupied telepathically? Why go through the trouble of sending a messenger – his own daughter nonetheless – just to deliver this message.”

“I do not know,” said Valindolin, a thoughtful glare stamped on her face. “We have been waiting for this information, and it did not make sense. I have made several attempts over the past few days to tap into his mind, but he has blurred his thoughts to the point of telepathic obscurity. Something must have gone wrong.”

“It was because of his illness,” said Maurelan. “He suffered from seizures the past several days. So you see, he has not been able to link telepathically. That is why he sent me here...to speak on his behalf.”

“It sounds pleasant when you put it that way,” Drumascius said dismissively, still trying to talk sense into the king. “She could have killed Nelo, taken the scroll for herself, and is now well on her way to fooling this very council. My lord, we can never be too careful these days.”

“And why would I spy to sabotage a council that is prepared to save the world from destruction?”

“Because, young lady...I am hardly convinced that this so called ‘threat’ is really as threatening as you all claim it to be. This may just be an attempt at a mad scramble of power, you know. It is the very reason why the seas are occupied, why

we have to strengthen our defenses in the first place, and why I do not trust every dopey-eyed girl that sneaks into our most sacred council meeting! Those who do not believe that the world can be saved will be the first to plot against us.”

“And then there are those who believe we are fighting for nothing,” she said. “Those are the same people that do not believe in anything to begin with.”

Once again Drumascius’ pride was hurt when he – as clever of a speaker as he was – could not say anything.

“I still say she is a spy.”

“If she were a spy,” began Trulaine. “Then she already knows everything we have discussed. And if she were an assassin, she would have made her move a long time ago. She is telling the truth. The Seas are being occupied.” He passed the scroll to Zargos who passed it to the king who read it and looked up at Maurelan, considering her for a moment.

“You may stay,” he said. “But you are not to speak to anyone outside of this room about what transpires here. Divulging valuable information, no matter how scant it is, is still equal to mutiny before a council setting, and is therefore punishable by death.”

“I understand,” Maurelan bowed her head in respect to the stipulation.

Trulaine nodded his head in response to her compliance. “We will do what we can with the reserves that we have. Now we must develop a sound plan for combating the real threat...the fountain.”

“We can postpone the earth’s fracture,” said Zargos. “But with as much magical energy that has been released into our atmosphere, we can only slow it down. And even then, most of our shamans will be killed, or worse. We still do not know how these disruptive energies will continue to affect people. It may spread from person to person, just like the curse did.”

“We could be facing a second curse in doing so,” exclaimed Valindolin.

“Then there is no other choice,” said Trulaine. “The fountain must be destroyed.”

“Do you know what you are saying?” Drumascius exclaimed, being the first to object. “To destroy the fountain would end the beautiful gift that the gods have bestowed upon us. Magic is our entire way of life, you can’t just, end that.”

“If it means saving the lives of every creature on this planet, then so be it! We will just have to adhere to another way of life.”

“Are you forgetting our culture, our economy, our currency-”?

“Is that all you think of, is money and power?” Zargos interjected. “We are facing the single greatest threat in the history of the world, and still your primary concerns remain so petty. How could you even call yourself a member of this council? The very air you breathe is blasphemous!”

“Calm yourselves!” shouted the old king. It was not like him to do much speaking, and it was a shock to hear him yell. The entire council glanced his way, surprised at his reaction. His expression was furious. “We are here in this council...to discuss the fate of mankind, whether any of you believe it to be true or not. There are no sure answers, and there is no easy way around it. I am in agreement with Drumascius. Magic is our entire way of life. It is our lifeline. But, the gods must destroy the energy fountain. If that means we must procure other means of survival, then that is what we must do. We will persevere. We must.”

“But-“ began Drumascius before being cut off as the king spoke again.

“I have thought over this very carefully, and I know what is at stake. On one side we have magic. Everything we have ever known functions from it. Without it, we would be cast back into time. Many or all of our progression would be lost, and to restore our golden age, the way it is now may take a number of millennia. And humanity’s most glorious age may be forgotten. On the other side, we have the fountain. We can spare magic, save the fountain, and pray that the energy enveloping the world as we speak does not fracture it to the point of destruction. Or, we can destroy it once and for all, saving humanity and every following generation of mankind from this godforsaken pestilence. Now I tend to agree with the latter. Trulaine is right. The fountain must be destroyed. In my mind, there is only one way of doing this. We must seek out the sources.”

The sacred key sources of AmanKran. Everyone in the council knew about the sources, with the exception of Maurelan who looked around in mysterious wonder at the mere mention of the name. Trulaine was all too familiar with the history. The sources were sacred safeguards - chamber devices that acted much the way keys do - activated by the incantation of forbidden spells used to unlock the inner properties of the energy fountain. These safeguards, or sources - as they were called throughout the history of the Centronian Empire - were used to neutralize the fountain's magical capabilities if ever humanity had need of ending it. Or at least that is the way Trulaine always remembered the myths being described to him. No one knew how they were created or whom they were crafted by or how many of them there were, but it was true that no living person had ever sought to collect them all. They were abominations as far as Trulaine was concerned, and he did not fancy discussing a quest to retrieve them. But it was what must be done.

For the second time, Drumascius gave a hideous laugh. "The sources? Three of them were destroyed and the others don't even exist. And even if we did know where to find them, we have no idea what they are or how to use them."

"Once again, you are misinformed, Drumascius," said Valindolin. "Remind us of how you got your position among the council."

"By prosecuting rogue witches such as you," he said. It was a vile, personal attack.

"Yes, you are Centronus' illustrious prosecutor of magic," she said; a kind smile still placed gently upon her face despite the uncalled for comment. "You have much influence over the laws that govern this province, and still, your knowledge of how magic governs societies is only limited to Centronus."

"Am I required to know the dealings of other realms?"

"No, of course not. But if you claim to be such a valuable asset to this council, then you would know that in the inhabitants of WinDarrow posses knowledge of the whereabouts of one of these sources."

"That is a lie."

"Actually, it is quite true, Drumascius," said the king.

“And how do you expect me to believe that a people so...insignificant can be in possession of one of the sources, when we, the Centronians, divine protectors of all that is sacred cannot even claim knowledge of where to find the others?”

“Perhaps the gods no longer trust the judgment of our leaders,” said Zargos, looking Drumascius directly in the eye. “And following the election of twits like you, how can I blame them?”

There was a moment between them. Zargos had obviously struck a nerve and for a moment, it looked as if Drumascius might actually show a hint of anger, but it soon subsided.

“I still believe this is all folly.”

“It does not matter what our personal beliefs may be,” Trulaine asserted firmly. “If we are to find this sourcekey, in whatever shape or form that it takes, then so be it. What must be done must be done.”

“My lord,” Ursilus addressed the king. “If the king of WinDarrow knows the whereabouts of one of these sources, perhaps he has knowledge of how to find the others as well. We will also need to know the proper spells needed to unlock their properties. These are very complex energies we are dealing with, for the sourcekeys are not simple devices.”

“Actually,” Romulus interjected. “I would be more concerned about the citizens of WinDarrow. They may refuse to divulging said information to us.”

“They will comply,” Trulaine confirmed assertively. “Each province is sworn to aid Centronus in carrying out holy mandates. Only rogue nations do not hold themselves accountable, and so, all status and credibility as a realm will be not be afforded to them.”

“Correct.”

“WinDarrow it is.”

There was a pause. Trulaine cast a glance at Romulus who glanced right back. Sometimes he felt as if he and Romulus shared something together. It was strange. They were not twins, or brothers, or even the closest of relatives. They knew each

other as well as any other pair of cousins, but perhaps it was their political obligations that kept them from ever sharing much time with each other in the past. He did not have as strong of a connection with Romulus as he did with Mandaelion who was younger, and more impressionable. Trulaine noticed however, in moments like this, when he and Romulus expressed ideas simultaneously, even though they were saying two different things, they may have had the same exact thoughts. The glances were confirmation of that. It had always baffled Trulaine, but he never mentioned it.

“How do we get to WinDarrow, then?” asked Trulaine.

“Its vicinity is located beyond the Southern Reach,” said the king.

“Our maps of the southern realms do not show that region in full detail,” Tilian paced thoughtfully. “We may need a navigator. And there are none in Centronus who can navigate the path.”

“Just head south,” Drumascius shrugged his shoulders dramatically. “It is a sound idea and it will take whatever company we send out far away from the sea invasion. And if we are attacked here, we will be ready for them. That is something I can agree with.”

“The path to WinDarrow is not a simple one,” said Trulaine. “Although it does keep whatever company we chose to send, away from Shallemeign and his Stene-tian army, the pathways to WinDarrow are filled with many dangers. That is in addition to us not even knowing where to begin searching for it. We might get lost. And only the gods know what may happen if we find ourselves drifting into the uncharted regions of the world. Just the other night we fought a horde of savages and that was just beyond the borders of our own lands to the east. And this was only our first encounter with them.”

“Trulaine is right,” said Tilian. “There are creatures in the outward reaches that do not have name, and there are timeless horrors that dwell in the uncharted regions of the world. It would be suicide not to prepare a safe passage in the face of such peril. And we cannot afford to be steered off course.”

“WinDarrow is well known to men of the east,” Maurelan interjected. “I know of someone who may be able to lead us there.”

Men of the East. They were rumored to have knowledge of things in the southernmost parts of the world, but trust was an issue that every Centronian took under careful consideration. Especially when dealing with outsiders.

“And why should we be so willing to trust your word, hmm?” asked Drumascius. “You are just a stranger, and a misuser of magic. You broke into one of our most sacred and discreet locations, and now you want us to trust you.”

“You do not need to trust me, your king does.”

She gazed at king Cathedeus. With an approving nod, he gave her permission to speak.

“He is a pathfinder,” she said. “A prisoner, held captive at the Culprit’s Inn. It is a small community on the borders of Torund.”

“A prisoner?” asked Zargos.

“What was he imprisoned for?” Trulaine inquired.

“I do not know. But we will need to interrogate him if we are to find WinDarrow. The village of Torund is not far...maybe a day’s ride from here.”

“Well,” said Romulus. “What good is a pathfinder when he is imprisoned?”

“It will have to do,” said Trulaine. “Indeed he is a prisoner, but this is our best lead. We can question him, and if that doesn’t work, then we’ll at least have foreign terrain as our advantage. We can ask around until we find WinDarrow if we have to...but we start in Torund.” He smiled, even though no one in the room expected him to. He was pleased that they were at least able to agree to a common solution. “Now all we have to do is put together a company of men. It should be small. That will keep us discreet. It will attract the least amount of attention to ourselves and more importantly, our cause.”

“Whatever company is made, I shall lead them,” said Tilian.

“No,” said the king. “You are one of my top generals, and your duty is to guard Centronus. You must stay behind to protect what will be most important to us in the long run...our home. Trulaine shall lead the quest to WinDarrow.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Trulaine bowing graciously. It had actually caught him off guard, and everyone at the council table paused in silence. No one had expected for the king to suddenly thrust this quest upon Trulaine. One part of him was excited to take up such a mission, but on the other hand was the obvious reason for the churn he just felt in his stomach. It was very poor timing since he had just come back from battle, and was weary. But perhaps the journey would not require much fighting or any fighting at all if he were lucky and could remain diplomatic enough. Nonetheless he was proud to take up the mission and further prove himself as a great leader, even though he missed home more than he could bear it, and had expected to spend more time with Deneaden. Still, he was thankful that the opportunity presented itself, and for that, he was grateful for the king’s decision.

“You may assemble your company.”

“Well ya’ can count me in!” shouted Golondred, breaking the silence, a large cup of mead still swishing in his hand.

The celebration and countless cups of ale made Trulaine wonder if his dear friend was just letting the alcohol in his system speak for him, or if he was truly knew what he was declaring.

“Golondred...” Trulaine began with a tone of compassion, trying to let Golondred know that in no way, shape, or form was he expected to go along on this journey. But if Trulaine knew him well enough, the large warrior would have never snuck in to the council room with him in the first place if he were not willing to follow his captain – his best friend – to the ends of the earth simply to watch his back. The friendship between the two was ironclad. Trulaine already knew that Golondred would reject his plea to stay behind. He didn’t even have to finish speaking before Golondred cut him off.

“Can it captain,” he slurred. “You know as well as I do that I will suffer whatever ignominious end you commit yourself too. You can try to reject me, but everyone round here knows...my place in this is by your side.”

“My friend,” Valindolin said, placing a hand on Golondred’s. “You have consumed more ale than the drunk who invented it.”

There were a few chuckles in the room. Golondred sat up straight, his eyes cracked barely open.

“Not the point milady,” he said with hiccup.

“And what is the point?” asked Trulaine with a chuckle.

“I know my limits dammit! And you should know yours!”

“And what does that mean?”

“You’ll need me out there. And I’m not belligerent. Drunk enough to piss an oasis, perhaps, but I know what I’m sayin’ dammit. I won’t be goin’ to save your ass this time, I’m sure you’ll already have that well covered. I could give a damn about your physical well being, because we both know that you’re too damn bullheaded and fool hearty to ever die in combat. No, no. You’ll need someone there to keep you from losin’ yer mind lad. Might as well be me.”

Even though Golondred sat there with a half drunk smile on his face and an expression that was not all there, Trulaine could not help but agree with him. He had a point. And the truth was, he did not want anyone else by his side, and Golondred had no other duties, unlike the grunting Tilian who was probably feeling useless at the moment. Trulaine nodded his head, feeling glad deep down that his friend was willing to join him back into the fray so soon. Besides, even if he tried to argue with the stubborn drunk, he would lose anyway.

“I will accompany you on this journey as well, Trulaine,” said Brontius, standing to full height. His frame pressed against the corner of the room. “It would be an honor to serve the son of Trumanscion, especially on such an important quest as this. The reason why I came to this council was to offer my services. You have my allegiance.”

“Thank you, Brontius,” said Trulaine with a generous smile. “I have heard of your resiliency among the centaur armies. I am more than pleased to have you along with us.”

“My outward appearance may cause attention to our camp however,” the centaur continued. “Therefore, I will remain hidden in public areas where the murdering of individual members of the spellbound races is tolerated. We all know that there are many.”

There was a pause. They had been so wrapped up in the local affairs of Centronus and the rest of the world, but it was the first time during the council they had pondered how the ignorance of other peoples might effect their mission. The oppression and prosecution of the spellbound races may not have been tolerated in Centronius, but they were all too common in some of the other provinces; provinces that they may have to cross in order to get to WinDarrow. The journey would not be without its obstacles. The many prejudices shared by many who believed centaurs to be vile or dangerous were out there, but having Brontius with them would help more than hinder them. He would be a valued asset to the company.

“Very well,” said Trulaine. “Rontaine, you can inform your brethren of our plans, and they can send reinforcements when they are ready.”

Both Rontaine and Brontius bowed their heads, pleased to be included in whatever lay ahead.

“Well,” said Golondred. “It looks like the company is coming along well then.”

“What about the girl?” Drumascius inquired rudely. “She cannot stay here.”

“And why not?” Valindolin proclaimed.

“My duties proclaim that I am to do as the king instructs me,” said Maurelan. “Anything else is none of my concern.”

“Hmm,” said the king, monitoring her from across the room. “How do you know the pathfinder?”

“I was present during his trial session. There is much information one can gain while attending the proceedings. Apparently he has been to WinDarrow on several occasions.”

“Yet you do not know what he was imprisoned for in the first place?” asked a skeptical Drumascius.”

“Clearly you’ve never been to one of the courts held by The Order.”

“The...Order?”

“Yes. Those decisions based off of the crime and the crime itself, are discussed privately among delegates. Proceedings are just public executions.”

“And why was he not lynched?” asked Trulaine, showing much interest.

“Because the prisons are not as full as they used to be. One cell would hold as many as thirty prisoners. It was a real rat’s nest. Now, they’re down to nearly one per cell. But they still need business. So they spare lives...for as long as they need to at least.”

“So long as he’s still breathin’ its good enough fer me,” Golondred belched.

“Well,” said Trulaine. “If you were a part of his court proceedings then we may need you to be present if we are to speak with him. You may need to come with us.”

“I understand,” she said. “I only ask to fulfill what is required of me.”

“Once we get there, it will be your choice if you want to go to WinDarrow or not. I won’t lie to you...there could be danger along the way.”

“So,” she said with confidence. “I am not afraid. However, I must warn you. If am to go along with you on your quest, I must also bring my personal guard, Bernarsu.”

“What?” Drumascius rose from his seat, appalled.

“How can we trust that you won’t go back and tell the entire province of Tovien what has transpired here?” asked Zargos, for the very first time in the meeting, he was beginning to agree with Drumascius. It seemed that he did not trust

her at all either. “How many people are you planning to bring from Tovien, anyway?”

“No one from Tovien, sir. He is here.”

“Here?” Drumascius sat up, looking around. “You said you were alone!”

“I am. But just outside your palace, he awaits. We were not granted passage, so I had to use other methods of persuasion.”

“Sneaking?”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

Drumascius’ face was turning beet red in concealed anger. He finally turned to the king. “How many times must she violate the privacy of this council before someone has the sense to remove her? And what business does a little girl have in this council room anyway, much less out there in the real world. Dammit, arrest her!”

“There will be no real world left,” Maurelan answered for the king. “I would rather join the cause than sit here and complain about everything that is going on.”

Tilian cracked a chuckle. Everyone looked at Maurelan with new respect for her fervor. They had just met her and already she was proving to be more useful than the prosecutor. There was little he could say, especially since everyone else in the room appeared to agree with her. It was an awkward moment for the prosecutor, but just like all of his moments where he failed to win the final word of the debate, he simply sat back with half of a frown stamped on his face.

Just then there was a knock on the hatch door. Tilian cracked it open, and a soldier’s head poked in as he whispered something. The exchange took no longer than a second, but in between that time, Trulaine could see that the outside hall was clustered with partygoers. A set of women walked by laughing, and a number of small footsteps – obviously those of children – could be heard scurrying across the narrow passageway. He could tell that the level of discreetness that had previously been kept for the meeting had now winded down as the night progressed

into its late hours. And suddenly the feeling of haste crept back into the room. It was the kind of haste fueled by secrecy: secrecy to keep the truth from the commonwealth as long as possible. It had an effect on the meeting. The interruption had caused bodies to shift and quick discussions. Suddenly there was a sense that they had kept the party waiting, that the celebration was more important than what had just been discussed by the king and his top subordinates. It had to be kept a secret; the appearance of normalcy had to be upheld in the eyes of Centronus and its citizens. Outside was an entirely different world at this point. A world where no one knew the horrible things to come, and the few who would give hope in the world's last glimmer of light. In that moment, the council room itself had become sacred ground.

Tilian closed the hatch door and walked back over to the Romulus, whispering something into his ear.

“It seems that our guests are becoming impatient,” he said, turning to the king. “Father?”

Cathedeus nodded his head so that Romulus could be excused. Romulus rose, bowed to the rest of the council and walked out of the room.

“This meeting has concluded,” Cathedeus said to the rest of the council. “Speak of this to no one. Not even to your loved ones.” He glanced at Trulaine before going on. “Trulaine, your wife ministers to the youth; technically she is a member of the royal council. The choice is yours on whether or not she knows about this.” He turned to look at the rest of them. “Please, try to enjoy this night, all of you. Know that we will overcome this. The days that lie ahead may be difficult indeed, but there is hope.”

With those brief words, he rose from his seat, aided by the mysterious man who had uncovered Maurelan with shaman magic. Just like that, the most important meeting of all time had ended. Now the only question floating through their minds was how to continue on with a celebration after hearing such news. It would not be easy for any of them, especially Trulaine. A single day back, and already he was to prepare for a journey to WinDarrow. Notwithstanding the quest itself, breaking the news to Deneaden would be his greatest task now.



Heritage

Following the meeting, Trulaine had been summoned to the king's quarters.

For the first time since his return, he had the chance to step into his uncle's royal chamber. It was chilly as usual. Cathedeus had always left the shutters open for the night breeze to enter. His room was exactly the way Trulaine remembered it; large and elegant, but modestly decorated. It had accommodated him with every aid that a king should be possessed with, from books, to compasses, to maps, and tools. He had archive storage of insect species collected from different parts of the world, and fossilized relics on one side of the chamber. There was also a masterful wardrobe on the other side, assorted with fleeces, gowns, and sandals.

Cathedeus sat on his throne, and the mysterious man from the council stood right by his side once again.

Regardless of the fact that Cathedeus was Trulaine's uncle and a somewhat lenient man, he still could not hide the fact that the greatest king in the known world had kept him guessing this long. It was beginning to make him nervous because of this new situation and everything he had come to terms with in the meeting. But Trulaine doubted that anything could be worse than what he heard earlier. Besides, after hearing nothing but bad news for the past several months, he was kind of hoping that the king would tell him something good.

"Trulaine," said Cathedeus, delighted to see his nephew. "I want to introduce you to Alvantin. He is a highly skilled Shaman from the tribe of Ralak'Tu, and I have decided that he will accompany you on your journey."

“I have heard much of your exploits,” said Alvantin, his distinctive accent finally coming out. “It would be an honor to join you on your quest.”

“That was a great show of talent you displayed in the council,” said Trulaine. “I see that you are well versed in using shamanic spells. We will be searching out a very powerful, magical object, and I could use someone with the talents that you possess.”

Alvantin bowed respectfully.

“Leave us,” said the king.

The shaman exited the chamber, leaving the two of them alone.

“Come,” said Cathedeus, leading Trulaine to through his chamber. “Your mission will not be an easy task. You have been procured by a holy mandate to retrieve an item that is held in quite high regard. The king of WinDarrow is no fool, and he may try to dissuade you if you do not have his cooperation. You will need to be as diplomatic as possible if you are to retrieve the first sourcekey. It is said that the WinDarrowans are coining it ‘the vessel of Ranok’.”

“But you said that he was no fool. If he is wise then he knows the gravity of the situation.”

“Never underestimate the foolishness of any king, no matter how intelligent they may be in practical matters. Especially giants, they can be as stubborn as trying to convince a block of wood, and they can be twice as impractical. To tell you the truth, I have no idea how that gargantuan ever got his position within the Leadership in the first place.”

He was speaking mostly to himself, glancing off in the distance. They came to the next chamber over in the king’s royal suite. It was his private reliquary where he kept most of his prized objects, and those relics considered sacred to Centronian lineage. Trulaine looked around at the many artifacts, but there were a million other things on his mind.

“My lord, if I may ask,” he said. “What does the vessel of Ranok look like?”

“Well I have never seen it, of course.”

“You haven’t? But you are the king of Centronus.”

“Kingship alone does not qualify me to know all of the world’s secrets. I think that you will find that these days kingship is quickly losing its value in the provinces, and our credibility is part of what will help preserve our way of life after the fountain is restored. The vessel of Ranok is said to be an object of absolute purity. If you are diplomatic, and if the king of WinDarrow has knowledge of where to find the other sources, then perhaps he may divulge said information to you. This may be our only chance to avert the disaster that lies ahead.”

“And, what if I fail?”

“I think you already know the answer to that. Deep in our hearts, I think we all do.”

Cathedeus paused, considering him for a moment before continuing. “I want you to have something.” He then proceeded toward a case that was covered in shimmering little crystals sitting on a stone table. Nobly secured in the case, was a long, elegant sword. “This...is your father’s sword.”

Trulaine gasped.

My father’s sword? he thought to himself, bewildered. Locked away in this vault? All these years? How? Why?

He carefully took out the sword and handed it to Trulaine whom held the thing like it was the most sacred object in the world. He could barely imagine carrying it around in a sheath, let alone using it in battle. He had seen the sword a few times in his youth, but had never really gazed upon it in his adult life until now. Its impeccably crafted steel glinted off the light in the room. The handle was decorated with jewels, and the hilt was crafted from a smooth circular chunk of thick steel, which could be used as a bludgeoning weapon for knocking opponents unconscious. It was a wonderfully crafted piece of steel, a fit reward for his father who had been responsible for the construction of Centronus’ finest palaces as well as those of other nations. To now possess it was a surreal sensation for him.

“Thank you, my lord,” said Trulaine.

Cathedeus stood there with a smile, watching him hold the sword nervously, awkwardly, his posture still, tall, and seeking approval when he had obviously just received the best kind he could have possibly asked for in the form of his father's revered sword. "You have come so far," he said to Trulaine. "Your father would have been proud. And although we did not always see things eye to eye when he was alive, he was my brother, and I have always respected his vision. He was a brilliant man, and quite resourceful. His opponents may have overlooked his accomplishments, but the people hold him in high regard. Even those not of this realm acknowledge his achievements. He would have loved to see the man you grew into. He would have been proud indeed. And after the valor of your last effort, I would be happy to award you with one of his finest possessions."

"Yes, that is true," said Trulaine humbly. "But I am still hardly worthy of being called its owner."

"Here here," Cathedeus suddenly got steely. "You are a royal son of Centronus. You are much more worthy than you know, and your lineage is well respected. It is an honor of the highest degree to possess this sword. Besides...this blade is one of the finest meat cleavers in all of our land. Even before it was granted to your father it was quite revered in its' time."

"That is why I am reluctant to take it," Trulaine admitted.

Cathedeus only chuckled amusingly, placing his hands upon his nephew's shoulders. "One of your father's last wishes was that his son be as ambitious, and righteous as he. Hopefully we have made him proud."

With that Cathedeus walked back over to his throne, and resumed his glancing and shifting over important tablets that highlighted the necessities of Centronus. His words had said it all. Hopefully they had made his father proud, not Trulaine himself. Did he even have any say on what standards he would have to live up to? Surely he deserved more from the older members of his family than the reassurance that they had produced the perfect prodigy a great warrior. Was that all he was to the remainder of his family? Perhaps Trulaine had expected him to say more...or less. He did not know. Compared to finding out that the world's end was at jeopardy of being nigh, receiving the sword from his uncle was good news he sup-

posed, but it had filled his stomach with uncertainty. Cathedeus had given the sword to him based on the laws of the realm, and it was Trulaine's duty to honor that law, regardless of what he thought of his own esteem. None of that mattered anyway. The world was at stake now.

“Thank you, my lord,” said Trulaine, bowing his head.

As he exited the room, his uncle's voice gave him pause one last time.

“Good luck, Trulaine.” said the king. “And may the gods be with you.”

On his way back to the party, Trulaine began to saunter slowly through the palace halls. He did not want to see Deneaden, not just yet. Not with this cold feeling in his gut; the feeling that perhaps he would never have more than a day of peace in his life. It was beginning to settle in; the fact that the cold battlefield would always call for him, offering nothing but death. He couldn't bear the thought of leaving again so soon after his arrival, knowing that he would just have to break Deneaden's heart again. He had to collect his thoughts first. He could hope that this journey would not be as dangerous as he thought it would be, for these were dangerous times indeed, but his gut told him that it would not be that easy. They would travel to find one of the safeguards to the vessel of Ranok. It could be done, but if they were unsuccessful then he would have much more to worry about than just leaving Deneaden for a second time in one week. Everyone would...perhaps even the gods themselves.

Trulaine found himself gazing up at a statue of his father, Trumandius in one of the several hallways of the palace. It was carved out of heavy oak wood, leaving shiny detail; so well sculpted and crafted in the likeness of his father that Trulaine could see the resemblance between his face and the statue's. It was proof that his father had lived and was revered by all of Centronus at some point. Trulaine visited the chamber to gaze upon his father's statue at moments like this when he needed to draw strength from himself. If only his father were here. But he was not. He died when Trulaine was just a child, leaving him with an entire world set afire. Sure, everyone praised his father, and even though he had been dead for decades, they all still spoke his name as if he were alive and well. It burned Trulaine up inside. Because the truth was, he did not admire his father. In fact, he loathed him

and the people who kept telling him that he was bred to be the epitome of what they thought his father would be if he were still alive sickened him. It made him numb. The only expression he could possibly muster was that of anger. It was a deep-seated anger, one that he had not fully understood in his youth, but it was still there; ready to come over him at any time. It haunted him like a bad memory, surfaced with his adrenaline, and before he knew it, he had nearly put his entire fist through the marble wall that encased his father's statue in glass. He was not even aware of his actions when he looked up and saw that the wall was cracked. Even the halls rattled a little as he looked up to see the damage he had caused. It caught him by surprise. He tried to regain his composure before someone noticed, but perhaps it was too late.

“Trulaine,” a woman's voice called over his shoulder. Trulaine quickly removed his fist from the wall, looking back up at the statue in an attempt to conceal both his anger.

“He was a noble man,” said Valindolin as she entered the hall. “Your father...no matter what power hungry men like Drumascius might say about him, he was noble. But I'm sure you will listen more closely to those who knew him best rather than those who only wish to take advantage of the power he left behind. But your father worked too hard, helped to preserve this kingdom too well to allow it to be taken by anyone he did not decree. It is the enduring legacy that he left behind and the worthy people behind it that allow Centronus to function without losing any of its former glory. Men like Drumascius are only jealous. Don't let what he said earlier effect you.”

“It isn't that,” Trulaine finally said to her.

“Then what is it, my son?” she said, placing a gentle hand on his cheek. She was not actually his mother, but had been the closest thing to one all of his life. His real mother died in childbirth. Valindolin was his godmother, but throughout the years she had always been so much more. She was his last glimmer of proof that his parents were everything that they were rumored to be; great, kind, wise people who fought until their dying breath to create a world of justice and peace.

“His death,” said Trulaine. “I know it is not something that is ever mentioned, but I wish to know why?”

“Well, it has been so long, Trulaine. But, you know how he died. He was assassinated by members of Lin Linei...”

The Lin Linei; they were legendary warriors of Shiria tribes to the southeast. They were known as being the first tribe to make a longstanding lifestyle living amongst the forests after the spread of the curse, which had not affected them. Just the mere mention of them had made Trulaine angrier than he was before, for unknown members of Lin Linei had caused his father’s death, leaving him a lifetime of his father’s unsettled business to finish. His father’s legacy had left many enemies behind, because his progress had led to the success of many provinces while some of the less fortunate ones continued to dwindle in prosperity.

“Still there has been no justice?” asked Trulaine. “After all the justice he fought to bring into this world, and still there was none for him.”

“Well there has,” said Valindolin. “The courts made arrests.”

“For what? The courts are corrupt. You know that. They commit more injustices in the name of justice; the courts and the Leadership for that matter. I blame them for his death as much as I blame his assassins. Sometimes I wonder if I am doomed to live the same life that he did.”

“Do not say that,” she said, pulling his face toward hers so that he was forced to look at her. “It is only self-pity. Besides, it is impossible for two separate entities to live the same exact life. The universe does not work in that nature.”

His eyes managed to wander again, gazing into empty space.

“That does not mean that I haven’t been cursed by this wretched bloodline we have. Sure, my father and all his descendants are loved by the gods...of course we are. We have protected this world for centuries with the lives of countless men. But the rest of the world...they hate us, both the spellbound races and those who have survived the curse. They blame us for it everyday. That is our curse.”

She looked up at him, admiring his passion.

“You are not cursed, and neither was he,” she said. “But you do remind me of him...very much so, outwardly and within. Stubborn of course.”

“What was he like?”

“Well, first and most importantly, he was a good man; wise, courageous, and unbelievably handsome, just as you are.”

Trulaine laughed.

“He was loved by more people than any man that I have ever known,” she said.

“Yes, and that is why so many hated him,” Trulaine looked up at the statue again. “I want to secure his legacy by finishing what he started, and help unite provinces.”

“Yes. The Leadership may have had the means to establish the provinces, but it was your father who envisioned a culture of peace. He wanted to expand it to the world...”

“But he only got as far as Centronus,” he said, finishing her sentence. There was a pause, and there was anger in his voice when he continued. “But it was not his fault. If that wretched curse had not tainted the masses, he would have seen it to the end. If he would have been allowed to make this world a better place, then perhaps he would still be here.”

“Perhaps.”

“So you see, Valindolin. That is why it is up to me. Either I will lift my father’s curse, or I shall partake in it. If destroying the fountain of enchantment is the only way to see his legacy finished then so be it. I must see it done myself.”

“Is that why you agreed so quickly?”

Yes, and that is why I will never stop, until it is done.” He looked down at Valindolin, smiling. “Thank you, for always being there. If not for you, what link to my past would I have?”

“Well, your uncle-“

“The king?” he said with sarcasm in his voice as the two of them began to take a slow stroll to the end of the hall. “He values family discussions about as much as the great warlord values peace.”

“Well,” she said with a chuckle. “In that case, it is good that I am still around.”

As they reached the end of the hall, the crowd could be heard in the reception room, praising the words of Romulus as his voice echoed through the chamber. He had been giving a welcome home speech for the past several minutes, a tribute to Trulaine and his returning soldiers. Romulus loved the crowd, loved to hear the people respond to his words with jubilant cheers. It was part of the reason why the king usually let him speak for him at meetings and public speeches. It was expected anyway, since Romulus was his eldest son, and because the king was already aging. Romulus enjoyed it so much that over the years he had made his voice heard more and more as a political figure rather than just the privileged son of a king. Trulaine was proud of his cousin and wanted to see him excel. Trulaine however, was of different stock. His place was not politics or in ruling a nation; it was in defending it. And that is what he was passionate about.

Tilian came walking from around the corner. Apparently he had been looking for Trulaine since the expression on his face was urgent.

“Sir,” Tilian said, approaching the pair. “Your wife has been worried mad looking for you.”

“Thank you, Tilian,” he said nodding his head.

“She went straight to the head of the reserve forces to tell you she craves attention,” said Valindolin. “It looks like you are in trouble, Trulaine.”

“Indeed,” Trulaine chuckled. “She’ll have my head if I am a minute later than I already am.”

Through the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a girl poking her head around the corner at the end of the hallway. She quickly vanished as she noticed him spot her. It was Maurelan.

“How long has the girl been snooping?” he asked.

“I think she has been tailing me ever since the meeting. When I went down to the party, she was down there but then when I left, it seemed like she was right behind me. I saw her guard earlier as well...big fellow.” he chuckled. “I wonder how good he is in a fight.”

Trulaine nodded his head and smirked. “Find our guests some accommodation. And make sure you keep an eye on them.”

With that, Trulaine gave Tilian a nod, bid Valindolin farewell, and exited the palace hallway.

He searched for Deneaden everywhere; the party, the interior’s lower levels, the outside promenade. She was nowhere to be seen and none of the guests could account for her. Her parents were no longer around to tell him where she had gone, and Mandaelion had run off with his friends. Finally after searching the palace grounds thoroughly, he had realized the worst. She was probably in their tower seething with anger.

Sure enough he found that his prediction was true when he walked in and saw her sitting there on the bed with her arms crossed and a stamp of disapproval on her face.

“Where were you?”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“How could you?”

“Well, there was an important meeting, and apparently I went to attend.”

“Just imagine, in the late hour, the look on my mother’s face...”

“Deneaden, your mother knows my status.”

“That is beside the point...you could have at least told us you were leaving. Not that I was worried, but...”

“I know,” he said, taking a seat beside her, holding her close.

He loved this about her. It was her love, her concern, and her uncanny, almost childlike drive for affection. It had defined her. She was a very delicate creature.

She gave attention, but she required the same amount of attention back. It was not because she was selfish, clingy, or needy, but because she longed for his companionship, and his happiness. She even monitored it sometimes (although she did not mean to) if only for the sake of loving him as much as she did. He was a lucky man indeed and he counted his blessing every moment he got the chance to spend with her. Notwithstanding her passion for him, Deneaden was a strong woman. As an advocate for the youth, and a sound political voice during the court debates, she often took charge of matters that most women, even those of royal status would shy upon; and she did her job well, with honors. But the Deneaden that he knew and the Deneaden that the rest of Centronus had come to respect and value were two different people. He got the soft side of her; the side that he loved most.

He heard her sniff as she sat there, head buried in his chest, comfortable in his arms.

“My mother may not want to admit this,” she finally said. “But she missed you too. She was looking forward to that conversation.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“Don’t tell it to me,” she said with a chuckle. “You’re the one who will have to answer to her.”

“We’ll see about that.”

He held her gently, thinking about how hard it would be to break it to her that he would be leaving once again, and sooner than she could ever expect to see him leave for a second time in one week.

“Do you remember when we first met?” she asked, staring out at the moonlight.

“Of course I do,” he said, staring off into blank space.

He regaled her on their first encounter. It had taken place so many years ago. Her father had brought her to the palace capitol on the Centronian annual day of inception, the holiday celebrated in honor of the realm’s commencement as the world’s first true nation. Deneaden had come to that celebration for the first time

when she was young. That was the first day she had met the son of the greatest king the world had ever known. But she had never seen him as such. She always saw him for who he was deep down.

He looked down and she was fast asleep. He figured it was a combination of partying hard, staying up late, and stressing over where he was all night that caused her to doze off so quickly.

He lay there in the bed with her, holding her until he felt his eyelids fall heavy. He had been so occupied over the past couple of days, that he just realized how little sleep he actually had since his return. He had thought about the Memradonian wilds, about the mission that lay ahead of him, about the sword he had been given, about his wife he was getting so used to leaving behind. So many thoughts flooded his head that it made him even more tired, and before he knew it, he was off into a deep sleep. Tomorrow would be a new day; one he was not likely to forget.



The Alchemist Map

Maurelan sat up in her room while Bernarsu slept soundly. They had been shown generous hospitality since the meeting. The reserve forces officer, Tilian made sure that she and Bernarsu were left in good care with the handmaidens. They had shown considerable hospitality at the request of the king. All she and Bernarsu had really wanted was a quick meal. They had gotten that and much more, for guests of the high palace were always treated like royalty, even if they were from a neighboring realm that no longer stood.

She was thankful that she was no longer starving, but everything else that had transpired up until this point had made her sick to her stomach. Her father was dead, and she had a face to his killer, Shallemeign the warlord of the seas. Already she had harbored an obsession that was beginning to grow within her. She wanted to see him dead. She had to, and she would not stop at nothing until her revenge was complete.

She could not sleep. She couldn't speak, she couldn't laugh, and she could hardly muster the energy to cry. The rage boiled and the anger swelled inside her as she sat there, clenching her fist, wishing that she could punch something. She did not realize it, was hardly aware that it happened, but suddenly there was a loud bang, and Bernarsu bolted, sitting upright with a wide-eyed start.

“Wha-!” he shouted, reaching for his knives. He stopped when he saw Maurelan sitting there with a hole in the wall beside her head. She had obviously tried to shove her fist through the wall, and the near hysterical look on her face indicated that she had likely lost control of her emotions.

He didn't blame her of course. She had just lost her father, and Bernarsu had lost a mentor. He said nothing to her, only gazed upon her with a baffled expression.

"Sorry," she said.

He simply pulled the covers over his head and went back to sleep.

Maurelan sat there, dwindling in her mind, eyes still full of watery tears. She needed something to do in order to cancel the empty feeling that pervaded her. All she had to cling on to was the memory of her father, and the ambition completing his final task assigned to her. For her it couldn't be far enough away. Perhaps in the following days, the Centronian guard would spend most of its time mobilizing troops, and securing detailed plans for the quest to come. It may take them a week to prepare, and all the while, Maurelan would be left simmering. She couldn't do it. She needed something to occupy her mind.

That was when it occurred to her. The chain necklace and the pendant she had been so intrigued with over the past couple days. She had nearly forgotten about it.

She reached into her shirt and pulled it out. A sliver of moonlight from outside came through a crack in the tower and hit the shiny device, causing it to glare in Maurelan's eyes. It was the first time she had ever really been able to examine the strange pendant that dangled loosely on the end of the necklace. It looked more like a small, metallic device in the shape of a ball rather than a piece of jewelry meant to be worn. She noticed that there were grooves and circles engraved into it.

It was indeed made of metal, but the only metal devices that she was familiar with other than swords and shields were tools and fancy utensils. A metal object such as this - especially one that was shaped in such a peculiar fashion - was foreign to her. She had heard of such devices of course, but it was something that even her elders had little knowledge of. Metal objects crafted by unknown craftsmen from all regions of the world had found their way into her father's reliquary quite often. From the looks of it however, this was not a device crafted from metallurgy - like the forging of swords in ancient smithies. This was something unique

about it. It may have been so subtle that she was just now realizing it, but she could feel its energy. The pendant had to be bound by magic, and she wanted to know more about what she was holding. Centronus was one of the most advanced realms in the world; its tome repository would be a plethora of knowledge and documented studies that would rival any text the scholars of Tovien could have ever possessed. Surely she would be able to find information about devices such as this somewhere in the palace.

With a start, she jumped up from her bed, moved by a sudden jolt of inspiration. She was surprised to see that Bernarsu did not wake from the disturbance. She quietly walked out of the room, heading straight down the palace halls.

She may have had clearance by the king to roam the palace grounds, but she had not been completely trusted. Apparently the leader of the reserve forces, Tilian sent a few guards to watch over her sleeping quarters, but they must have retired or vacated to secure other, more important duties since then because her room was no longer guarded. Even after intruding on the king's most secret council meeting, she had somehow gained acceptance as a guest in his palace. Considering the gravity of her mission coupled with the fact that she no longer had a home to go back to, she did not want to ruin what hospitality she had already been lucky enough to acquire. And at this point, an unnecessary bounty on her head was the last thing that she wanted.

The drums from the assembly theater could still be heard droning slowly through the palace halls. It had never occurred to her that Centronians would be so into partying. With all that was about to transpire, she would think that they would all be praying in solemnity. Now she knew that even the conservative Centronians could pass for belligerent drunks. As she made her way through the theater, she could see that the celebration had winded down quite a bit and most of the people who were still there were either passed out or falling asleep on stone steps. There were few guards patrolling the interior, and none of them seemed to pay Maurelan much attention.

When she exited through the other side, she nearly bumped into a woman walking by on the outside road. With such a speedy pace, Maurelan should have

knocked the woman over, but years of combat training gave her the dexterity to move aside before the woman could even realize that she was there.

“Oh,” said Maurelan. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” said the woman, startled but not bothered.

“I-I was just on the shelters.”

“Well, you’re in the wrong direction. The shelters are that way.” The woman pointed over Maurelan’s shoulder behind her, in direction she had just come. Of course she knew the shelters were behind her but concealing her frustration at the moment was like walking on ice.

“Thank you,” said Maurelan as courteous as possible. “Oh, I was wondering if you could help me, I seem to have gotten lost. Do you know where I might find the um...the uh- the ar...arc...”

“The archive?”

“Yes...the archive...for the tomes.”

“It’s right over there.”

The woman pointed to a tower in the distance behind her, and then turned back to look at Maurelan, a peculiar expression beginning to form on her face.

“How much have you had to drink there, gal’?”

“Well,” said Maurelan finding the consumption of ale to be a fitting excuse. With a subtle lean and a cute chuckle she made her stance believable. “I may have had...just a lil’ bit.”

“The archives are closed,” she said firmly.

“Closed?”

“The archive is forbidden after hours. Get home child, you’ll be spotted by the guard.”

With that, the woman walked off shaking her head in disapproval.

Maurelan had delivered a horrible performance as far as appearing natural, but at least the woman had shown her the way, which saved her the time of wandering through the night. She was determined to find out about the pendant, not necessarily because she was eager to learn about it, but more importantly, she may not have another chance after tomorrow.

Her greatest attribute was stealth. And one of her favorite and well versed forms of magic was the ability to render her physical form eclipsed which gave her the ability to disappear, move without sound, and phase through objects at will. It was the same spectacular feat that landed her in the secret meeting: vanishing, sticking to head officials, and overhearing their conversations.

Being as quiet as possible, she spoke the enchantment. “Eluviel lucendum.”

Immediately she disappeared and was completely out of sight.

Within minutes she had made it to the repository, phasing through the locked door, and stepping into the spacious tower. Since she had no fire to light the dark room, she used one of her simple light spells to illuminate the darkness.

She was sure that this room housed every book of knowledge the Centronians possessed on the facts of the known world. As she began to look around she saw books specializing in every source of information from the different realms and their histories to head political figures of the Leadership movement. There were tomes dedicated to religions, military practices, court guidelines and deliberations, formats for youth training, institutions of training, manuals on the different tasks assigned to the Centronian commonwealth and the benefits they offered. There was every document possible on Centronian ways of life. She was quite impressed by how developed their culture was. Centronus really was the world’s first true nation, and the proof was right here in this archive. It amazed Maurelan. She wanted to sit here all night and study each and every one of these books, but she had to focus on the task at hand.

Finally she found the section on magic, which was more extensive than she thought. There were tomes instructing users on ancient magic, modern magic, mental magic both light magic and dark magic alike. She came across a book entitled, *Forms of Alchemy*. She knew that it would reveal something useful, because

there were illustrations of potions and metal objects on the cover; objects that appeared mechanical in nature, like the pendant she wore around her neck.

She sat there for nearly an hour, skimming - as briefly as she could - over everything that the book could offer about alchemy. There were several forms of alchemy starting with its basic elemental forms. The text moved on to include mist forms, liquid forms, and metallic forms alike. She was surprised to learn that it was possible for extremely skilled magical alchemists to produce mechanical objects with functioning fields of energy within them, a form of magic that could create an assortment of effects. Some of them could twist or bend objects, while others had the ability to breathe life into certain objects. In the book there were spells and incantations; words written in the sacred language of the gods that allowed the magical conduits to exist. That was the nature of magic and she was quite familiar with it, but warping metal was something completely new to her.

She continued to flip through the pages, when she found it; an illustration of a metal ball, similar to the one she held. In the text beneath, the author spoke about the ability to trap light and conceal it, which Maurelan noticed was an attribute of light magic, something she was familiar with. There was an incantation at the very bottom, and beside it was another illustration of light extending from the metal ball.

Maurelan nearly leapt to shift her position to her knees as she realized that her efforts might finally pay off. For the first time, she had become quite excited about something. Just the day before, she took the pendant, not realizing the significance of what she was actually carrying. It was no shiny piece of jewelry...it was a magic amulet of some sort, and she had the ability to unlock it. She pulled out the amulet and held it up close. She was careful to study the pronunciation in the book, reading the over the words several times before attempting to speak them. And when she was ready, she focused her energy on the light force within her.

“Incantatem Vi’Torian,” she said.

Nothing happened.

She frowned, stumped for a moment. She glanced down at the book again before giving another try. This time she cleared her throat, and raised her voice.

“Incantatem Vi’Torian!”

Something happened. She could hear the tiny gears within the device grinding against the outward shell as began to twist open. One half the casing opened up, slid backwards and split into two sections, revealing a small light inside. As soon as the light was visible, it shot up and arched into a spectrum that aligned itself into an image. She couldn’t quite make out what the image was, but it appeared to show a platform of some sort.

She was surprised to see that the light itself appeared to be coming from her own willpower. She noticed as her emotions, thoughts, and curiosity shifted, the image in the light began to take on new shapes. The image morphed, and reshaped, and fuzzy glitches, but the actual image itself remained as well as the size of the light arc. As she focused more on the image itself, new detail began to twinkle in the light. There was a sphere...several of them. And they appeared to be attached to odd shaped patterns; patterns that looked as if they could be locations on a map.

She stared at the thing for a while, not thinking of anything, just captivated by the small panorama of light that shone before her. Then it hit her. She remembered overhearing Shallemeign mention something about a map, and now that she took a closer look she knew exactly what the odd shaped patterns were. This was the map Shallemeign referred. It had to be. Why else would Nelo offer her permission into Tovien’s repository? Perhaps he had even planted the idea in her mind to take it. Being a psychic, he had obviously known that she had already been drawn to the thing. He also must have known everything that would transpire; the eruption at the fountain of enchantment, the sacking of Tovien, even the timing of his own death must have precipitated in his mind at some point before he had given her the scroll to deliver.

“Wow, dad,” she whispered to herself.

The thought alone had nearly caused her to cry, but her grief was replaced by another emotion...urgency.

She was holding the alchemist map, the very thing that Shallemeign murdered her father to get. She did not know for sure if he was dead but she did not want to

think about the thought that kept popping into her head. But, Shallemeign was after the map, which meant that he would be after her.

She had to think. She couldn't go in and just warn the royal council about this. They might think her actions more suspicious than they already were, or that she could be a spy, or working with a second agenda. They might even try to lock her up, and leaving in haste – which is what she now desired over everything else – would be the opposite outcome.

Trulaine, she thought to herself. If there was one person who would pardon her, it would be him.

Releasing the enchantment, she closed the map pendant, and jumped to her feet. Springing into motion like a bolt of lightning, she took off, still invisible, phasing through the archive wall, and darting off into the night.

Trulaine had another dream. It felt similar to the same dream he had continuously, over and over for months, but this time the second battle of Centronus was more intense and vivid in his mind. This time, he could recall the tragedies as they unfolded that night. This time, he could see her clearly. It was Ionna. She stood there in the sand with the battle raging on around her in the middle of the night, just as he remembered the last time he ever saw her.

Trulaine. Her voice called out to him.

He had felt the guilt. Even in his dream, he could feel it, just as strong as he could feel the flames rising behind him. It was a powerful guilt, forcing him to lower his head, forcing him not to turn away from her voice that desperately called his name. Her voice. Ionna.

Trulaine.

It was louder this time, ringing from inside his head, but in the dream it was barely a whisper, traveling easily as if carried by the very winds pushing through the flames behind her.

With all the courage he could muster he turned to face her. She was standing there...just standing there with her arms held out to him, weeping in the heat.

Trulaine...

Suddenly an explosion ripped through the night. It ripped through the air, through his dream, and through her.

“Trulaine...” a voice whispered to him in the night. It was a different woman’s voice, but he could not tell whom.

Consciousness flooded into him and his eyes opened wide. He expected to see Deneaden, but instead, there was a young woman looked down at him; her face was strange in his waking moment, but as his eyes adjusted he was finally able to make her out. It was Maurelan.

“Trulaine,” her soft voice whispered. “We have to go now. The men are all waiting outside, in the stable. I’ll explain later.” With that, she exited the room before Deneaden – who lay in the bed next to Trulaine - could be stirred.

Trulaine lay there, dumbfounded, but cognizant of what she had said to him. It was odd of course. Maurelan, a complete stranger had snuck into his room in the middle of the night to warm him. Why would Tilian not be the one to tell him, or one of the palace messengers? He did not like it. Whatever mannerisms accepted in Tovien did not apply in Centronus, and she would be good to learn that, guest or not. He was the high captain, and no one would have questioned him if he would have grabbed his sword on instinct and slain her on the spot. He would have scolded her while she was there if he had a moment to fully wake and get his thoughts together before she exited.

He looked beside him and Deneaden was still fast asleep. He glared at her for a long moment. He figured that waking her and trying to explain his actions now in such a short period of time, so soon before he was abruptly summoned would be worse than not saying anything at all. With a heavy heart he kissed her on the forehead, got out of bed, and wrote her a letter. He placed the letter on the bed beside her. He dressed quickly in heavy, navy blue clothing with rough, leather greaves, and thick, durable boots. He fitted a winter cape to his shoulders, one with soft,

fluffy wool for warmth on the inside, and tough hide on the outside for resistance against the rain. The final thing he took was his father's sword, already tucked honorably in its sheath. With a final glance at Deneaden, he walked out, closing the door behind him.

When he made his way down to the stable, he saw much the small company already rallied. Maurelan spent her time brandishing weapons while Alvantin and Bernarsu got acquainted with each other. Brontius and Golondred were the only two not there. Golondred's absence was to be expected. He did not intend for him to even remember any of what happened in the meeting, much less anything he may have actually agreed to.

Other members of the council should have been present as well to see them off, but they were not.

"Where is Tilian?" he asked Maurelan sternly. "And why did you sneak into my private quarters without permission or escort?"

"This is urgent," was her only excuse. "We must leave now."

"I do not care. When it pertains to matters of security, urgency can be appropriated. If you are caught sneaking around in any part of the palace again, you shall be persecuted. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said, somewhat apologetically.

Trulaine looked at her for a moment before continuing. "Tell me what you know."

"Well," she said hesitantly. "I wasn't quite sure before, but now that I've given it some thought, I just remembered that the pathfinder's sentence was already carried out several weeks ago. That means that his execution may be sooner than I thought; which is why we must leave now."

"Execution? Why did you not mention this before?"

"That is because I only just thought of it."

Trulaine grunted.

“But I wanted to tell you,” she continued.

“Me? Why?”

“Because you are the leader of the company.”

“Who told you to rally my men?”

“Well,” she said with a guilty look on her face. “No one did.”

“Listen, and listen carefully, he said, looking at her with a stint of aggravation. “I do not know you well, and you were only allowed inside the palace because of your status in the land of Tovien. In fact, my commander of reserve forces already believes your actions to be suspicious.”

“But-“

“We have not even departed yet, and already you have lied to my men, making them believe I have given orders which I have not. If I cannot trust you, then we will part ways now and I will take my chances without your help.”

“Yes. I went around your command, but it will not happen again.”

“Where is Brontius?” Trulaine asked, glancing around.

“In the stables,” said Maurelan. “He went to gather the horses.”

“And I’m assuming he believes he was going under my orders.”

Maurelan nodded her head.

“Ever the diplomat, you are,” he said, regarding her.

He appreciated her fervor, but how could he trust her? If she went behind his back to make her own decisions then that could hinder he and his men from doing what they are supposed to do. He would let it slide this time, but he already knew that he would have to watch her closer than he had initially thought.

Behind him, he heard a horse trotting slowly through the stable. He was somewhat surprised when he turned to see Golondred approaching them in the early hours of the morning, the moonlight still shining behind him. His expression held

the combination of drowsiness, anger, and piss-faced intoxication as he looked down at Trulaine for an explanation.

“Ya didn’t think ya could just leave in the middle of the night without me, did ya?” he shouted in anger.

“Quiet yourself, Golondred,” Trulaine demanded. “I was going to get you. I’ve only just arrived.”

“Oh.”

“And this mission was granted elected officials. As my second in command, you are allowed to join us, but it is not necessary given how soon it still is from the battle.”

“Do you really think I was so drunk that I can’t recall my own actions? I’m the best-damned drinker in all of Centronus, maybe even all the world. I’m perfectly capable of understandin’ the gravity of all this. How many bleedin’ times do I have to tell ya’? You need me on this mission.”

“Of course I do,” said Trulaine, tossing Golondred the set of fifty coins he had handed him just the day before for the bet in the Memradonian fields.

Trulaine nodded his head, a slight smirk sneaking beneath their notice. He wanted nothing more than to have Golondred by his side. In fact, the angry, jolly drunk was the only person in the company that he actually knew. Maurelan, Bernarsu, and Alvantin were complete strangers; he would definitely need Golondred, even if only to keep a steady head. Brontius was the only other member he had met before at some of the previous trials.

Soon the centaur showed up with the horses. He arrived with Trulaine’s wild yet tamed mare, Delemeney, as well as Maurelan and Bernarsu’s steeds, Cloverlorn and Swinton. Tied to those horses was a forth horse, a stallion that could be ridden by Alvantin. He had also secured most of the company’s food rations to the saddle on his back. Being a centaur, he was able to carry much more than they could and still move even quicker than their steeds. He was a valuable addition to the company, one that could not be replaced. There were just certain qualities that

centaurs possessed; qualities that came highly recommended on missions such as this.

“I have done the liberty of letting the guards at the front gate know that we are leaving,” snorted the centaur. “The gate is now open. Shall we depart now?”

Trulaine thought of Deneaden for a moment before answering. He could go back and tell her face-to-face that he was leaving, but there was no point, especially now that they were all gathered and ready to go. With a heavy head, he gave a nod, and they all mounted their horses.

“Navigation,” said Trulaine.

His old friend did not respond immediately, but after pausing, shaking his head to wake himself, and fumbling over a compass, Golondred finally got his thoughts together.

“We’re headin’ south,” he grunted. “That means we’ll have to go round the canyon first.”

“After that we will need to cross through the sojourner fields,” Maurelan interjected. “Torund is not far beyond that. We should arrive there on tomorrow’s eve if we hurry.”

“And you know the path to the sojourner fields, I take it?” asked Trulaine.

“Well course,” she said. “I would not be much help if I didn’t.”

“Good,” called Golondred. “So we’re all set then. Let’s hurry and get this damned thing over with.”

They departed hours before sunrise, all six of them. As he sped away on the back of Delemeney, Trulaine looked over his shoulder at the tower where Deneaden still slept. He felt guilty for leaving her with only a letter, but what was done was done. They were on their way to complete a mission, which had suddenly been sprung upon him. But how hard could it be? All they had to do was make it to WinDarrow. He just hoped that it would be a quick journey.



The Cradle of Gravitation

The Leadership was composed of three separate institutions, each built to serve humanity in different ways. The first was the Tower of Social Integration and Intelligence, dedicated to the social and political aspects of the nine realms. The second was the Sanctuary of Natural Wisdom which catered to the discovery and understanding the many creatures of the earth, and the study of its natural habitat. The third was the Temple of Incantations. It was built to support the practice and discovery magic. The social climate of these three institutions differed from that of the nine realms. The sovereign lay claim to no citizenry, just a population comprised entirely of mages, scholars, and a security force that barely rivaled a third of Shallemeign's men. Besides, he had bided enough of his time throughout the decades, watching nations rise in power. It had made him more cautious about which realms he could seize and which realms were still too powerful. In the past, he would have never thought it possible to storm a temple of the Leadership, and now here he was, steaming ahead with confidence. It was here, within the temple itself that Shallemeign would find the first cradle. Or at least that was Saskia's promise.

"Blood memory does not come with navigational charts," he said. "Are you sure this was the temple you saw in his mind?"

"In all its glory," said Saskia standing beside him wearing a hooded cloak to shade her face from the sun. "I am certain."

This was Shallemeign's second siege in just over a day. How he loved the thrill of conquest. It was not so much the enslavement of lesser peoples that excited him; it was the toppling of those already in power that he enjoyed more than any-

thing. He found sport in overthrowing kings and watching them plead for their lives before crushing them. It was, after all how he came to power in the first place. He was the warlord of the seas. Conquering powerful leaders was part of his life's work. Enslaving the entire population was just a bonus, and the killing would just be a matter of sport.

He could see the temple clearly now, rising in the distance as a slew of his Stenetian ships drifted ahead of the Valora. They were quickly closing the gap between the sea and the shores of the temple where already he could see members of the Leadership far away – tiny like ants in the distance – running around frantic, calling their mages, rushing to set up enchantments, doing whatever they could to hurry and prepare for battle.

Stenetian pirates barked commands all around Shallemeign's ship. Farther ahead, the first of his ships had already landed on the shore. His pirates stormed out to meet the mages on their own ground. What followed would be an extravagant, yet very quick battle. Suddenly the shore erupted in a myriad of flash explosions and powerful incantations that broke the silence and could be heard clearly from far away.

Shallemeign cringed as he watched the first dozen of his men die brutally due to the effects of light magic. The Leadership's mages were skilled indeed, but they were greatly outnumbered. After suffering several volleys from Shallemeign's archers, and a steady charge of sword and spear on foot, and their primary forces were soon outmatched. His men made quick work of the mages, and quickly moved on to storm the inner grounds. Shallemeign had a solid smile on his face, as the Valora finally made its way onto the shore.

The helmsman of the Valora, Brutus – a loud, scraggly pirate stock full of tattoos and an affinity for barking commands to everyone but Shallemeign – lowered the deck hatch, and Shallemeign's ship was quickly emptied out. Close to a hundred of Shallemeign's men stepped off the ship and onto the shore to join the rest of his men. Altogether, his forces numbered around five thousand men, and he was in command of nearly fifty ships, half of which were still berthed in Stenetian

docks. And this was not including the recruits his daughter would surely bring back on her way from the outer realms.

Shallemeign stepped out, flanked by Saskia and Brog. By now the sandy beach before them was riddled with dead mages. He could not help but notice that the alarms – which now blared through the air - sounded identical to those in the land of Tovien. It was just another sign that the other realms had taken after the customs of the Leadership. He was invading this temple for two reasons, to steal the cradle of gravitation and to prevent the blasphemous customs of the Leadership from spreading further into the nine realms, each of which he would own before the end of the next week.

“Go inside the temple,” Shallemeign said to Saskia. “And find that worthless swine, Hesperus.”

With speed ten times that of a normal person, Saskia dashed through the air, bursting through the front doors of the temple. Shallemeign paced calmly with a smirk, stepping over bodies. He held the side of his cape so that it would not drag in the sand, and with Brog by his side he made his way up the steps to the entranceway. Some of the surviving mages and a few recruits tried to rush him but they were swiftly cut down by his men, who by now were laughing about how quickly the squabble had ended, and looting the bodies, taking the few things they happened to find.

Before he could even make it inside, Saskia was dragging someone out of the temple with two men slain behind her. A third tried to chase her outside, but quickly collapsed due to the wounds she had inflicted upon him; two gashes to the chest. Kicking and screaming, the man pleaded, trying to free himself from her solid grip. She threw Brandeis to the ground and he looked up in utter fear when he saw who stood over him.

“Please!” he pleaded, groveling at Shallemeign’s boots.

The warlord looked up at Saskia and back down at Brandeis, perplexed.

“I heard rumors years ago that your sovereign, Zareth no longer walks this good earth,” he said, personally disappointed that he could not get his hands on

the Leadership's so called Leader. "I never believed it, never thought I would see proof of it. And here I find you, acting as sovereign in his stead."

"W-we do not know where he has gone," expressed a shivering Brandeis. "He has deserted these lands."

"Well I guess you will just have to do then."

"What do you mean? P-please don't..."

"If you value your life and the lives of the few men I have chosen to spare, you will comply with my every word. Then, maybe you can live to deliver a message to the rest of the Leadership."

"Yes," said Brandeis. "Of course...a-anything you ask."

"Bring to me the cradle of gravitation."

There was a chilling pause that stuffed the air with tension as the some of the surviving mages close enough to hear the conversation made quick glances at Brandeis. The frightened sovereign stuttered more than usual before replying that already began to anger Shallemeign before he even spoke.

"C-cradle?" asked Brandeis. "I-I don't know of any-"

Shallemeign shoved his boot deep into Brandeis' throat, pinning him in the sand. He held it firmly for a few moments so that Brandeis couldn't speak any more lies even if he tried. He did not release his foot until he felt a soft crunch in Brandeis' larynx. By the time he released his foot, the young sovereign began to cough up chunks of blood.

"I beg you," Shallemeign taunted. "Tell me another lie."

Brandeis writhed in pain, clenching his throat tightly with tears scrolling down his face, his fancy, festive gown sodden in muddy sand and blood. Shallemeign stomped his foot on Brandeis chest, preventing him from crawling.

"The cradle! Where is it?"

With a trembling finger and a voice barely audible, he pointed toward the temple, and gurgled. "In the...observatory...locked in the storehouse."

“Show me!”

Shallemeign lifted Brandeis to his feet, shoving him back up the steps through the entranceway. Saskia followed them inside, while the dimwitted Brog remained with the rest of his men, holding the surviving mages hostage until they came back out.

The first thing Shallemeign noticed was how elegant the place looked on the inside. It was a dull tower laden with bricks on the outside, but the interior was padded with crimson curtains lining the walls around them. Along the walls were many statutes commemorating all the men who had acted as sovereign to the temple of incantation, dating all the way back to its inception, nearly a millennia ago. There were seventy two of them. As Shallemeign paced behind the stumbling Brandeis, he pondered what the seventy-third statue might look like in his likeness, but soon discarded the thought as he realized that there would soon be a statue of him in every realm and village on the planet.

There were other people in the temple. They were scholars and custodians, those who maintained the temple, or took up residence for spiritual training. Some were young, some old, and some were cursed. Shallemeign recognized a few centaurs among them. He was quite interested to see that the Leadership could claim such creatures as pupils, or even guests. The issue of passing off cursed men as holy disciples of magic was a controversial one. The old Leadership would have never allowed it, and the new Leadership was obviously not powerful enough to keep its shameful secrets hidden from the rest of the world. Amusing.

Brandeis led them into the observatory, which was full of books and tools for primitive astronomers to gaze at the stars. It was believed that observing the stars held the key to communicating directly with the gods, but Shallemeign saw no reason to believe in such theories, because if that were true, then the gods would have struck him down right where he stood...in the observatory itself. The gods had abandoned man to his own fate long ago, and Shallemeign was about to prove it.

Brandeis walked them through a staircase that spiraled beneath the temple leading to an underground substructure. There, in the corner of the vault was a small

cupboard where Shallemeign could faintly make out the hue of a small, yet bright aura glowing from inside.

“No!” a woman screamed from above. She rushed down into the vault but Saskia immediately grabbed her by the throat and lifted her into the air. She could do nothing but squirm, for Saskia had the strength of ten men, and could easily hold her up with one arm for an extended period of time without budging. Instead she opted to slam the woman against the brick wall, causing shards of rock to burst out. The woman fell to the ground, lifeless. Shallemeign looked at Saskia in admiration, and Brandeis looked at her with utter terror in his eyes.

“Well aren’t you the lively one,” said Shallemeign. He turned back to Brandeis with a twisted smile on his face. “You may continue.”

Repulsed by both of them, Brandeis unlocked the cupboard, revealing the cradle within. The light was no natural glow. It pulsed with vibrancy, reflecting off of Shallemeign’s eyes that were greedy with power. His hand was drawn to it immediately. He was so entranced by its magical hue that he hardly even noticed Brandeis speak.

“What is the point of stealing the cradle?” said the young sovereign. “You need the spell in order for it to work properly.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Shallemeign. “Thanks for remindin’ me.” He leaned forward in front of the small sphere and whispered a pair of sacred words.

“Hanunting beding-granel graspel”

The cradle began to flash slowly, coming to life. With the simple will of his mind, it now floated in the air at his command. The magical bond between the cradle and its wielder was powerfully binding. It had become linked to his mind, alive with him. It sustained itself without thought or volition, and could be used in half the time it would take for him to complete a thought. He felt as if he had a new muscle in the depths of his brain, and he was eager to flex it. But there would be time later. Besides, he did not want to waste an ounce of the energy that it would take to use it effectively.

Brandeis stood, shocked, and could not believe what he was seeing.

“Now that we have an understanding,” said Shallemeign, the cradle floating to the side of him. “I need you to tell me where I can find the other cradles.”

Brandeis wanted to speak – if anything, out of fear – but instead he continued to gaze at the tiny light blazing in front of him, terrified out of his mind.

“Tell him!” Saskia said, slapping him on the head. He whimpered a bit before speaking.

“I-I don’t know!” he stuttered in panic.

Without saying a word, Shallemeign pulled out one of his swords and held it up to Brandeis’s face.

“I’m telling the truth!” he cringed. “T-the cradles are hidden. We are forbidden from knowing their location. All but a few chosen may know.”

“Yet, you knew where to find this one.”

“That is only because this temple is one of the secret locations. As custodians, it is our duty to know. But that does not apply with the others. And we know that the other two temples do not house them.”

“You wouldn’t be tellin’ me that just to save your own hide, now would you?”

“W-we don’t even know what the other cradles are. We don’t know their locations. We don’t even know their properties. We only know about this one.”

“So, as custodians of this particular temple, you would know which part of creation this particular cradle controls holds.”

“G-gravity, gravity,” said Brandies, gladly giving up the only valuable information he had to divulge in exchange for his life.

“Ah, gravity,” said Shallemeign slowly with a wide smile on his face. “So, if you do not know where the other cradles are, then surely you know how I can find them.”

“They can only be found by one who possesses the alchemist map.”

Brandeis knew in his heart that every mage, scribe, scholar, or king in the world would wish him an eternity of agony if they could hear this conversation. At this

point, he was more concerned about how the gods would punish him in the after-life.

“The alchemist map?” Shallemeign perked in curiosity. “What is that?”

“I-it is a special map. One used for concealing the locations of creation’s cradles. When I first arrived here, I-I learned the nature of alchemy. I learned about the maps...how to sync them, how to create them. When sacred devices are made forbidden, the spell caster uses a metal object to conceal locales within in it.”

“How is that possible?”

“It is light manipulated within the device.”

“I apologize for my ignorance. The ways of the Leadership have not appealed to me for quite some time now, so I may be behind on the academics. How does all this work exactly?”

“Well...with advanced, magical alchemy of course. An alchemist can form a metal object of any shape. The object is embedded with a magical code that adheres to the light within. Therefore, the locations of the cradles are imprinted in light.” With a frown, Brandeis looked at the floating, cradle that now answered only to Shallemeign. “Wait...how did you know it would be here without first possessing the map?”

“Because,” he began sarcastically. “I asked nicely. Now, where can I find this map?”

“I do not know that either.”

With lithe skill, Shallemeign sliced him across the stomach, just deep enough to expose some fat, sparing his insides. Brandeis screamed in agony.

“I’m not lying!” he squealed, barely able to speak, cringing in the corner for safety.

“Shallemeign,” said Saskia, placing an arm on his shoulder.

Initially, Shallemeign took it as a sign of weakness on her part, but once he saw the blank look on her face, he knew that it was something else. “What is it?”

“Now I remember. There was something in Nelo’s mind that I saw as well...an object.”

“N-Nelo?” Brandeis said, looking up at them in anguish. “You killed Nelo too? Nooooo!”

“Silence!” Shallemeign snapped. He turned back to Saskia, concern on his face. “What object?”

“I did not know what I was seeing in his mind before, but I recognize it now. Yes...there was an alchemist map in Nelo’s possession.”

“I knew he would never give in,” Shallemeign whispered to himself. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said with a focused look. “Although I feel it is no longer there.”

“Did he hand it to someone?”

“No. He did not. But someone may have taken it.”

Shallemeign paced the small vault for a few seconds before stopping, and gazing at Saskia in shock as something significant had just occurred to him. “The girl.”

“What girl?”

“The girl that was hidden in Nelo’s chamber when we found him. The one that nearly took your head, remember?”

“Do you really think she holds the map?”

“Who else would? Surely no one left alive. My men pillaged that entire land-mass and found nothing. She escaped.”

“True.”

“And she is someone significant to him I would imagine.”

“She is his daughter,” Saskia confirmed. “That much I could tell from earlier memories, many of them include her.”

Shallemeign stood there for a moment, calculating things in his mind. Saskia did not know if he was acting on a whim or some detail he may have previously overlooked.

“Come,” he said to her, completely ignoring Brandies. He stormed through the temple, making his way back up to the ground floor.

“But...where do you think she could be?” said Saskia, following him out of the temple. “And even if we do know where she is, how do you know she has it? How do you know if she even knows how to use it?”

“Because, Nelo was a noted psychic. The secrets he had knowledge of must have made him extra cautious. There were certain things that he must have kept from even his most trusted advisors. But his daughter...she would be the exception.”

“Perhaps that is why she was still there in the first place?”

“We must find her,” said Shallemeign walking with a new conviction.

“But we know not where she has gone. She could be anywhere in this realm by now. Brunorn, Trilexia...she could even be in Centronus by now. You will have to lay siege to the entire realm just to find her?”

“I do not think it will be very hard. Did you forget that I have advocates in every land from here to the rim of the world?”

“Well of course not,” rolling her eyes beneath his notice. “That is why you are the warlord of the seas.”

“Precisely.”

Shallemeign had been so deep in conversation that by the time they made their way back outside and down the steps, he failed to notice Brandeis trailing behind them, still pleading nosily for his life. When Brandeis’ advocates saw the light of the cradle floating obediently beside Shallemeign, they scowled at their sovereign. Shallemeign stood there for a moment, contemplating his next move.

“My lord,” pleaded Brandeis. “Please. You said that if I cooperated, you would spare me. You said you would spare the rest of us.”

Shallemeign paused.

“True,” said Shallemeign thoughtfully. “I did say that I wanted you to deliver a message for me, did I not?”

“Yes,” said Brandeis graciously. “Thank you, my lord...thank you...AH!”

Suddenly an invisible force, powerful and unrelenting wrenched itself around his neck, crushing his throat. Shallemeign simply raised his hand and Brandeis was lifted off his feet where he dangled in the air, effortless like a feather.

“You will deliver a message for me,” said Shallemeign. And even though the smirk on his face was calm and collected, the quiver in his eyes betrayed an uncanny thrill within him. He was more than pleased with the effects of the cradle. It felt so powerful, yet so stable. With the faintest thought he could probably tear Brandeis’ head from his shoulders, without effort or seconds. He wondered just how much pressure he would have to apply.

The unlucky sovereign gave a high shrill as his neck stretched, and there was a loud gushing pop. Blood streaked in the air. Everyone shrieked, unable to speak following the violent act. Saskia glanced at Shallemeign the madman, a blank glare in her eyes. She dare not show it, but her fear of him had suddenly reached an all-time high, as she realized very quickly that he could use that cradle against her at any moment.

Even Shallemeign himself was surprised, glancing down at the thing.

By the gods! he thought. How powerful is this little light? How powerful will I be if I can acquire all of them?

He looked over at Saskia. Blood was splattered on his face but he did not care. In fact he laughed, wild excitement running through him.

“You know,” he said. “I could possibly take the realms with just one of these.”

“Yes,” said Saskia. “But remember Shallemeign, you need all of them to survive the catastrophe that we are upon the eve of. How will we even know when we’ve found them all?”

“That’s something that the map will just have to tell us, now isn’t it?” he turned to one of his captains. “Summon the dactyls. Tell them to give word to put all villages on watch for a young woman from Tovien.” He then turned to the wheelman of the Valora. “Ready the ship.”

“My lord,” said one of his men that still held the last dozen survivors of the massacre hostage. “What about the rest of em’?”

“Well they are a part of the message as well of course...kill them.”

The survivors were all put to death, and before Shallemeign left the shores of the temple of incantations, he made sure his men stripped the building of any gold or relics, and then left a Stenetian flag beside the corpse of Brandeis. Had it been any other time in history, and Shallemeign would have to worry about the entire world uniting to overthrow him. But now was the perfect time...now, while the Leadership was crippled and the enchanted fountain had awakened to threaten everything known to man. It was only Shallemeign’s first week of conquest, and already he was the most powerful man in the world.



The Pathfinder

After riding for nearly half a day, Trulaine and his company stopped to set up their first camp. It was positioned close to the lake so that they and their horses could sip fresh water. As nightfall approached quickly, they all crept in the large tent with the exception of Brontius who crouched near the entrance, keeping watch over the horses. They had all eaten a quick meal of oats and with a side of corn; just a portion of the food Brontius had brought with him from the pantry before they left Centronus. Diner had been served and quickly eaten. Afterwards, they all watched their dishes in the lake so that they could be cleaned, dried, and used for later.

Trulaine sat in one of the corners of the tent, taking a moment for himself. He thought about their task and what it would mean not only to his city, but the rest of the world. They were on a quest to find things and people that many would be shocked to have even known existed. Whatever the vessel of light was, it would fix everything. All they had to do was retrieve it.

The night began to wind down. Golondred and Brontius had just finished having a quick laugh, Maurelan was sound asleep - her journey had begun before Trulaine even knew there would be one, and she probably had far less rest than everyone else in the past couple days. Alvantin was different from the rest of them. He sat quietly, polishing his staff. Like Brontius, he had a humble demeanor on the surface, but he barely ever spoke a word unless it was to point out specific landmarks or to suggest a change in direction. Trulaine did not know much about the shaman but he knew he would soon enough. There was no rush, and it was still early on their journey. There would be time to get better acquainted with everyone; Al-

vantin, Brontius, and Bernarsu, even the self-proclaimed, new regent of Tovien, Maurelan. He was more curious about the bodyguard-wielding girl who snuck into his room the other night, and created false commands to assemble his men without authorization. Then again, the situation had been urgent. There she was, balled up in a corner, snuggled in blankets. He wondered how well he could count on her and her bodyguard. If he gave a command, would they comply without hesitation? How well could he trust them? He was used to knowing his men well, that is part of what made him successful in most of his battles.

By now the small tent had fallen silent as the rest of Trulaine's company began to doze off. Soon Golondred's snoring had become so loud that Trulaine was worried that they might be found and held captive by some rogue tribe patrolling the grounds nearby. All that could be heard outside was the hard wind and the occasional grunts from the horses.

He leaned over to douse the flame they had used to keep light in the tent. A crack of thunder rolled through the sky, and as the rain began to fall, Trulaine quickly dozed off.

Trulaine woke in the middle of the night. The sound of rain was pounding hard outside. He took a long sigh, and glared up at the ceiling that wavered in the he wind. They would be lucky if the tent held through the night.

The rest of them were fast asleep, but right away he noticed that Maurelan was gone. Quickly, he rose to his feet, and dashed outside into the rain. He nearly tripped over Brontius who sat with his cloak over his head, still awake, keeping guard. Trulaine also noticed that he had rounded up the horses so that they would not get scared a bolt. They were resting beside him comfortably like children huddled to a father; sheltered beneath the great willow, its branches and leaves keeping them dry. Brontius glanced at Trulaine, pointing off in the direction behind him.

“She went over there,” he said with a smirk. “She’s a night cat alright, that’s for sure.”

Brontius had shown stunning reliability, even this late into the night. Apparently centaurs did not need to sleep as much as ordinary men did, because he did not even look tired. It was also obvious that centaurs also had special influence over horses. It was because of him that they rested so easily during the storm. Trulaine saluted him and walked off into the night. Within seconds, he was soaked. It was just a few hours before daybreak, so the rain mixed with the misty sky and bright moonlight created a gray haze that made it quite easy to see in the night. He saw her standing near the edge of the cliff. He walked up to her, and before he could question her, she had already spoken.

“Down there,” she said pointing at the plains below. “They are restless.”

With his eyes squinted, he leaned close to get a better look. Deep in the canyon, he could barely make out something moving in the darkness, and when the lightning struck, illuminating the sky, he could clearly see a small pack of wolves ruffling in the night. A faint howl rose into the air. Trulaine could not help but think that if there were wolves nearby, then werewolves were never too far away. He tried to put that thought in the back of his mind. He clearly had bad experiences with wolves, but she seemed so delighted by them, even here in the middle of nowhere, outside on the rainy night, where most young women her age would not dare roam. Trulaine could not help but notice a connection between her and the watery wilderness around them.

“I used to love nights like this in Tovien,” she said gazing out at the dark plains below. “I would come out in the rain and just gaze out at the ocean. Whether it be day or night, I could always tell where the earth was positioned in the cosmos.”

“How can you tell? Magic?”

“It’s the moon,” she said, pointing up at the full moon, which shone brightly through the trees. “And the stars, and the position the shadows take on the ground. My father used to tell me, that it’s our perspective alone on this planet that gives away its most valued secrets. He also believed that the key to immortality was dwelling somewhere in the stars.”

Even though her face was already soaked with rain, he could tell by her expression that she had been crying before he even showed up. Trulaine noticed that there was a soft side to her indeed.

“What happened?” he asked. “What happened in Tovien?”

She gave a rebellious sniff and a blank stare before answering. “Shallemeign happened, that’s what.”

It had been a long time since he had heard that name uttered anywhere outside of his own thoughts, but the sudden mention of it caught him off guard. “Shallemeign? He is the sworn enemy of Centronus and all the free world. I did not even know he had surfaced again after all these years.”

“Of course he has,” she said. “Who did you think has occupied the seas? Did you think that he would just give up the Stenetian throne after all these years? He burned our village to the ground, and I could do nothing but watch. The day before that, my father assigned me this task.”

“He nearly burned down Centronus once.”

“Really?”

“Yes, years ago in a great siege to overthrow our lands. It was in that battle, that I lost my beloved Ionna. Ever since that day I have made it one of my top vows to see him slain,” he paused, gazing purposefully into the night, before continuing. “I am sorry to hear about your village. Have you received any word on your father?”

After a pause and a deep sigh, she gave a sniff.

“I think this is what he is after,” she said, ignoring his question. She pulled the small pendant from around her neck and held it out for him to see. “That is why he is occupying the seas.”

“Do you think he knows about the fountain eruption?”

“I do not know. But it would seem coincidence if he does not. Why else would he make this move now, so soon after the incident? I think he is planning something, something that involves this map.”

“Why did you not tell me about this before?”

“Because I only just found out before we left. That’s why-“

“That’s why you prompted us to leave so soon.”

She paused, a sting of guilt poised on her face. “Yes.”

“Then why lie? Why did you tell me the pathfinder would soon be executed?”

“That was not a lie. The pathfinder will soon be executed for his crimes against humanity. I did not tell you about the map right away because I did not quite understand it myself. I thought that if I tried to explain it then, then you would not see the urgency. But the more I thought about it, the more I started to realize...this map shows the coordinates to something significant. Besides, my father told me only to trust you.”

“Why me?”

“Because you are the son of Trumandius. My father claims to have known him, back in the Coterie wars. Maybe you are the only one he trusts.”

Trulaine remained silent.

With the spell she learned in the Centronian archive, Maurelan unlocked the map, and the brilliant display of light leapt from the device, illuminating the darkness in front of them. It shone in the dark, through the night, frightening the wolves in the valley below. They darted back to their home retreat somewhere off in the wilderness.

“See,” she said, angling the light so that he could see the spheres drifting within. “These spheres respond to coordinates. They are all displayed here, but the details of these locations must be viewed one at a time. That is why the locations only show up individually. And look,” she said pointing to one coordinate that shimmered by itself. “When I first opened it yesterday morning, there was a sphere here. Then when I looked at it a few hours ago, it was gone. Which means, whatever these spheres are, one of them was stolen not long ago.”

Trulaine took a careful look at the spheres floating within the light; their separate hues, their odd shapes. Only the gods knew what these things were or how sa-

cred they were, and the fact that Shallemeign was in pursuit of them had made his stomach churn. Once again he was reminded of how much of threat magic had become to the world.

“Spells,” he said, half talking to himself. “Magic. Curses. They are the cause for man’s madness.”

“Yes,” she observed. “But if not for magic, how would anything work? It is something that we have become dependent on. Our life force is tied to it.”

“Perhaps that is the problem. All my life I have fought against curses. And now the greatest one threatens all of humanity. Hmm,” he began with a thoughtful gaze. “Perhaps we are the curse.”

“Some of us clearly are,” she said. “People like Shallemeign.”

“Well, we are thankful that we are not truly cursed like the spellbound races.”

“Sometimes I feel like I am cursed already.”

“We share this world, we all are. But if we cannot save it, then curses will be the least of our problems.”

She was a wise girl for her age. Perhaps she would prove more useful than he had already thought she was.

“Get some rest, Maurelan,” he said. “We will leave in a few of hours, after dawn.”

The two of them made their way back into the tent, Maurelan taking her little spot near the corner, and Trulaine taking his place near the fire, which had died down to a crackle. He threw a few more logs of woods in to stir the flame, for the winds were chilly and Trulaine could not afford for anyone in his company to catch a sickness.

Trulaine closed his eyes, and his mind wandered thoughtfully in the darkness. The tumultuous thunder outside mimicking what was on his mind, its slow violence reflecting his hidden demeanor. They were now on the run from the very man who had murdered his wife. Would revenge become one of the hidden prizes to come out of this journey? He would like to think so. But Shallemeign had an

army at his command. They would not survive an encounter from the likes of him with only six men.

Maurelan said that Nelo considered him the true heir to the Centronian throne. How was he supposed to feel about that? And what exactly did that mean? Although Trulaine was the son of the first Centronian king, his uncle had inherited the throne. But he was hero of the realm. He bore the name of his father. It was he who had won the hearts and imaginations of the Centronian people, and it was he who upheld the legendary reverer of Centronus. It was not a total surprise that the great psychic, Nelo had deemed him in such high esteem. Could he lead his company successfully into WinDarrow? There were so many obstacles to overcome: avoiding Shallemeign, interrogating the pathfinder, saving the world. But he had plenty of time to think about all that later. Right now he needed rest.

It stressed him to even close his eyes; because he knew as soon as he dozed off he would have the same nightmares over again. It made him hate sleep. But sleep he did, nonetheless. And that night, for the third time since his battle with the werewolves he had horrible nightmares: nightmare of Isis, dying over and over again.

The next morning, they all made a quick hunt, ate hearty, and were on their way, heading east. The horses had been well rested and appeared full of vigor and energy. A few hours into the ride and they had approached the border of Tovien where the open grassy field met the forest. Trulaine gave a hand signal and the seven of them halted. Maurelan moved toward the edge and peered into the set of trees.

“We are about to enter the realm of Torund,” she said, turning to Trulaine and nodding to Brontius. The centaur looked at her in wonder.

“What is it?” Trulaine asked.

“If the centaur comes with us, there may be a problem.”

“Brontius stays with us,” Golondred spoke up defensively. “All of us.”

“She is right,” said Alvantin. “This land does not take kindly to those who are cursed. They believe it is evil. The centaur must stay until we return, or else we may all find ourselves imprisoned here.”

They all glanced over at Trulaine who was about to decline and suggest Brontius come with them, but the centaur stepped forward and spoke for himself.

“I will stay. Such was my vow before we even departed on this quest. Besides,” he said, catching a glimpse of few birds soaring and chirping through the air. He smiled. “I have always loved the forest.”

“Alright,” said Trulaine. “But keep a lookout for anything suspicious, and uh... feel free to find the exits around this village if you feel like taking a stroll. We may be gone for a while.”

“And what if you do not come out at all?”

“Well why wouldn’t we come out?” asked Golondred, perplexed. “How long are we expected to stay...days...weeks? We’re just going to question the lad, right?”

“Calm down, Golondred,” said Trulaine. “Its just precaution.”

“Not that anything fatal is intended to happen,” Brontius exclaimed. “But...we centaurs tend to cover all possibilities before moving on. Even dire ones.”

“We’ll be fine,” Maurelan said, walking off ahead of them.

“We shall return,” said Trulaine as the rest Bernarsu, Golondred, and Alvantin followed behind her. “And if something does go wrong, find us.”

With that, Trulaine reluctantly walked off, leaving the centaur behind them in the woods.

It was not long before they approached a great, stonewall that stretched for miles along the border. Every hundred yards or so, there were entryways where foreign travelers could pass into the land of Tovien. As they entered one of them, they could see that the village was not well fortified. There were no guards to stop

and check them. Few people were even seen inside the great wall, and those who were seen walking were mostly old men and homeless beggars who paid them no attention. Slaves toiled and carried large baskets of fruit. There were no women or children seen among them.

“So this is Torund,” said Golondred. “Not much to look at.”

“It never was,” said Maurelan, passing him by on her steed.

“Torund is a prison land,” Alvantin added, looking around at a series of crumbled buildings to the far right of them. “Not much more.”

They proceeded on with Maurelan leading since she seemed to be more familiar with the place. As they went deeper into the village, it had slowly become more populated. Trulaine noticed most of the people staring at them, while others looked completely shocked. He wondered. If they were receiving such ghastly expressions, then what kind of looks would they have gotten if Brontius were had entered with them? As they traveled deeper into Torund, arriving at a large, stone temple, which stood several, stories high. In front of the door there were two guards. Trulaine could not help but wonder where the rest of their guards were.

“Hold,” said the first guard, stopping them. “What business do you have here?”

“We are here by order of the Centronian king,” Trulaine said boldly. “You hold a prisoner here. We wish to speak with him.”

“All orders must be seen by our headmaster first,” the same guard said. “You and only one other may enter. The rest must wait here.”

“What?” Golondred sneered, astonished. His horse shifting and startled by his reaction. He turned to his captain who simply raised one hand.

“Very well,” said Trulaine, stepping forward, glancing at Maurelan. “You’re coming with me.” She nodded obediently, already knowing that if any of them knew anything about the prisoner, it was her.

“You must leave your weapons,” said the second guard. “You will get them back when you are finished.”

Trulaine loosened the buckles to his sheath, and handed over his sword willingly. The news however, did not seem to sit too well with Maurelan, for she grunted. Tugging the handle on her back, she pulled a lengthy, eight-tonged whip slipped out of its coil, cracking loudly in the air.

“Careful with this,” she said, tossing the whip to the second guard who caught it clumsily. The first guard then proceeded to open the door behind them. Maurelan entered, and Trulaine stepped forward, looking back at his crew.

“Don’t worry,” Golondred said while smirking. “We’ll get familiar with the locals.”

Trulaine and Maurelan disappeared through the entrance. The guards led them underground into a fortified pit, lit by a multitude of candles; the wax splashing to the floor gave the place a wet, dreary feeling. When they came closer to the edge of light, Trulaine could see that floor was littered scummy-looking prisoners, all shackled together and sitting in rows on the filthy, stone floor.

“This way,” one of the guards called over his shoulder, attempting to distract their gaze. They entered a room toward the left corridor, where an old man moved in the dimness.

“My lord,” said the guard. “We have some visitors.”

Suddenly the old man raised his hand and a bright, green light shot out from his palm, illuminating the room. The old man, now visible with many wrinkles in his face, took a close glimpse at them both and then leaned back against the dirty wall.

“And who might you be?” he said, gazing at them with a wide eye.

“I am Trulaine of the Centronian brigade,” said Trulaine introducing himself boldly, cutting off the guard. “And this is my aide, Maurelan.”

“Bah!” the old man snarled. “In Torund we are no lovers of Cathedeus and his undying vanity. What is it that you want?”

Trulaine paused, caught off guard by the prospector’s rudeness. Trulaine had never visited Torund before, but as far as he was concerned, it was a part of the

Centronian province, and therefore had sworn allegiance centuries ago. His response was odd and a bit uncouth, but not entirely surprising. It was just another reminder of how Trumandius' legacy had caused more enemies than it should have for all the good he had done.

“You have a prisoner here by the name of Philistian. I wish to-“

“Philistian?” he said, leaning forward, caught by surprise. “That wretched assassin? The pathfinder?”

“Uh, yes,” Trulaine said, squinting. “Is there a problem?”

“No. Well...I assume there is no coincidence then. You, arriving on the eve of his execution...”

“There is no coincidence. That is why we are here. And with your permission, we wish to question him now, before he is put to death.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Also,” Trulaine added, reaching into his side pouch, revealing a gold coin. “I have a small crew outside. We may need accommodation.” He tossed the old man the coin; it gleamed and whistled in the air as he caught it. His eyes brightened in the dimly lit room as he looked down at what was in his hand.

“I see,” perked the old man, gesturing to the guard. There was a brief pause and suddenly he yelled at the young man. “Well, you heard the man! Go on then, you worthless bastard!” The guard took off, jogging amateurishly through the corridor; the old man still shouting, his words echoing off the walls. “Give them one of our grand huts! And open the wine hall for them!”

“Good,” he said, turning back to Trulaine, giving him a new, humble look. “Now then...you may pass into the dungeons to question the prisoner, but be hasty, or the executioners will give me trouble about it.” He gave a quick chuckle.

“Thank you,” said Trulaine, turning to exit the room.

“Oh...and by the way,” the old man stopped him with a pat on the back and a warm handshake. “I am Erebus, the keeper of Torund.”

“Erebus...where is your army?”

“Army? Ha!” Erebus chuckled. “Torund needs no army. Nor do we need magical enchantment.”

“No army? Who is to protect these lands if there is an invasion? You have women here. Children and-“

“No one will go to war with us. You see...we are protected by the Stenetians.”

Trulaine looked down to the ground, silently shocked. It appeared to him that Shallemeign was already nearly finished with the conquest that no one imagined he would ever have the power to accomplish. And it was just beginning. How far would it go? Far enough to take hold of Centronus? And with the world ending, would it even matter?

Trulaine did not want to appear suspicious or alarmed in front of Erebus, so he did not mention the name Shallemeign at all. And he was pleased that Maurelan did the same. She kept her mouth shut, just as he hoped she would.

“Well,” he said, giving a quick bow and a gracious smile. “Erebus, keeper of Tovien, we shall be quick.”

“Yes. Oh, and good luck questioning that filth. He is a stubborn one, that man.”

With that, they began heading down the dungeons with the remaining guard to guide them, leaving Erebus to soak in his chamber.

Torund was signed into the jurisdiction of Centronus, not the Stenetian warlord. The fact that warlord and his Stenetians were starting to be mentioned all over the place had him thinking, almost worried at this point. How powerful had Shallemeign become? Regardless, Trulaine could not afford to worry about that now. He had to focus on the prisoner. A man so close to execution had nothing to gain, and if they did not play their cards right, they would get no information out of him at all.

They made their way through the dark dungeon. It was a filthy place full of rats scurrying in the dim light. There were no windows. Flaming candles, their

stretched shadows dancing against the wall, dimly lighted the place. The floor was wet, either from the rain dripping in through cracks in the roof or from urine, the fresh smell of which permeated the air. In the cells to their right there were mixed cries from the prisoners. Some were old and feeble groans, and some were loud psychotic screams.

In the dark, Trulaine glanced around cautiously.

He was not used to seeing prisons, because in Centronus there were none; the people were too humble, and the wicked usually died in battle. There was only discipline against the misuse of magic. But he was far from home. This prison was uncivilized and unruly. From what Trulaine could see, Torund had harbored poor governing tactics to deal with its public disturbances.

“Here,” said the guard, stopping near one of the cells. “You have five minutes.” With that, he walked off in the direction they had come.

Trulaine and Maurelan stood there in the dim light, gazing at the silhouette on the other side of the bars.

“Are you the pathfinder?” he asked sternly. “The one they call Philistian?”

The sitting figure looked up at him, staring back into the darkness for a long, cold moment. Trulaine tried to make out his face, but all he could see was a head, full of shaggy hair, and deep shadows where his eyes were. Trulaine pulled the chain switch dangling above and a small flame ignited in the chamber so he could see the man inside. Surprisingly, it was a young man; apparently stubborn, and unresponsive. Maurelan looked up at Trulaine as the prisoner finally answered.

“You are looking for a man named Philistian...”

“Yes.”

There was a pause.

“He died a long time ago...along with that name.”

“Well, I was told that he lives, and that he is held captive in this prison. I was told that you are him.”

“Your sources were wrong.”

“I am the high general of the Centronian army. My sources are never wrong.”

“Don’t be so sure,” the prisoner chuckled. “Besides, I don’t believe in any word spoken from the mouth of a Centronian pig.”

Maurelan stepped forward as if to speak but Trulaine stopped her with his hand before she could make a sound. There was a short pause and the prisoner spoke again.

“If it means anything special to you...yes, I am Philistian, the man who was the pathfinder. Satisfied?” He stood, slowly making his way toward the bars. “So, either you and your lady servant are here to torment me on my last day in this wretched hole, or you are an illusion sent from hell, here to remind me of where I am going.”

“We need your help to find the land of WinDarrow.”

Philistian chuckled.

“It is foolish to travel to WinDarrow. The path is treacherous. You would die before you even arrive there.”

“The fountain of enchantment has erupted, and the journey must be made.”

“You think I care?”

“Even if you do die tomorrow, would it not be better to know that you redeemed yourself in the eyes of your peers.”

“But that’s just the thing, Centronian,” he said with a smile. “I am dying tomorrow. And it was your so-called free world that put me here. So if the survival of this world suddenly happens to fall on whether or not one lowly prisoner help you find WinDarrow, then my death has just become the sweetest death of any man. I do not want to help you. And even if I did, I wouldn’t, just on principal alone.”

Already, Trulaine realized that Philistian would not cooperate or care about what happened, no matter how diplomatic he was. Erebus was right; this man was

a stubborn beyond measure. Trulaine had to switch tactics, keep him talking, do anything he could to appeal to whatever humanity this man may have had left in him. He had to try a different approach.

“What were you put in here for?” asked Trulaine, more curious than anything else.

“They accused me of killing a king.”

“Which king?”

“A king of air of course. I was wrongly convicted. I am innocent, but I doubt that it matters.”

“I am a member of the royal council, and I have the power to set you free...if you cooperate.”

There was an awkward pause, and Maurelan looked over at Trulaine, shocked, trying to hide her surprised expression.

“Humorous,” said Philistian with a smile. “You mock me?”

“No. I am serious. We must make it to WinDarrow as soon as possible, to put an end to the fountain’s destructive forces that threaten the existence of every living thing on this planet. That may not be much of a constellation to you right now, but hopefully I can change that.”

“Erebus is the keeper of this land and he will not have it. He would have your head on a spike in an instant for freeing me.”

“Not to a lackey of the Centronian army, I doubt it.”

“That no longer matters. He doesn’t answer to the king anymore. What happens in Torund is not up to your people. But, as a general, I am sure you already know that. You would not be willing to risk your own lives in order to free me, unless you really are as dimwitted as I thought you were when you first walked in here.”

“Then consider yourself lucky.”

“I do not have much use for luck anymore. I am a prisoner.” Philistian looked to the side scornfully. “And I don’t seek refuge with Centronians. Leave me.”

“You are a prisoner, which means you do not have the luxury of requests...”

“Then how can any be made of me?”

“This is much bigger than your ego.”

Philistian looked him in the eye, cold and blue. “No ego here, you see?” He lifted the shackles around his wrists. “I do not care for the world or for glory. Leave me here to die.”

“But-“

“Guard!” Philistian shouted.

He simply would not be bribed. All Trulaine could do was stare at him through the bars as the big, creaking door swung open on the other side of the chamber. The guard did not walk down the hall, but stood there just waiting for Trulaine and Maurelan to exit the chamber.

Reluctantly, Trulaine walked off, Maurelan following close behind him.

“Well, that didn’t go so well,” said Maurelan in a low voice.

“Shut up,” was Trulaine’s only response.

Philistian was even more uncooperative that Trulaine had originally expected him to be. Trulaine had to think of something, and they couldn’t leave Torund until they did.

The hut that had been accommodated for them was spacious. It was one of their largest huts, complete with cabinets, beds, and a large table in the center of the room. Out of Trulaine’s company, Golondred seemed to enjoy it the most. He had stolen as much wheat loaves from the wine hall’s bakery as he could possibly stuff into his satchel.

Torund was not only a village with a prison and a somewhat pliable economy, it was also known for renting rooms to wayward travelers. Yes, their accommodations were gracious indeed, but the meager wonders of Torund were far from the forefront of Trulaine's mind. He did not know what to do, or what actions to take if he did not have a guide to WinDarrow. There was not much he could do without a guide. If they continued on, then they would easily get lost or killed, and going back so soon only made Trulaine feel like he had given up, and sooner than he ever imagined he would. The thought alone was absurd.

Although this was by no means a leisurely mission, he wanted to give his company as much freedom as he could afford them, and explore they did. Alvantin was currently out exploring the grounds. Bernarsu had left earlier with Maurelan, but since then, he had come back, alone. Brontius had been left in the wilderness to do god knows what for god knew how long. Trulaine was pacing, Golondred had just finished the last of a series of pastries, and Bernarsu was sitting on a stool in the corner, polishing his knife.

Alvantin walked in.

“Interesting,” he said to the trio of men. “I have spent some time among the locals, trying to learn what I can from them. Apparently, the majority of them worship the Stenetian warlord as a god.”

“Interesting?” asked Golondred. “More like foolish. This is a breeding ground for mindless sellouts. Don't they know that the real gods' bestowed magic upon the earth long before Shallemeign's very first ancestor was even born, before the air that vile men breathe was ever even created? A people should know right from wrong.”

“It doesn't matter here,” said Trulaine. “They look up to Shallemeign...like a hero.”

“Well, it stinks to high noon, all of it. I say we get the hell out of here and rethink this again.”

“There is no other way,” Bernarsu interjected, sitting in the corner sharpening one of his blades.

“And what would a thief know?” Golondred raised his voice in confrontation. Trulaine pushed him back, while Bernarsu continued sharpening his knife, nonchalant and emotionally unaffected.

Trulaine could not blame Golondred entirely for not particularly liking Bernarsu. He and Maurelan had come out of nowhere, somehow inserting themselves into the conflict. And Golondred was already a hothead as it was. Besides, it was probably just the ale talking for him anyway.

“We are faced with a dilemma,” said Alvantin.

“No shit,” said Golondred.

“What will we do?”

“We will wait,” declared Trulaine. “We will wait until the executioner arrives, then we will question the pathfinder again. Perhaps by then he will change his mind about helping us.”

With that, he sat down on the bed, leaning back. If he were at ease, then perhaps the rest of them would be. Nothing had happened, yet tension was high. Waiting until dawn seemed like a decent plan, but he knew deep down that the pathfinder would refuse his offer. Then there was the offer itself. How could he guarantee that he had the jurisdiction to order the release of a known killer...even worse, an assassin? Of course, he could go beyond authority and spring Philistian free himself, but just the fact that he had even flirted with considering such a thing made his stomach churn. He couldn't spring the pathfinder free, even if he was tempted to; it was just too risky. A risk he could not afford to take.



Prison Break

Philistian sat on the floor of his filthy cell.

He had not a single friend in the entire world, and now he had to reserve his strength for his escape. He would have to kill all of his captors before they walked him into the public courtyard for execution. The thought of escaping put a smirk on his face, as it appeared to be the last thing he would look forward to in the foreseeable future...getting his freedom back. Of course it would have been easier to take up the Centronian's offer earlier, but that would not suffice. If he broke free this time, he would do it on his own, and owe no debt to any man. Then, and only then would he be able to exact his revenge.

Just then, he heard a faint crash somewhere near the end of the chamber coming from outside. He perked up in the darkness, listening intently, knowing full well that the only sound coming from outside should have been that of the falling rain. From the far wall near the last cell, he saw something moving. Unless his eyes had deceived him and he was losing his mind, it almost looked like a faint light, dancing in the shape of a silhouette. As bizarre as it appeared, he knew he was seeing the act of magic happening before his eyes. He had the ears of a fox in its prime, and he could hear a pin fall from a kilometer away, but he could barely make out the sound of quick, skillful steps pacing inside the chamber.

“Show yourself!” he shouted. “I know the tricks of magic. You aren't fooling anyone.”

The footsteps suddenly stopped and complete silence filled the chamber once again. Philistian looked around keenly, a slight smirk over his lips...he could smell a woman's scent. It was a familiar scent.

"Show yourself," he warned again. "Or I'll let everyone know that Torund hides an intruder."

"Then you will condemn us both to death," a voice called back.

"What?" he gazed forward, perplexed. In the darkness, he could hardly make out the shape of a cheek, and in seconds a woman's head appeared, but there was no body attached. Baffled for a moment, he couldn't help but notice her face. It was the same woman who had come with Trulaine hours earlier, the last woman he was sure to ever see.

"Ah," he said. "Invisibility...so you are a light mage."

She nodded, and Philistian smirked, crossing his arms.

"Just as I suspected. You and your master are not what you appear."

"He is not my master," she said. "But like he said before...we need your help."

Suddenly, a bright flash of light shot between them, and the steel locks on the cell exploded. Philistian stepped back as the door swung open.

"Come," she said. "Make haste. We do not have much time."

Just then, far down the hall, one of the guards walked into the chamber with a sword in one hand and a lit candle in the other. Apparently he had heard the hushed conversation between them.

"What's going on in here?" he mumbled to himself unsure if he had even heard anything at all. He held up the candle, and squinting his eyes, he was shocked by what he saw. He immediately grabbed the bell near the wall and rang it loudly. "Prisoner escape!!"

It would be mere seconds before every guard in Tovien came raining down on them with blades. Maurelan vanished completely and the shackles around Phil-

istian's ankles exploded. He shouted in pain, but quickly stepped out of the cell, only to see nearly a dozen men rushing after him.

"You're going to get me killed," he said.

"You were a dead man anyway," her voice called back.

Philistian prepared himself. His original plan of escape had now been tossed aside by an unlikely circumstance, and it was now beyond his control. But with or without anyone fighting by his side, armed or unarmed, he was ready for anything.

The sharp crack of a whip sizzled through the air, and an unseen force devastated the guards, knocking half of them to the ground. They all froze, looking around in fear and awe; some tried to stand but were too bruised to even move. The guard closest to the exit gazed at Philistian in disbelief, dropping the candle, terrified.

"Demons," he said, trembling. "The prisoner has conjured demons to destroy us!" He ran out of the chamber, screaming, but was replaced by more guards. They rushed in by the dozens, wielding knives, swords, and maces. However, they could not contend with what they could not see. Philistian was now in a position where he could easily use the guards' own fear against them. Even without the help of his rescuer or a weapon, he favored the odds before him.

Erebus was awakened by one of his men. The guard's face was sweaty...his voice, hysterical. "My lord...one of the prisoners is escaping! It's the assassin, Philistian!"

"What?" shouted the old man, sitting up from his bed – the only cozy bed the prison had ever seen – rather quickly for his age. He leaned forward motionless as if listening closely. The sound of bodies thrashing against the wall was almost immediately apparent. Erebus jumped up and grabbed his sword off the wall. It was an elegant sword; one that he had acquired years ago as a prize for his efforts in bringing criminals to justice, one that was not particularly made for combat, but a

sword that could slice a man's head off with much skill and little effort. A jeweled sword that he felt ashamed just pulling it off the wall.

“Set the traps outside! Secure the entire village! No one is to leave this place!” The guard nodded obediently and darted out the door to make his way outside. Erebus paced down the hallway toward the chamber of inmates - where he had already begun to hear them chanting in glory – in an attempt to enact order in his prison. He could not believe that this was even happening, and it angered him to the core. He was trusted to uphold this prison, and any outrageous incident like this would suffer his reputation greatly. Beneath his fear, he predicted humiliation. He would lose everything if any of his prisoners escaped, especially such a prized captive as Philistian, and on the eve of his execution. This was not good by a long shot.

He proceeded down the chamber where a large number of his guards stood; some of them waving their swords in the air attentively like blind men, while others were still lying on the floor, cowering in fear. Philistian stood in the darkness, appearing to exhume an untouchable confidence.

“What is the matter?” Erebus shouted to the head guard beside him. “It’s just a man.”

“He seems to have conjured demons to defeat us, sir,” said the guard. “The men will not go near him.”

“Demons?” Erebus snickered absurdly. He couldn’t believe the nonsense he was hearing. These were simple-minded men who lived simple lives. They did not understand the multitude of marvels that magic offered, but from the looks of it, the rebellious pathfinder standing his ground before them obviously did. Erebus surely felt regret for not boosting his security earlier; he should have known better.

“Philistian!” he shouted, pacing carefully through his men, keeping an eye on the lone figure in the distance. “You’ll never make it out of here. Just go back to your cell and accept your fate like the rest.”

“My fate?” exclaimed Philistian. “Do you really think I would hand my fate over to you, Erebus? Your guards are too pathetic to stop me.” With that, he be-

gan to approach them; weaponless and armed only with a deviant smile. The guards inched back, swords shaking in their trembling hands, knees buckling nervously.

“What are you waiting for?” Philistian called. “Come and get me.”

“Wait,” said Erebus, refusing to fall for whatever goad Philistian was trying to enact.

The old man threw his hand into the air, and a bright flash of light illuminated the entire chamber. A droning shock wave of energy surged toward Philistian, and before it could reach him, a feminine outline appeared for just a brief moment, and then disappeared. The shock wave harmlessly dissipated in front of Philistian, but the entire demeanor in the room shifted. Erebus was indeed shocked, but not because of what he saw, but because he recognized the figure. He did not need to see her face. It was her long, flowing hair that gave away her identity, for he noticed her right away. A new anger boiled within him.

“No demons...” Erebus repeated with a vengeful smirk. “Just magical enchantments. He has an ally. Kill them both.”

Suddenly his men exhibited a new found confidence. Although they could not see their attacker, they were no longer afraid. Some of them smirked and chuckled, finding it amusing how they had been fooled. As they inched forward - weapons redrawn - the head guard spoke softly. “Rush him.”

They all rushed forward, somewhat huddled to the side of the cells as the chamber was an already a narrow fit. Sure enough, they were struck again by Maurélan’s invisible attack, but several had managed to dart by, unharmed. The first guard lunged forward with his blade aimed for Philistian's heart. He sidestepped the attack; he grabbed the hilt of the sword, flipping over the man, snapping his wrist, and tossing him hard into the wall. The next guard was impaled before he could even make a move. The third, which was a slightly better swordsman than the last two, found himself fighting for his life quicker than expected. Metal clang against metal, and the guard was easily overtaken as Philistian decapitated him.

Erebus' remaining guards were all astonished by Philistian's skill. It had struck even more fear in them than when they were deceived into believing that he had summoned demons to attack them. Six of the guards were still struggling with their unseen attacker, trying to find where Maurelan was. Some of them swung their weapons aimlessly like blind men while others lunged toward the ground, only to crash and be assaulted by unseen strikes. This was quickly turning into a disaster. The head guard was smart enough to see that the assailants could not be stopped. It shocked him how fast the tables had turned.

"Come, my lord!" he shouted, grabbing Erebus' arm, escaping in retreat while the battle continued behind them. They quickly made it back to Erebus' chamber.

"The reinforcements should be here soon," the guard instructed, rushing out, barricading the old man inside. Already Erebus was out of breath from the shirt sprint, and fearful for his life. Sure reinforcements would arrive, but the fugitive would be gone by then and there would only be a handful of dead bodies left on his debt.

Erebus stood there in the middle of the room silent, practically holding his breath in fearful anticipation, listening for what lurked outside his doors. He heard the crashes continuing to thump through the halls, and suddenly everything was quiet. There was a brief pause, and suddenly the doors were kicked open, slamming hard against the wall with a deafening crash. Erebus jumped in a panic. Philistian stood in the doorway with rage in his eyes and blood on his smirking face. Two swords were now clutched in each hand – swords that he had taken off the guards he had already killed; both were also dripping with blood. The rogue pathfinder stepped into the room with an unexpected calmness.

"Good evening Erebus," he said sarcastically. "Lovely day for an execution, wouldn't you say?"

Erebus screamed timidly, and before he knew it, Philistian had practically pounced on the old man, pinning him against the desk. He sunk a forearm deep into Erebus' throat, choking him, and the old man gagged.

"Give me one good reason why I should spare you."

Philistian held the tip of his blade close to his former captor's face, letting the blood drip into his eyes. The old man shrieked helplessly, but there was nothing he could do. Philistian was now in control. Posted high up in the middle of the wall were two large, beautiful swords. They were decorated with rare, colorful gemstones, and near the center was the symbol of a crested shield. The fact that Erebus eyed the swords, meant that they had some sentimental value to him; perhaps they were a gift from his superiors that he had earned for capturing fugitives. Perhaps they once belonged to one of them, a great warrior wrongly accused and executed years ago. Maybe Philistian - a prisoner himself - would enact his own brand of justice for its previous owner by taking the swords back into nomadic freedom.

"Hmm," said Philistian, tilting his head. He shoved both of the swords into the desk near Erebus' head. When the old man jumped up in fear, he was met with a swift kick to the face, and the back of his head thudded hard against the desk. This time a dirty foot was shoved into his throat.

"Not so fast," Philistian said, taking the new swords off the wall and holding them in front of him.

"Are you going to kill me?" Erebus asked, frightened, yet still managing to uphold a tone of anger. "You won't get away with this!"

"I'm not going to kill you, old man. Someone must survive to tell the tale, and to send a message to your beloved warlord."

"W-what?" asked Erebus, dumbfounded. "What warlord?"

"Shallemeign," he said, shoving his foot deeper into his throat. "Tell him that I will have my revenge."

"Revenge for what?" Erebus continued to struggle, trying his very best to keep from gagging under the pressure of Philistian's heel. "You're a criminal! I would have never condemned an innocent man."

"But you did!" Philistian shouted in anger, the pressure increasing on Erebus' throat. "You are just as much of a devil as the warlord, and you do his bidding

without question because he stuffs your pockets with filthy, Stenetian coins. You are a disgrace in the name of justice, and you shall bear the mark.”

He leaned over, pointing the tip of the blade that jutted out from the top of the spear and carefully carved an X into Erebus’ left cheek. The old man cried in agony as if he were being stabbed. As he screamed, Philistian gave a slight smirk while backing out of the chamber, and in an instant, he was gone. It took a moment for Erebus to come to his senses and realize how fortunate he was to still be alive. He sat up, wiping the blood from his cheek; a disgusted look stamped on his face. After all that had taken place, the chamber was now silent, except for the alarms blaring outside. A single tear fell from his eye, and he sat still, trembling in a state of disbelief.

It wasn’t long before the reinforcements arrived; another handful of guards armed and ready for battle. But instead of arriving with Philistian captured, they were empty handed.

“My lord,” said the head guard. “The border traps are set.”

“Did you see the prisoner?” said Erebus frightfully. When the guards paused, he became hysterical. “Where is he?!”

“We did not see him,” one of them said, trembling in fear. “But it does not matter. He will never get pass the traps we’ve-“

Erebus slapped the man and a tooth flew out of his mouth.

“NO!!” He bellowed, stomping his feet and knocking all his precious trophies off the wall. Everything came crashing down with a clamor. The guards jumped back cautiously to avoid falling objects. After a moment of hard breathing, he took a deep breath to calm himself. His next command was straightforward. “Find the bitch who helped him escape. Bring me her head.”



Fugitives

Maurelan had made her way through the village completely undetected, and still invisible. The alarms had been ringing in a constant blare for roughly five minutes and all of Tovien was now astir. People ran out of their huts in speculation to what all the commotion was about, but there was no commotion that could be seen except for Erebus yelling in the distance. She had made it back to the vicinity of Trulaine's hut. She knew that he and the others would be wide-awake when she got back. However, she hoped, even prayed that no one would question her...especially Trulaine.

She approached the hut, peering cautiously around the corner, and with a mere thought of volitional will, she was visible once more. Quickly, she stepped around the corner and walked through the entrance. To no surprise, they were all awake. Trulaine and Alvantin stood peering through the straw walls of the hut to see what was happening outside. Golondred was still snoring, fast asleep, and Bernarsu sat in the middle of the hut, Indian-style. His eyes were fixed on Maurelan, and she could tell that he already knew she had somehow been responsible for this. She walked past him, giving a slick nod that went unnoticed by the others.

“Maurelan,” Trulaine said, now facing her. “Where have you been?”

“Outside,” she said nervously. “I was speaking to the locals.”

“And what have you learned?”

She paused. “Word has gone around that one of the prisoners escaped.”

Before Trulaine could even respond, the entrance door was kicked in violently. They all turned in surprise to see who was on the other end. Golondred jumped out of his sleep, blinking hard and shaking his head.

“What is going on?” he asked, bewildered.

A large group of armed guards stormed in, followed by Erebus; his eyes fiery with anger. He pointed straight at Maurelan and shouted. “Get her!”

Before the guards could respond, Bernarsu sprang to his feet, producing his huge pair of twin blades from sheaths on the side of each leg. “You will not touch her!”

“Blasphemers?!” Erebus exclaimed, immediately turning to his men. “Arrest them all!”

“On what charge?” Trulaine interjected with a hand on the hilt of his sword.

“You are all accomplices of the pathfinder, a condemned man! And she helped him escape!” Erebus pointed to Maurelan with conviction.

Trulaine didn’t say a word. He just continued to stare at Erebus.

“You are all criminals,” he accused. “And you... Trulaine of Centronius, son of Trumandius. I thought a man of your reputation would have some shred of honor...some dignity. But now I see that your honor is merely a disguise.”

Trulaine and Erebus were now standing face to face. He stared the keeper of Torund in the eyes as if testing the man’s steeliness. Trulaine’s gaze was almost magical and the entire demeanor of the hut suddenly became deathly silent before he spoke again. “We are all high members of the royal guard. To detain us would be considered treason to the throne of Centronus. If you wish us to leave, so be it, but she comes with us.”

Erebus chuckled again, retreating behind his men in a slick fashion. “I don’t think you understand Centronian. Someone must answer for these crimes, not only for freeing a dangerous fugitive, but also for killing my men.”

“We have all killed men,” Trulaine said casually.

“Not on my land!” Erebus raged, gesturing to his men. “Take the woman to the dungeons. Kill whoever resists!”

Everyone drew swords, and Maurelan released her thunderous, five-thronged whip. Soon there was a great clash and the entire room came alive with violence. Weapons clanged and kicks were delivered swiftly. Erebus stood far back, watching helplessly, and it quickly occurred to him that while his men had the advantage in number, they were not the better swordsmen. The skill of Trulaine and his band had become more and more evident with every passing second.

“Release the tigers!” Erebus shouted to a pair of guards. “And make sure no one is outside! Go, now!!” The two guards ran off, and Erebus paused before taking off right behind them.

Meanwhile, the mayhem inside raged on until the hut itself was slowly being reduced to a lopsided bag of hay. Trulaine fought his way through the great number of guards, none of which proved to be a match for him. He tried to spare as many lives as he could, but they seemed almost intent on killing him.

The strife calmed a bit, as the guards took a moment to regain their grip on a losing battle. Four of them surrounded Trulaine and six of them lay scattered on the ground, either unconscious or writhing in pain as they picked up severed limbs.

“That’s their leader,” said one of the approaching guards, bragging to one of his younger comrades. He whispered something briefly to the man and then turned his gaze back at Trulaine with greedy eyes, as if he would walk away from this battle with a rare trophy. Trulaine knew that the man was looking for a challenge, and at this point he would die for it. The guard raised his sword as if to strike and jerked his arms in an attempt to mislead Trulaine. At the same time, the younger guard swung his blade, hoping to lop off Trulaine’s head, but his attack was deflected. Trulaine countered with a hard punch to the face, and a kick, knocking the young man off his feet. Before the other guard could react, he was sliced through the gut. As he crashed to the ground, the neck had already seized the next guard.

“Move an inch and you’re a dead man,” Trulaine said, pointing the tip of his sword to the side of his face. He glanced over his shoulder to see Golondred slicing through men with ease and he was surprised to see Maurelan holding her own. Five guards inched closer, attempting box her into a corner.

“Stay back,” she warned, moving carefully; her whip clenched tightly in her hands, its tendrils curled over the floor like a pack of wild snakes laying over each other ready to strike. Whether Maurelan was invisible or not, they should have already known what she was capable of. Still, they proceeded to rush her. She raised her arm, spinning her whip in a counter-clockwise motion; it soared straight up into the air where it locked vertically into a massive braid. Then she spun it downward in the opposite direction. In an instant the tendrils unraveled, striking each man so hard that most of them soared through the air. One of them crashed right through the large dining table, causing everyone in the hut to glance over at the commotion.

“I’ll handle the little lady,” said a huge, towering guard with a deep voice. “Try whippin’ me with that thing.”

With lightning fast reflexes she sprang into action, sweeping him with ease; his large body crashing to the floor. Before he could fully regain his footing, she was all over him with a flurry of kicks and punches, each one connected but he showed no signs pain. Pulling out her diamond dagger, she deftly avoided his one of his broadswords, managing to slice him up in between the scuffle where sparks flew as his easily deflected her weapon. She stepped back watching him gasp for air; his trembling hands covered a large gash over his throat. Blood dribbled through his fingers, and he cursed her while stumbling for a moment. Surprisingly, he continued to approach her, when a pair of fists suddenly pounded him, and Bernarsu stood over the dying brute. Bernarsu smirked at her and she smiled back graciously.

The rest of them were now deep in battle. Golondred had managed to grab his sword, and had already sliced up two men. Meanwhile, Trulaine was still fighting off a group of guards as they continued to rush in one by one. Alvantin had al-

ready whipped several magical enchantments to slow down his attackers, but there were too many of them, and soon Trulaine's company would be overrun.

"Alvantin!" he called over his shoulder at the shaman. "Get us out of here!"

"When..." he said, struggling to avoid being stabbed; his voice high and raspy. "...when I am free!"

Feeling somewhat frustrated, Trulaine snapped the arm of the man he had been forced to strangle. The guard was thrown to the ground violently where he lay gagging. They would have already escaped had this been a real battle and killing was of little consequence, but these men were civilians as far as he was concerned, and it would not be a righteous kill. Besides, he would already have enough to answer for when he made it back to Centronus after tonight. The penalty for killing these men could be quite severe, and a few of them were already dead. What was he thinking?? There were already consequences, and in their jurisdiction, it wouldn't matter if he killed them or spared their lives. By now it was probably kill or be captured, tortured and then killed. A murderous attitude arose within him, and he suddenly charged at them, slicing and dicing with a skill that no one else could dare challenge. Soon, it appeared to him that the guards had met their match; nearly all of them lay on the floor, either dead or wounded. For a moment it even seemed as if they could just walk out of Torund with no one to stop them, no aid from his company or even a weapon. Trulaine was becoming a blur of motion once more, a phenomenon that only Golondred had been familiar with.

Just then a huge, claw-like ripple stroked along the side of the hut wall, causing the entire room to stutter and rattle. Everyone looked around, startled. Trulaine, being the first to react to the incoming danger, stood hunched, ready for action. Suddenly, the flimsy wall of the hut had been torn to shreds, and a monstrous saber-toothed tiger stepped in, trotting through the shredded straw. It was a beautifully elegant creature, standing nearly seven feet tall and nearly ten feet in length; its huge body was full of thick, shaggy fur decorated with black and yellow stripes. From its massive head and belly fell countless rain droplets, wetting the floor. The great beast shook off the rain, completely showering everyone. Its torso was

strapped with a metal harness; four chains were attached, each with an able bodied guard holding each end, allowing them some control over the animal.

The tiger locked eyes with Golondred, and quickly went in for a slash. The large Centronian had narrowly managed to avoid being slashed, not because he was so quick for his size, but because he just happened to see it in time. Rising on its hind legs, the tiger gave an ear-piercing roar, revealing two massive saber teeth among a jaw full of much smaller, but sharper minor teeth. Golondred stared straight into the primal face of fear.

From halfway across the room, Maurelan's whip soared through the room, cracking the tiger on its back. The great creature turned around to confront her, its deep growl erupting as a call to challenge.

“Go!” she called to Golondred and the others as she sacrificed her own safety so that they could make a run to escape.

“Come on!” Trulaine called to everyone while standing near the entrance with no one else to challenge him. The remainder of the guards who were left alive either held their wounds, crying for help, or they struggled to regain their strength and escape the fear of beaten eaten alive by the untamed tiger. Golondred ran up to Trulaine, nodding to his captain who watched Maurelan tangle with the tiger in a way that only a tamer of wild animals could. Soon Bernarsu accompanied her and together they kept the creature at bay with a series of well-timed feints.

“That lil' lady sure can handle herself, can't she?” Golondred said to Trulaine, stabbing another guard.

“She is buying us time,” said Trulaine as he fought off several other men.

Just then, another massive tiger shoved its way through the small entrance of the hut, widening the straw gap even more. The entire roof sank in and the fighting space was now greatly reduced. And this second tiger was bigger than the first, and also more aggressive. It roared wildly at Trulaine, rising up on its hind legs to take a slash at him.

Trulaine was barely able to dive and roll out of the way skillfully, avoiding the massive claws. One of the guards that tried to run up on Trulaine had suddenly

gotten himself into the wrong path, and the great beast got a hold of him, sinking its massive, tusk-like canines into the man's gut – through armor and all - wrenching the man nearly in half. Blood soaked the canvas.

Everyone moved back in fear, both Trulaine's company, and Erebus' men. The guards that held the straps to both tigers had nearly released them because the violence in the collapsing hut had riled them up to the point of nearly breaking free. They did not have as much control over the creatures as they hoped they would.

Before Trulaine's company could be overwhelmed, Alvantin spun his spear, creating a blur of circular motion. With magical energy to assist him, he created a shield made of pure air; a powerful, continuous gust of wind that repelled the tigers, pushing them back and frightening them away.

Everyone who had not been knocked off his or her feet by Alvantin's enchantment paused in that moment of the shaman's excellence. There was a shriek, and everyone turned and saw Maurelan held in the air of one of the guards, his hand gripped hard around her face. He was a crazy looking man, wild eyed and loving the thrill of combat; possibly one of their most daring and skilled guards.

“Drop your weapons!” he shouted.

They had no choice but to obey, because he put the sword to her neck, threatening to cut her throat. A defiant Bernarsu was the last to drop his blades as he cringed reluctantly.

“Erebus!” he called.

Trulaine could already hear the laughter from outside, followed by a fervent and irritated command. “Will you get those beasts under control!?”

His remaining guards pushed aside large patches of straw - which used to be the hut's entrance - from the keeper's face so that the old man could enter again.

“Ha!” Erebus laughed. “You will all be put to death. In the jurisdiction of the Stenetian conglomerate, and the Leadership-“

“You have no authority,” said Trulaine. “And you're not ready for a war.”

Already the old man could, as his next original statement had been crushed. He looked around for moment, searching for something else to say. “But that is not the point. You have come here, betrayed my hospitality, freed one of my prisoners, and slaughtered half of my men.”

“They deserved to die, they attacked us first.”

“Infidel!” Erebus yelled.

Before he could even make the command for his men to proceed any further, Brontius came bursting through the side of the hut, shooting an arrow with pinpoint accuracy straight into the shoulder of the guard who had Maurelan held beneath her will. He yelled and dropped her as he crashed into the other guards behind him. Brontius send another shot that went whizzing right past Erebus’ head into the guard behind him. The old man yelled in outrage, nearly having a heart attack.

“Wha- a centaur!?” he stood appalled. “How dare...a centaur?!”

He could not believe his eyes.

“Kill them all!” he shouted. “Kill them all! Let the tigers lose! Let em’ lose!”

The tigers came thrusting forth but this time they were unchained.

“Go!” shouted Trulaine over his shoulder at whoever was behind him.

They exited through the hole that Brontius had come through. The centaur himself shot an arrow into the side of one of the tigers. He and Trulaine held them up while the rest of them escaped. The Centronian sliced the other tiger on the paw as it reached out to slash him. The feline roared in pain. As Trulaine and Brontius escaped through the back Alvantin opted to hold up the rear, swinging his staff vertically. Using probably and magical heat conduction, he caused what was left of the straw hut to burst into flames. It was an enchantment he could have only used for an escape or else he would have risked burning the others.

They left an extremely angered Erebus, his men, and two now terrified saber-toothed tigers to try and find their way out of the burning hut.

It was not a very graceful escape, but under the circumstances it could not have been better. They may have been fugitives not, but at least everyone would be accounted for. Overall however, the quest entrusted to him was not going very well. Even while escaping into the night, he wanted to shout because of how angry he was that Maurelan had jeopardized everything. He would have her head if Erebus didn't end up getting all of theirs first. The keeper could use political influence to try and have them executed after all of this was over. Execution, even prosecution would be a long shot in the courts, but not if Maurelan continued making enemies for him. She had much to answer for, and she would answer to him.

The forest became increasingly dense as they made their escape through the wet foliage. It would have been far more difficult to evade Erebus' scouts undetected, had it not been for the falling rain, drowning out the sound of their footsteps. Brontius led them to a safe place where he had left the horses, and they soon mounted their steeds to put further distance between Erebus and his men. At the head of the pack was Trulaine, making quick, careful strides, finding some small comfort in the fact that he was at least reunited with his faithful steed Delemeney. When he felt that the company had traveled far enough to a safe distance, he slowed to a halt and dismounted.

"Shh," he gently glided his hands over Delemeney's thick neck to calm her with a soothing rub. Such chaos had broken out that he felt the uneasiness beneath her quivering flesh. Soon after, he could hear the other horses galloping, and the rest of his company came trotting through the green brush. Luckily, they were far enough away from Erebus' men that they could take a short break, at least until they got their thoughts together.

Through the brush came Bernarsu, trotting on his horse, followed by Maurelan; both of their faces were covered in sweat as they approached. As she jumped off her horse, Trulaine dropped his defensive stance, sword still in hand.

"I think we've lost them," she said, glancing around while walking up to Trulaine. "If we hurry, we can be out of here by dawn. I don't think they will chase us very far." She continued looking around for enemies, seemingly unaware of Tru-

laine's indifferent composure as he turned his back to her, staring out at the moon through the branches overhead.

"Are you wounded?" he asked, turning to face her.

"No," she said.

"Good."

He smacked her in the face so hard that she fell to the ground.

In an instant, Bernarsu pulled out his blades and began to rush Trulaine, but Golondred and Brontius drew their swords against him, defending their commander with a quick and firm commitment. It had become immediately apparent how much respect his men owed to Trulaine. Glancing over his shoulder at the situation about to unfold, the captain turned back to look at Maurelan, his expression was enraged.

"Give me a reason why I shouldn't kill you right now!" he shouted, his sword pointed to her face.

"Hey!" Golondred whispered loudly, advising Trulaine to lower his voice. Though tempers were high, it was certainly important to remember that they were still on the outskirts of Torund, and they were still in danger of being apprehended by Erebus' men. They had to be careful.

Trulaine calmed himself, lowering his sword.

"You could have gotten us all killed!"

"My apologies," she said, making her way to her feet; a spot of blood on her lip.

"You have betrayed our mission with your incompetence. How do I even know you can be trusted?"

He looked down at her as she wept, so many things going through his mind. He lowered his sword for a moment, but then raised it back up toward her face. "Why did you free the prisoner, Maurelan? Do you realize what you have done?"

"But, you said you would free him yourself."

“Not that way! He chose not to give us the location of WinDarrow, but I was prepared to find it through other means.”

“How?” she said looking up at him with glazed eyes.

“I do not know,” his anger surfaced again. “But at least we would not have been on the run, and our identity would have remained a secret. Now, because of you, they will likely chase us to the ends of the earth!”

No one could say anything.

Trulaine turned around to face the rest of them; his face was dark and shadowy in the moonlight. By now, Brontius and Golondred had lowered their weapons, allowing Bernarsu to check to see if Maurelan was harmed. She stood to her feet, pushing away the brute in an attempt to shelter any weakness. There was no doubt in her mind that she had hindered their mission, yet at the same time, in freeing the pathfinder she was only trying to help. She stood beside her horse, unmoving, unsure of what to do or even how to apologize.

Trulaine walked over to Alvantin who peered out into the distance, keeping watch.

In the trees above them there was a ruffle. Philistian could not be detected however, because the many tangled branches that interlocked each other covered him from sight, and the falling rain silenced his movements. This made perfect cover for Philistian as he maneuvered stealthily. Slowly and easily, he made his way to the lower branch where he could see the stocky centaur standing still below him.

Out of nowhere, Philistian dropped twelve feet onto Brontius’ back, tackling him hard to the ground. The centaur let out a shriek that caused everyone to look in attention. They two rolled around twice, and Brontius stood to his feet with his attacker straddling his back. He was suddenly put into a chokehold with a dagger pointed to his skull.

“Move and he dies,” Philistian said to the rest of them. He pointed to Trulaine with the dagger, tightening his grip around Brontius’ neck. “You...you only

chase your ruin. You will never make it to WinDarrow. It is forbidden by the gods.”

“Yet, you claim to know of its location,” Alvantin asked, a bit of sarcasm in his voice.

“Yes. That is true.”

“The why not join us to help us find it?” asked Trulaine.

“You owe us that much for saving you,” added Maurelan.

Philistian paused.

From one warrior to another, Trulaine noticed immediately that if the condemned pathfinder had enough humanity left him to finally consider their plea, then deep down he was truly not ready to die. Of course he wasn't. If Maurelan did not spring him free, then perhaps Trulaine would have been able to use diplomacy to free him after all. But all that was irrelevant now. Besides... the pathfinder had been momentarily distracted, lost in thought.

With but a wink of his eye, Trulaine gestured to the centaur. Before Philistian could react, Brontius suddenly broke his grasp, slamming him hard onto his back. Dazed but not down, Philistian did a kick-up, brandishing his new two new swords. As he looked forward he could see Trulaine already charging him, preparing to strike with his sword.

In the next moment, sparks flew as their weapons collided. The two parried between strikes. Quicker than a flash of lightning, Philistian managed to kick him hard in the abdomen. To his surprise however, Trulaine hardly budged. The captain was much stronger than he had anticipated. He swung his swords, but Trulaine evaded, shoving his elbow up into Philistian's chin, knocking him off his feet. The blow had nearly discombobulated him, but he quickly recovered, turning the momentum into a back flip. He landed on his feet like a cat, gaining some distance.

Philistian grabbed his jaw, spitting out blood, but tougher than most men, he stood his ground without a single grunt. He had ambushed the centaur for the pur-

pose of interrogating them, but now he was beginning to regret this encounter. The last thing he wanted was to become someone else's slave just after escaping Erebus' dungeon, and he would be damned before he let it happen again. He dashed toward Trulaine who aimed to stab Philistian through the chest. With efficiency, the pathfinder jumped over Trulaine, catching his sword, allowing their weapons to interlock. The momentum gave Philistian the advantage on the way down as he managed to grab Trulaine and put him in a side headlock. Somehow Trulaine was able to slip out of it, jabbing Philistian in the face yet again.

Switching tactics to match those of his opponent, Trulaine dipped low in an attempt to sweep Philistian, but the pathfinder had already jumped into the air and gave him a massive kick to the side of the face. Trulaine looked as if he had barely even felt the kick.

"You should have left me alone Centronian," said Philistian, twirling his swords. "Now you will die."

"Stop!" Maurelan shouted, throwing out her arms throwing between them. "You can fight each other later. Right now we have more pressing issues at hand."

"She is right," Brontius said, peering through the hedges. Far off in the distance, he could see the torches of wandering men searching through the night for them. He moved aside branches and bushes to give them a look. "Soon they will find our location. We must leave now."

The centaur quickly disappeared through the brush, followed by the others. Trulaine and Philistian were the only two who remained for a moment, eyeing each other with genuine dislike.

"You can join us now or you can take your chances with them," said Trulaine, gesturing toward the torches in the valley below. "It's your choice."

There was a pause.

"I will help you find the death that you seek, Centronian," Philistian said sternly. "But after that, we will part ways."

"I couldn't agree with you more."

“But stay out of my way. Next time I won’t be so gentle. Next time...you will die.”

Trulaine chuckled, approaching him.

“That’s the thing, pathfinder,” he said. With a giant rush of speed he grabbed Philistian by the throat, lifting him in the air. Philistian had managed to get a sword straight into his gut, but the blade did not go completely in. Philistian kicked tried to swing or grab him, but all his could do was look down at the captain, smiling up at him, effortless. “Many have tried. I was only testing your abilities.”

“So you...could have...killed me anytime?” Philistian gagged.

“Who knows? You are skilled.”

Philistian looked at him, mystified. “What...are...you?”

Trulaine released him and he dropped to the ground coughing.

“Are you cursed?” asked Philistian, standing to his feet, more intrigued than hurt.

“Possibly. Now, will you help us, willingly?”

“Yes,” Philistian said, finally managing to catch his breath.

Trulaine mounted Delemeney, offering the pathfinder a chance to ride along. They disappeared through the brush before the guards could find them.



A New Problem

Prince Romulus made his way swiftly to the council hall.

His father had called a special meeting. This time it was not to be held in the confines of a small chamber, but out in the open where all the public was invited to watch. Romulus never cared for the public so much as his father had told him he should. The public is everything to us, my boy, he used to say. But that was so long ago, when he was much younger.

These days, Romulus understood the conflicts that often arise from divulging too much information to the public. Anything could happen, but the most likely circumstance would be panic. That would be good in this situation.

He could hear them...the people. They were cheering for their king, cheering for the soldiers he had returned home, cheering for the celebration that been generously given, cheering because public councils usually meant good things were to be announced. But Romulus knew better. This was no time for cheers. The people were about to get a sting of pure reality. From the looks of it however, some of them must have known about the fountain eruption. Tones of gossip arose, and those elders, scholars, and politicians who were known for digging up Centronian secrets before they could be made public, were making the same nervous gestures and whispering rumors that something was amiss. They were indeed correct, and something in Romulus' gut told him that they were about to realize how correct they actually were.

“Romulus,” Cathedeus called to him over at the royal table near the wall. “Come over here and have a seat, my boy.”

“I’m not a boy anymore father,” he said, sitting down. “I’m sure that you already know that.”

“Of course you are not,” he said, gazing over at Philistian, a sinister smirk emerging over his face. “So, are you ready? Are you ready for me to break their hearts, person by person?”

“You are sick.”

“I don’t mean to be. It is the way of the world. From now on, it will be up to faith. I will see what can be done for the sake of the people.”

“And what if there is an outbreak? What if there is panic?”

“Listen to me. Even if Trulaine doesn’t find all of the gauges, the energy from the fountain will eventually run its course. Do you really think that the gods would allow this world to be destroyed with its entire people? The earth will be fine.”

“And what of Centronus? We are not a great distance away from the fountain itself.” “Centronus will maintain its integrity,” he said, with a serious look on his face. “The people need to remember that.”

Before them there was a pavilion where all the guests and citizens gathered to enjoy what could only be interpreted as yet another celebration. It was the same illustrious tarp that had been unveiled the day of Trulaine’s return. A myriad of festive foods decorated the tables, and there were plenty of courtesans to assist the commonwealth with an abundance of wine to fill their glasses. Near the back wall was the council table, seated by the entire royal council - king Cathedeus, prince Romulus, Valindolin, Ursilus, Tilian, Drumascius, Zargos, and Arknon, just to name a few. The outer lengths of the table were occupied by much of the Centronian aristocracy.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began. “How are you all feeling today?”

The crowd gave a hoorah and a wave of cheers.

“We are here today to celebrate life. Life, and all the wonderful things that can come from it, as well as all the things that can be taken away by it have suddenly

come into question. I will not lie to you when I say that have difficult times ahead of us...because we do.”

He paused, looking at the people in the crowd.

“Our hero is not here with us today...because he is out defending us yet again, as we speak. Many of you do not know this, but the energy fountain has erupted yet again.”

There were gasps, and conversations broke out quickly.

“I do not want a panic.”

But it was as if they not even hear what he was saying. Their voices rose, regardless.”

“Silence!” Romulus stood up to quell them. “This is not the time for panic. My cousin, your greatest hero, Trulaine, has gone us to defend us once more. If he can retrieve the five gauges, then we can put an end to the destruction once more. But this time we can end it for good. The fountain enchantment was granted to mankind as a gift, but perhaps we are not yet ready to receive that gift.”

“So what are you sayin’?” a royal spoke out from the crowd. “We need magic to live. Without it, we have no nation.”

“That is because we have been dependent on it for so long. If we put our will together, we can find a way to continue without magic if we have to.

“What if the eruption spreads?” asked a woman.

“What if it reaches Centronus first?” asked another.

“It won’t,” promised Romulus.

“Why should we believe you?” asked a daring man. He was one of the aristocrats who financed the construction for many of the buildings in Centronus. “I just heard that part of the Leadership has been destroyed by Shallemeign. What if they are on their way here?”

“Shallemeign wouldn’t dare step foot on this land.”

“Well how do you know?”

“Because in over 300 years no army has ever broken through these walls. Our military, our enchantments, our walls are far too strong, far too resourceful, and far too great in number for Shallemeign to ever gain a successful siege. But I tell you this...that is the least of our concerns right now. However, we shall fix this. Do not worry yourselves.”

“You’re going to rely on one man?” said a bystander.

“What if he’s can’t find them?” asked another.

“What if he gets killed?” asked a teen.

“I assure you, Trulaine is fully capable of completely his task. If he were not, he would not have agreed to it. I want you to all understand...too informed. But please, do not fear. We are doing everything we can. Every day we are in contact with the remaining psychics.”

“Remaining? Well what happened?”

“Well, we have word that Nelo was killed. We don’t know how.”

There were a few gasps in the hall, but Romulus felt as though he had done a good job of calming them. His father on the other had been no help at all. As he sat back down, Cathedeus turned to him with a smile.

“Thank you, Romulus,” he said, proud of his son. “You speak so well. And look...you’ve calmed them. You would think that they don’t even care what will happen to them. That everything will simply be fine.”

“That’s enough, father,” Romulus snapped.

The king said not another word. He just looked forward with a smile on his face, genuinely pleased with his son. He was a twisted man. One that Romulus had never really understood. Sure there was some good in him, but he had his moments; moments like these, truly dark moments that the Commonwealth was blind to. Philistian however saw it all too often.

Briefly, Romulus felt as though he had lost his appetite, but soon he eyed the food in front of him and began eating.

Deneaden stormed her way through the halls.

During the meeting, she had remained among those in the crowd.

The days past since Trulaine had suddenly left were bitter ones, and she had already yelled at just about everyone. She was a humble woman, but this had gone too far. She was angry at Trulaine for leaving her with only a letter, and even angrier with the so-called council that she was supposed to be a part of. None of them had even said a word to her about it. Perhaps they didn't know. Perhaps they figured Trulaine had told her. It did not matter. What was done was done, but she could not hold back her tears any longer.

With no one watching, she leaned against the wall, and burst into silent tears. She thought that there were no other ears for her sobbing to fall on, but she was wrong.

“Dee?” a curious head poked around the corner.

It was Mandaelion. Ever since his father (her brother) had died in battle, she was the closest thing he had to a sister anyway.

She quickly gained her composure, trying to cover up the fact that she had been crying to whoever it was peeking in at her. The answer was obvious; there was only one person who ever called her ‘Dee,’ it was her nephew, Mandaelion.

“It’s okay, Dee,” he said, walking up to her. “What’s wrong?”

“Trulaine,” she said with a whisper. “He has gone. He did not tell me anything. I’ve been miserable. And now, I find out through a public council that he is off saving the world again!”

Her anger was quick. Mandaelion immediately knew that there was much going on in her mind. He wasn’t sure of what to say. “Do you...want me to...leave?”

“No,” she said turning to face him. She looked at him, trying to smile, trying to show her strength by comforting him. “Someday, perhaps you’ll be a regent, or a captain, or a scholar. And you will take yourself a bride to wed, and perhaps then

you will understand this. Cherish her enough to impugn your duties. Even if it is only long enough to say goodbye.”

She looked down at the floor. “I may never see him again.”

“Trulaine will return,” he said. “I know he will.”

“I hope so.”

“Are you not afraid of the energy fountain eruption as well?”

“Well of course I am,” she said somewhat defensively. “I pray that his mission is successful and that we end this crisis before it gets out of hand. But I should have been told something.”

“You are right. You should have.”

They both looked down the hall and there was king Cathedeus walking through. He noticed that her eyes were glazed.

“Oh, what is the matter, my dear?” he asked as generous as possible.

“Nothing,” she said. “Perhaps I am just a bit ill. I think it might be the weather.”

“Ah yes, the weather,” he said. “You will notice some changes in the weather I am afraid. But we will get through it together.”

She nodded her head, and he continued making his way down the hall, his aging knees causing him to shift rather than strut. Honestly, she had never really liked the man. All members of the royal family were great, honorable people. Cathedeus had his moments but, then other his moments were odd. She could never really understand his logic at times, but she knew one thing was true. She had felt cheated. Cheated of the truth, cheated out of her royal status...just cheated.

Shallemeign walked into Erebus’ chamber, Saskia right by his side, and a host of dactyls parading and frolicking just outside. The dark and filthy place was riddled with gloom, and the sodden keeper sat smoldering in his seat. Shallemeign al-

ready knew what he was going to say before he said it. The message had been sent from their messenger dactyls, and finally Shallemeign had a lead on the girl.

“So she was here indeed, you say?”

“Yes, but she sprang one of the prisoners free, it was madness, it was chaos. My tigers were stabbed, one of my huts got burned down, seven of my men were killed, and that’s not even including the fifteen wounded. I need compensation! I need recompense! How will this village thrive? How will this business thrive? We have over three hundred prisoners here. If the Leadership finds out about this-“

“Ah, the Leadership is a dying breed and everyone knows it. I even toppled the temple of incantation just last week.”

“Y-you did? Why?”

“That is irrelevant. I need to know where the girl went.”

“I don’t know. My guards chased after them.”

“Them?”

“Yes, some band of thugs she brought with her.”

“So she has protection.”

“Yes! That’s what I’m trying to tell you, they ruined everything! There were a few men. One of them was a Centronian, their captain. And they had the audacity to attack us with a centaur...a centaur!”

“You said there was a Centronian with them?” Shallemeign perked up in wonder. “What was his name?”

“A-ah, I can’t remember. I think it was-“

“His name was Trulaine sir,” said one of the high guards, standing there with a bruise on his head, and a wound on his side.

“Yes, that was it.”

“Trulaine?” said Shallemeign. The very blood within his skin seemed to be stolen away from him as he paled with a flinch as if he had suddenly been stabbed with a sharp blade. “The true heir is with them?”

“The true heir? What are you talking about?”

Shallemeign continued on, pacing with his eyes pointed to the ground, speaking more himself rather than addressing Erebus. “Interesting...At first I did not suspect the girl to have any political influences or affiliations, but now I see.”

“Surely I would have seen this,” said Saskia. “Nelo was her father. I do not know why there were no memories of this conspiracy in his mind. Perhaps his thoughts were too unstable to remember. It happens to those psychics who are very old.”

“Or perhaps he just blurred them out,” Shallemeign said with a scowl on his face. He walked outside of the hut for a moment and shouted to the dactyls outside. “Find her, and bring me that map!”

In the second that it took for him to walk back in, Saskia had given Erebus a quick glance. Nothing in particular, but the eye contact gave the old man shivers.

“Now that that problem is solved, we can move on,” Shallemeign protested.

“What about my business?” Erebus pleaded.

“I guess you’ll have to find some way to thrive. Most of my currency has gone into this campaign, and I have none to spare. You’re just going to have to do.”

Shallemeign turned to walk off.

“What?” Erebus cried. “I can’t maintain security now. The moment you leave, there will be chaos. What happens if I have to answer to the Leadership? They’ll throw me in jail. What will I say when I have to tell them that the pathfinder escaped? How am I going to-“

“The pathfinder?” Shallemeign stopped, glaring over his shoulder at Erebus.

“Well...yes. That’s what I have been trying to tell you all this time.”

Shallemeign went into a sudden rage, kicking over all the trophies that Erebus managed to restore just the other day. “Damn you!”

Suddenly the cradle appeared out of nowhere, whipping around, just a twinkling light, one that Erebus was dumbfounded by. Suddenly the keeper of Torund’s body went rigid as he was wrenched into the air, unable to do anything but squeal in pain.

Shallemeign dropped him to the ground where he crawled against the sidewall of the dungeon, screaming in fear. “Please don’t kill me!”

“Now why would I kill one of my subordinates. That’s what you are, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Besides, you have extensive knowledge of the regions. You can be useful.”

“Y-yes.”

“Yes. I’ll tell you what. I’ll give you another chance to serve me.”

“Y-you will?”

“Of course. Your blood memory will tell us all that we need to know about the terrain surrounding these lands.”

“Yes, I...what?”

“I am a man of my word,” said Shallemeign walking out of the dungeon. On the way out, he looked over at Saskia.

“Turn him over slowly. I don’t want some kind of rebellious ghoul running loose on my ship.”

“Wait,” said Erebus, confused. “W-what?”

Saskia looked at Erebus, smirking, and the old man screamed in horror before she even approached him. In an instant she sprang up and pounced on him, sinking her teeth into his jugular. There was a clamor, a squeal, and sound of liquid draining from his body. Saskia rose from her prey, glancing over her shoulder at Shallemeign. “Done.”



The Leviathan

For days, Trulaine's company had been through the wilderness. They had survived off of the fruit grown in the tropical bushes near waterfalls, and Brontius was kind enough to hunt them fair game during the nights. It was what he was used to, growing up in the lilac forests with a tribe of centaurs. It provided a hearty meal for all of them, and for him it allowed for some extra exercise. Before and after every meal of course, Brontius would say a prayer, expressing gratitude to the gods for sustenance, while at the same time paying respect to his slain brothers. This was the humble, spiritual way of the centaurs. The way the rest of them honored the tradition differed slightly from the Centronian way of preparing food, which typically consisted of less praying but it was a welcome difference in customary etiquette.

The rest was all travel. There were many pitfalls and miles of hazardous terrain. The hills were high and long, and for a while it seemed as if they would never escape them.

Philistian did as he had promised, but that still did not make his presence any easier to digest among some of the others. He guided them the best way that he knew how, through the highlands, and the streams, the low valleys, and mountain ranges; trekking as far as the eye could see and beyond, until Golondred jumped off his steed and threw a fit.

“Where the hell are we going!” he shouted as they stopped for a break near another stream to fetch some water. “Doesn't this blasted world have an end?”

“Actually, we are still within the Centronian outskirts,” said Brontius with a snicker.

The rest of them gave a chuckle as well – with the exception of a skulking Philistian - but Golondred stood there with an angry look on his face, staring Brontius in the eye.

“What are you sayin’ horse-man? You think I can’t take the travel? I can out-travel all ya damn bastards! I just thought it’d be nice ta pull out a map’n pinpoint wherever the hell we are, just for pity’s sake, so I can have some peace a mind!”

“He is right,” admitted Alvantin. “We should pull out a map.”

“Brontius,” Trulaine gestured.

The centaur reached into one of his wool satchels. He pulled out a map, and spread it across a large rock in the flattest area he could find. There was still a bit of sunlight pouring through the forest tress, and fortunately the lighting was good. They all gave a good look at the map – with the exception of Philistian once again, of course. The leather cloth did not do a very good job of illustrating the provinces accurately. Centronus at the center of the map and the rest of the world just spread out with only shapes drawn, but no detail as to what lies around and beyond those areas, and with no reference to the lands or paths to take. All they knew was that the land of WinDarrow lie somewhere on the right side of the map.

Trulaine looked up at Philistian. “Show us the path as well as you can.”

Philistian paused, and reluctantly walked over to take a look. He studied it for a moment with a strange look on his face and made a remark. Something to the effect of ‘who makes your maps?’

He studied it some more, shaking his head.

“First we will travel for maybe another day or two, depending on how well the horses hold up. I am not sure how fast you intend on traveling,” he glanced at Alvantin. “She is a good mare, but I don’t know how much longer she can keep up, especially if we decide to push them.”

“He has a point,” said Alvantin.

“Fine,” said Trulaine. “Brontius, he can ride with you.”

“With me, or on me?” asked the centaur, not pleased. Just the other day he had the pathfinder jump on his back and try to attack him, and now, Brontius had to endure it again, for a long period of time. Brontius could stay the pace with a person mounted on his back, but it was the fact that no one trusted Philistian that made it uncomfortable. Brontius scowled at the fugitive.

“I will never allow an assassin to ride with me.”

“Well I guess you will have a fun time trying to get to WinDarrow then,” said Philistian.

“Brontius,” Trulaine protested.

The centaur looked at Trulaine, glanced at Philistian, and nodded his head. “Okay. But if he tries anything, he dies this time.”

“Good, I think we can all agree to that, right?” Trulaine said looking back at Philistian for conformation.

“I suppose,” said Philistian.

He took a look at the map, again shaking his head in disappointment. “Now we get to the part that I dreaded; the reason why I did not want to come along in the first place.”

“How bad could it be?” Golondred snickered.

Philistian gave him a dead look before continuing. “After we reach the Southern border there will be three regions I thought I would never dare to pass again. The first is a great lake. I don’t have to tell you how difficult it will be crossing it, but I assure you all, it shall not be pleasant. Next...the Python Isthmus.”

“The Python Isthmus?” asked Maurelan in interest. “What is an isthmus?”

“It is a narrow strip of land governed by the seas,” said Alvantin. “It separates one great land mass from another.”

“Yes,” said Philistian. “But this is no ordinary isthmus. It was formed thousands of years ago when the Southern Reach was wide enough to be its own landmass.

Following centuries of erosion quickened by the tide of opposing seas. Now what remains is an extravagant view from the clouds. One can only describe it as ‘the earth touching the heavens.’ It is extravagant...and deadly.”

“So we are to cross this python thing?” asked Golondred.

“Yes. And we will not be glad for it.”

“And what is the third region you fear?” asked Trulaine.

“Well, that would be WinDarrow itself, a place where I cannot accompany you.”

“Why not?”

Philistian gave him a smirk, pointing to an obvious fact. “Because I am wanted.”

No one objected, and Trulaine could not dispute it. Philistian was indeed wanted; he was the worst kind of criminal...an assassin escapee. And Trulaine was harboring him. Sure it would be for the sake of the people, but would the politicians and royals see it that way? Would Trulaine be galvanized for allowing a criminal to accompany him? Trulaine had to find the Vessel the only way he knew how...by putting their fortune in the hands of a known killer. It sickened him to think about it, but it sickened him even more to think of what may happen if they did not complete their mission as quickly as possible.

“So we have a direction,” said Trulaine. “It would be pointless by now, but if anyone wants to turn back, this is your final chance. This journey will not be for the faint in heart. Beyond this point things may get...harrowing. You are all welcome to decide.”

No one said a word, and it worried Trulaine that Maurelan was among them. She was such a young woman. And although female warriors were rare in the Centronian regime, they were usually much older, since women did not typically join the brigades until womanhood. He would feel responsible if anything was to happen to her, and he had not been accountable for any other woman’s death but Ionna’s. Just the thought alone made him cringe. He could not believe he was send-

ing this young lady into harm's way. Sure she had proven herself in battle, but the forces of nature were an entirely different thing. But somehow, he felt that she was used to the forces of nature.

“Good,” said Trulaine, nodding to Philistian. “We shall continue.”

By nightfall, Trulaine's company made it to the vicinity of the great lake. Here the winds were already high. The horses were being to grunt and it was hard of for Trulaine and his company to see. There seemed to be little or no vegetation in the area, and the soil was moist everywhere. To Trulaine's surprise however, there was actually a hut in the vicinity. Not a home for living where a thriving community was expected to grow; it was just a tiny hut with one, small lamp to twinkling in the night.

“We can find transport here,” said Philistian, walking up to the front entrance.

He gave two knocks, paused and gave another two knocks. From inside came a jingle, ringing through the air.

“Who are you?” shouted an old crackling voice from inside. What do you want?”

“We are travelers!” said Philistian, practically yelling because the wind was so loud. “We wish to cross these seas.”

“The seas are closed off! The waters are too high this season!”

“It is urgent! We must reach the rocky falls by sundown!”

“If you want to cross the seas, you must make payment!”

A small, old man inched his way out of the hut, wobbling up to them. The mean, grungy expression of his shriveled face illustrated a lifetime of tough times, and hard work for poverty-level income.

Philistian glanced at Trulaine who stepped forward.

“One hundred coins,” said the old man after giving Trulaine one glance.

“A hundred coins!” Golondred snapped.

“This is no normal fair, mister. An’ whatever skipper I give you will have to be out of his mind enough, and paid enough...to consider your proposal. Then there’s the fee for my shop to stay in business, and insurance fer damages.”

“Why I outta-“

Trulaine stopped Golondred with a hand gesture, and pulled out his entire sack of coins that he had wrapped in a pouch. He tossed it to the old man. “That’s a hundred and thirty. Make sure you pay the skipper well. I want your best man at the helm.”

“Uh, right,” said the old man, humbled and rather pleased that Trulaine had thrown in extra for him.

The old man produced a written note to validate their passage, and he handed it to Trulaine. Then he handed each of them courtesy balaclavas. “Go ahead, wrap em’ round your face. Don’t worry, they’re clean.”

To Trulaine’s surprise they were fresh. The rest of his company slowly agreed to wrap their faces up as well, Golondred grunting, and taking the longest. He eventually settled for just stuffing it in his pocket to use for later.

“The docks are a quarter mile form here. Be safe, and may the gods look after you.”

With that, he shut the entrance to the hut, and suddenly Trulaine was left out in the cold with only a note and all of his currency gone.

“Well that was a good deal,” said Golondred sarcastically.

Trulaine was amazed how he could find humor in the situation so soon after being angry in it.

It did not take long for them to approach the docks, but once they did, they noticed how the weather had already become even more chaotic. The wind had grown so strong and constant that they could no longer keep a steady pace; each of them had begun to struggle with their balance just to keep from falling over. The docks themselves looked as if they might blow right off their fragile hinges;

boards popped off, swinging freely, creaking and smacking against the building. Bushes and branches ripped from nearby trees dragged along the ground, smashing into the docks. There seemed to be no end. The rain gave the place an eerie, desolate appeal, accompanied by a thick fog that followed them through the docks. Trulaine knew that the holding rooms before them housed poor, brave, and possibly twisted souls within. What other type of men would accept such a harrowing profession?

Trulaine and his company stopped before the specific room that corresponded with the one on his ticket. It was the most tattered building in the docks. Not because of the storm, but because of the endless amount of graffiti stamped all over the exterior. Trulaine knocked on the door twice, and loud enough to wake even a slumbering soul in the middle of the storm. There was a brute grunt from the inside. The resident was clearly no ordinary man. A massive man with twisted features stepped out. He was riddled with colored tattoos, and piercings that hung in loops from various parts of his face. His frame was tall...far taller than that of most men, he was practically taller than Brontius was from standing height. The shape of his face, head, and shoulders was gnarled, and his skin was stretched and tough in areas where skin was normally supposed to be soft and flexible. The man did not look completely human.

“Careful with this one,” said Philistian in a low tone into Trulaine’s ear. “He is a mercenary from one of the high realms. Those who were affected and mutated by the curse - but were not changed completely - roam the lands as mercenaries and nomads. In these lands, they are known as Brutes. They are quite intelligent, but are belligerent and highly volatile creatures. They can hardly be called human themselves, at least by the standards of your people.”

Trulaine noticed the sudden change in his tone, indicating insult. He gave the pathfinder a quick glance before addressing the Brute that now stood before them.

“Fares,” demanded the towering man that stood before them.

Trulaine handed him the ticket, which he looked over carefully, looking at them oddly, but then shaking his head in agreement when he saw the price at the bottom. He slammed the door shut, and came back out a moment later, wearing a

large cloak and a balaclava to shade his eyes and face from the intensity of the wind. The company followed him through the loading docks where he led them to the port. It was not much of a port at all, just a large, muddy shore, with a series of massive ships lined up side by side; seven of them.

“By the gods,” Golondred exclaimed.

“This...” began the Brute in his gnarled tone. “...is a sea vessel.”

“I’m used to boats and schooners, but I have never seen something so massive.”

The great ship swayed in the water, tumultuous waves pushing against its’ giant hull, but held down by giant anchors harbored deep under the sea, it did not drift. But it did tug violently, however.

“At first, I was wondering how we were going to transport the horses over with us,” said Trulaine. “Now I see, that will be the least of our problems.

“I did not know that mankind was capable of creating such extravagant mechanisms,” said Brontius.

“These are not mechanisms,” the Brute corrected him. “They are ships.”

“This ship was built by the Voranth,” said Philistian. “Members of the Order.”

Everyone in Trulaine’s company glanced at each other in confusion. Only the Brute nodded in acknowledgment.

Dismounting their steeds, they guided the horses up the ramp and into the entrance cage. They boarded the ship through a small hatch near the bottom of the ship that was attached to a railed ladder that they were able to walk across safely. When they entered the ship, their horses were taken by a few of the men inside who were assigned to night watch. Their steeds were then taken into a watertight compartment that was big enough hold a stable. Brontius elected to stay with them of course, and so he went into the chamber as well.

Trulaine’s company then proceeded through a long corridor, walked through a series of small chambers, climbing more steps until they reached the lower cabin. Inside there were nearly a hundred men sleeping in little cots rowed side by side, and in separate rows above that were vertically stacked. Few of the men were still

awake, walking around, or climbing their way up the ladders to find an empty cot. And with a loud, booming voice the brute skipper, shouted at the top of his lungs, waking them all in sudden panic. “GET OFF YOUR ASSES, IT’S BACK-BREAKIN’ TIME! NO MAN SLEEPS TONIGHT! DESTINATION...THE HIGHLANDS..TO THE ROCKY COAST YOU LAZY MAGGOTS!”

Some of the men groaned and hesitated, while many of them scurried to their feet, quick to get to work, even pleased that they now had a job to do so that they receive payment. Many of them were scrawny, malnourished, and looked like that had been starving to death. And Trulaine couldn’t help but imagine that most of them had families to provide for. The profession itself was madness. These men were facing certain death due to circumstances of poverty anyway. He could see how they could be so willing to accept such a role for money. If he could, he would employ them at Centronus. The fact that he was paying their salary, even if it was only for one trip, it still made him feel a bit better about the fact that he had just given away all of his coins away.

They went to work. Higher ranking sailors began to shout orders and groups of men darted off to specific parts of the ship at the same time. One group, went ran off to the engine-room, another group went to unravel the anchor and detached the ladder system. Another group of men ran up to the top deck to secure and ready all the navigation systems. Trulaine was amazed. Soon the ship was ready and casting off in to the sea. The sound of the engine pumping through the hull was loud and could be heard throughout the entire ship.

“How does all this work?” asked Trulaine as they walked along.

“Steam,” was the brute’s only answer.

Although the brute did not explain much to him, it was obvious to Trulaine that whatever technology they were using somehow pre-dated the bestowing of magic. It was an amazing thing to behold; yet another shred of proof that men were not as primitive as the times suggested, that the gods had in fact bestowed magic unto men for their achievements rather than their setbacks. It was assurance that the world of sword and shield that Trulaine worked so hard for people

to respect and acknowledge had not been exhausted in vain, that practical applications still made sense in the world of magic.

They continued up through the ship until they reached the top deck. The weather was blistering. Golondred yelled as the hard wind hit his face.

Philistian began to laugh. “I told you, didn’t I?”

“Shut up, you filth!” said Golondred, wrapping his face up quickly.

The brute stepped up to the helm, trying to gain control early as the anchors were disconnected and the ship was cast forcefully, the winds alone adding to their speed on takeoff.

For nearly an hour they sped across the sea faster than any other sea vessel Trulaine had ever seen. By now many of them had lost their balaclavas. At first it was not so bad, but then giant waves began to roll in massively, hitting them hard. The entire ship listed from side to side, and each time, everyone on board had to clutch to something to keep from sliding to the other end.

“Hold steady men!” shouted the brute.

As the ship swayed to the left, men were sliding helplessly around the deck, and just before they could hit the other side, the ship would sway to the right, causing them to slide right back to where they had originally been standing. It was a nerve-racking environment, and Golondred did not have the stomach for it. He leaned over the side every chance he could get to vomit into the sea. Soon the ship sailed evenly and they were able to propel.

By now the wind had picked up violently, and their balaclavas had been blown off long ago. Trulaine was amazed that the ship was still able to remain afloat.

The Voranth, he wondered. This must be a piece of their technology. It was fast, but the vastness of the sea made it seem slow. Or perhaps it was the fact that they were caught in a storm of fifty-foot waves.

“How far must we travel until we get to shore?” Trulaine asked Philistian, shouting over the blazing wind.

“Perhaps an hour or two!” Philistian shouted back.

“That won’t do!” Maurelan interjected.

“This is not a little pond!”

“If we are seen by any of the warlord’s spies, then our mission will be compromised.”

“You speak of compromises?” said Trulaine, looking at her as if she were insane. He could admit it; the girl had nerve.

“I apologized for my actions, but that still doesn’t make me wrong about this!”

Before any of them could say another word, there was a huge crash in the side of the hull. They were nearly knocked off their feet by the impact.

“What was that?”

“Did you think I was warning you away from just another sea voyage?” said Philistian with a laugh.

“You tricked us!” Trulaine shouted.

“It was no trick. I warned you, good captain, about the horrors that would await.”

“You warned us?”

“Damn you!” shouted Golondred. Ya’ could’ve at least told us about...well what was that thing anyway?”

“I don’t think you really want to know,” said Philistian, glancing up into the night as if a bad omen were among them.

Suddenly another maddeningly loud bump rattled through all hull.

Out in the sea, Trulaine could see something moving in the distance. The head of some unnatural thing poking its spiked head out of the water, majestically, so large that it seemed to move in slow motion. With one giant flip of its head, the creature hurled tons of water into the air, and the shape of its monstrous face was revealed. One of the brute’s pirates shouted into the night.

“It’s a leviathan!”

Suddenly a giant tentacle burst from the water, brushing forcefully along the ship.

The pirates quickly ran to their defense stations, pulling out their high-powered harpoons, tossing them at the creature as it emerged. The brute himself was no longer at the helm. He had left his second in command in charge while he ran off to supervise the men in charge of their sectors. He went to different parts of the ship, urging the engine crew to pump more steam, making sure the men on deck did not waste too many of their spears and hooks, checking back on how well the ship was steering.

There was another colossal thud.

“What is that?!” shouted Trulaine. “Is it another leviathan?”

“Of course not!” said one of the sailors running by. “They never travel in packs, or else there would be none of them left alive!”

One had to understand the physical makeup of a leviathan to know. It did not occur to him however, until the thuds became more frequent, and the creature reached out to grasp every inch of their ship. Once it rose farther out of the sea, they could see its massive head, similar to that of an octopus or a giant squid. The only difference of course was that the leviathan was much larger and far more ferocious than any sea creature that ever lived. Or at least those were the rumors Trulaine had remembered growing up.

“Time to slice and dice,” said Philistian pulling out his dual swords.

Pulling out his own sword, Trulaine nodded his head. It was the first time the two of them had appeared to be in agreement on anything. They sprang into action, and soon the rest of Trulaine’s company followed with strikes of their own, attacking the giant tentacles that were already rising and spiraling around the great ship. As the lightning above lit up the world around them, the brute skipper caught a glimpse of them. For the amount of money he had been given up front, he had fully expected them to just sit back and let all of his men to do all of the fighting. They were all far better warriors than even his finest men who were just tossing their javelins aimlessly in fear. Some of them were swept away by its huge

tentacles, swallowing men whole. Its monstrous mouth was a circular pit of giant razors followed by another set of razors, by another set, and another. The men were chomped and grinded into pieces before falling in the hole that was the throat. They all paused in horror at the sight before them as a streak of lightning illuminated the oscillating pair of jaws, gleaming in the water.

With the help of some of the crew, Trulaine's company had managed to sever a few tentacles. Trulaine hoped that would cause it to back away in retreat, but it had only proved to enrage the creature even more.

“We have to turn around!” shouted the brute.

“No!” Trulaine called out, smiling at the brute. “We can slay it! And that will be dinner for you and your men for the rest of the year.”

The brute considered his offer for a moment and then gave a boisterous laugh. “Come on men! Have I taught you nothing about how to slay one of these bitches?”

He grabbed a javelin from one of his men and with a careful thrust, tossed it straight into the eye of the monster. It roared in agony as blood poured from its eye, but that only made it angrier, and the leviathan moved in to devour their entire ship whole.

With superhuman strength and agility, Trulaine sprang up and latched himself onto one of the creature's tentacles. Now was the time to strike, while it was injured and blinded. Somehow, the Centronian managed to climb his way up the tentacle, jabbing his sword into its flesh whenever he needed to steady himself so that he wouldn't fall into its mouth. Taking one great leap, he reached the top half of its head, plunging his sword straight into the creature's other eye. His blade sank in all the way to the hilt completely submerged almost to the point where Trulaine thought he might fall into its eye. Blood soaked his arm all the way up to his shoulder by the time he was able to dig himself out, and the leviathan flung around, furious. Trulaine was tossed into the air, and luckily, he landed on the deck of the ship, his comrades all checking to see if he was okay. They all marveled.

“How did you do that?” asked Maurelan.

“You truly are something to be spoken of, aren’t you?” Alvantin remarked.

“Never fails to impress, so does he?” Golondred said to Bernarsu.

“Look!” said one of the sailors, peering over the side of the ship and the tentacles quickly slid away. “It’s leaving!”

The men all cheered and gave praise to both the gods for sparing them and to Trulaine for saving them. It was a triumphant moment, especially since Maurelan and Bernarsu had no idea what to say. They were the only two who looked at him strangely as if he were an alien from another planet. Such feats were not possible for mortal men to achieve. Trulaine was something special indeed.

He stood to his feet, once again heralded as a hero for his uncanny prowess. The sailors lifted him into the air, cheering his name throughout the night, as the leviathan’s silhouette sunk beneath the sea, never to be seen again.

As the ship pulled into berth, Brontius and the horses came up from below decks. The steeds were rattled and irritated; they whinnied and resisted as Trulaine’s company mounted them, but they were ultimately unharmed. Trulaine bid farewell to the brute and his crew, but not without a bit of persuasion first.

“You are quite skilled,” Trulaine said to the skipper. “You should join us.”

But the brute shook his head.

“My crew needs me,” he said. “Besides, you seem perfectly capable of doing just about anything. I wish you all the luck on your quest, however much more crazy it is than traversing this godforsaken sea. It was a privilege to have met you Trulaine. May the gods be with you.”

And with that, they parted ways.

Following their trek offshore, Trulaine's company came to a series of swamps that Philistian navigated them safely through. By now the wind had died down considerably, just enough for them to talk in regular tones.

Treading through the murky waters and hacking away at the dense foliage with one of his blades, Philistian led them for miles through the core of the borderlands. They had made several brief stops, pausing nearly every hour, and Philistian would use that time to glance around keenly as if trying to recall which direction led to the right path. He had even knelt over to inspect the terrain, picking at the roots of the grass tentatively. It made the rest of them uneasy, especially Golondred.

"Fugitive," said the round Centronian in a rather rude tone. "If you know this area so well, why do we keep stopping?"

"Because the terrain has changed over the years. If I do not inspect, then we could get lost."

"Well why do we keep stopping if you have traversed this path so well?"

"I never said I have traversed this path," said Philistian with a chuckle. "I've never even been here."

"What?" Golondred's eyes opened wide in anger. "You don't know the path?"

"He doesn't need to know the path," Maurelan interjected. "If he doesn't know a path, he can find it. That is what pathfinders do. Am I correct?" she asked him.

"When my kinsman and I traveled to WinDarrow," said Philistian. "We did not take this route. We traveled at much longer distance around these lands. And we did not enter by the sea. But yes, you are right. I can find the path."

"Then how do you know we're not lost now?" grunted Golondred.

"I assure you. This is the right direction."

"You speak of your kinsman," said Trulaine, glancing in curiosity. "Where are they now, and which of the provinces do they belong to?"

There was a pause, and Philistian said nothing. Instead, he continued walking through the forest, his actions questionable. The rest of them did not know what to think of his silence. Most of them just assumed that the two of them were still in conflict with each other due to the quarrel they had back at Torund. But Trulaine knew it was more than that. Philistian did not want any of them to know the details of his past. Perhaps he had hoped to die with the truth of his demons, unknown to anyone else.

Philistian may not have been the most trusted member of Trulaine's company, but he had been correct. After exiting the swamps, traversing through yet another field of dense foliage, ascending a massive hill that put them hundreds of feet above sea level until finally they reached the summit of a great landmass that rose thousands of feet from the sea.

“This is it,” said Philistian. Because of the acoustics of the mountain amplified the sound of the raging waters below. “Behold, the Python Isthmus!”



Crossing the Python Isthmus

They were standing nearly a thousand feet in the air. The clouds themselves were so close, that it seemed as if they could reach up and touch them. They were so high up that the elevation had made it difficult to breathe, and the moisture in the chill air caused their flesh to feel like ice. Although the wind was nowhere near as turbulent as it had been at sea, the air here was much colder.

The isthmus itself felt like being on the back of a massive creature. The thing was so huge and majestic, that it took them a few moments to understand the features that Philistian had described earlier. Because of its height, it looked like a great stairway, leading into the heavens, its curving path, loosely resembling that of a snake, twisting as far as the eye could see in the mist that lay ahead. Glancing far below, Trulaine could see evidence of what caused the isthmus to form thousands of years ago. On either side of the isthmus were two great bodies of water pushing on either side of its base. It was apparent that over time, the tides of these two great seas had pushed against the mountain, eroding it on each side until the end result was a massive, thin strip of what used to be a mountain, standing firm in its last hundred years before the forces of nature would cause it to crumble into the sea. Such a fate would not be too far into the future for any of them to live to see, but in the course of the mountain's entire lifespan, it was already on its deathbed. Now it was a thin, windy shade of its former self. The Python Isthmus, named after its curvy path, and precipitated by its ultra-natural demise, lingering somewhere in the distant future.

Trulaine took a deep breath, inhaling air that he may never be this high up to inhale again. He brushed his hand across the neck of Delemeney. The mare had

been through much already since departing Centronus, but she was calm at the moment. The isthmus was about fifteen feet in width, which made it wide enough for a few horses and a handful of skilled riders to make across safely, but one wrong move could spell disaster for them all. And the sea was so far below them that the world below was dizzying to look at.

Slowly, cautiously, they led their horses across the great thin space that separated all of the Northern Realm from that of the mysterious Southern Reach. Trulaine was finally beginning to feel as if they were making progress.

Perhaps the worst was behind them.

After charting nearly a mile across the isthmus however, Trulaine's company noticed a small, black dot moving against the sky.

"There is something up there," Brontius declared, causing them all to stop and glance over their shoulders. "In the clouds."

"What is it?" Maurelan asked, somewhat intrigued; hopeful for a glimpse of any type of wildlife on this miserable stretch of land.

It difficult to get a good view with so many heavy clouds in the way, but as the object in the sky began to loom closer however, it was no longer a single dot, but a cluster of them, gliding awkwardly in the wind, each brandishing a long pair of claw-tipped wings that protruded sharply like a set of jagged knives. They flew quickly and circled above like a pack of seagulls surveying a meaty carcass.

"Oh no," said Philistian under his breath.

"Dactyls!" Trulaine shouted.

Immediately, they all took off, kicking their steeds sharply in the haunches. Suddenly they were forced to sprint swiftly across the isthmus. Traversing the narrow cliff had now proved to be a difficult task indeed - for everyone except Brontius who was far more coordinated and stealthy than the other steeds that were ridden by the rest of the company. Maurelan, who had been in the middle of the bunch, was contending with the heat of the charge, her steed whinnying in panic. Trying to repel both the fears of causing everyone to fall over the side and being attacked

by the winged terror from above, she had nearly lost her composure, and slipped on the reigns of her mare. She could hear Golondred's voice, bellowing in the wind behind her.

“Careful lass!”

In the lead, Trulaine ordered them to split into pairs to prevent a disastrous tumble, with he and Brontius speeding up to take the lead, Alvantin and Golondred slowing their paces in the rear, allowing Maurelan, Philistian, and Bernarsu the space to push forward steadily. This relieved some of the tension, but the dactyls however were still closing in, even faster than they were before. Now just a few hundred feet away, they began to squawk and croak in a collection of noises that resembled eerie laughter. The sound itself was even more chilling than the air around them.

“They're catching up to us!” Brontius shouted as he pulled out his bow. While still in full gallop, he turned and shot off two arrows with dazzling accuracy. The first arrow missed its target, but the second found its mark, striking one of the dactyls in the chest. The creature collided to the earth, letting off a charade of rubble in its demise. The rest of Trulaine's company brandished their bows as well. Trulaine let off several arrows, striking two dactyls and Golondred had also found his mark in one of them before they all started to catch up to them.

The first dactyl soared in so fast that it became just a passing blur. Picking random targets, the creature slashed wildly at Bernarsu, and farther up at Trulaine, missing twice as it passed them. The second dactyl did the same as the first, causing Maurelan to shriek as it managed to scratch her across the cheek with its sharp talons. She wiped her face and saw blood streaming down her fingers.

“Watch yourselves!” Trulaine called to them as he pulled his sword from its sheath ready to take on any of the creatures fool enough to cross his path again. Looking over his shoulder he could see dozens of them flying around, scattering in different directions, all of them waiting to dive in for the kill.

“Look!” shouted Alvantin, pointing forward in the blizzard ahead. “The end of the isthmus is near!” In the distance ahead, they could faintly see the entrance

of a narrow passage where the cliffs ended and the southern reach shelled off into a string of mountainous peaks that stretched on in the mists before them.

“Keep pushing forward!” shouted Trulaine.

Just then two more dactyls pounced onto Brontius' back, trying to knock him over, but the mighty centaur slammed both of them to the ground with brute strength. Further away, Golondred was being pursued by a large, burly dactyl; one that did not fly quite as fast as the others and could steady its speed to match the gallop of their horses. With a mighty charge, the dactyl slammed into Golondred's shoulder, knocking him off his steed. The plump old man hit the ground hard and tumbled where he collided with the loose gravel, nearly falling over the side of the cliff.

“No!” Maurelan called over her shoulder. Instinct took over, and she quickly turned her horse around, breaking from the pack in a dangerous maneuver to go back for him. She could hear Bernarsu yelling for her to rejoin them.

In the front of the pack, Trulaine had barely caught a glimpse of his company disbanding and disappearing in the thick fog behind him. Before he could react, several dactyls sprang from the sides of the great wall just ahead, flapping their wings together to form a barricade. Trulaine and the rest of his men came to a halt, crashing to the surface; their horses whinnying in agony. Alvantin had actually managed to jump off of his steed and levitate as the horse tumbled and slid over the side of the cliff with a bellowing shriek. Frightened by the winged terror from above, the rest of the horses bolted, disappearing into the mountainous gap ahead.

The remainder of Trulaine's company had made it to their feet rather quickly, standing back to back as the dactyls flocked all around them.

“What do you want with us?!” Trulaine shouted as he and the others stood their ground, completely surrounded with weapons drawn. “Speak now, demons!”

“We want the map,” said one of them, stepping forward.

“What map? What map” asked a few of the others, oblivious. Another group of dactyls began to chuckle while others snapped violently at Trulaine, his men, even at each other.

“Give us the map and perhaps we will let you live!” nagged a third.

There was a pause, and Trulaine became puzzled by their speech, but still baffled that some of them actually knew how to speak the Centronian language. In their excitement however, they began talking so fast and croaking over each other in such garbled tones that no one in Trulaine's company could actually understand anything that they were saying or what language their dialects had become mixed with.

“What are they talking about Trulaine?” asked Alvantin.

“Trulaine,” said another dactyl. They inched closer to look at him in awe, all chattering amongst each other at the same time.

“Trulaine?!”

“The creator's son?”

“Which one is he?!”

“This one!”

“Let me see him!! Let me see him!!!”

“Stay back demons!” Brontius shouted, ready to ram his spear through any one of them at a second's notice. Those in the front inched around his spear and oddly, the rest of them began to laugh. It was the type of appalling laughter similar to a crowd being entertained by a set of comedians. This was disturbing behavior indeed; behavior that showed the playful, yet cruel humor of the dactyl race. It was unnerving for Trulaine's company, as brave as they were to be outnumbered more than ten to one by a pack of thick-witted savages. Something that Trulaine overheard had lingered in the back of his mind. One of the dactyls mentioned something about him being the creator's son, which was an odd thing indeed. He would have thought it odd if everyone back home did not think the same way

about him. Besides, they had suddenly given mention of a map. This sparked his curiosity even more, because he had no idea what they had been rambling about.

“Why should we obey your command centaurian scum!” one of them hissed, addressing Brontius. “We could tear you apart right now if we wanted!”

“Yes,” squawked another. “Give us the map.”

“But he doesn't have it!”

“Lies!”

“It is with the girl.”

“Find the girl!”

“Find the girl!!”

Suddenly a few of them broke away from the rear of the pack while the rest converged on Trulaine and his men.

“Get Trulaine!”

“Get Trulaine!”

“I want him first!”

“Give me his head!”

“Give us his legs!”

“I don't care, as long as I get the heart!”

“Can we eat the others as well?” shouted those in the back.

Trulaine wanted to burst forward and come to the aid of Maurelan and Golondred who were about to be under attack, but there were too many dactyls blocking his path. Perhaps it was impatience, perhaps it was anger, but As Trulaine watched them discuss how they were going to tear them apart, he could feel a distinct rage boiling inside of him. It was the same rage that he had felt the last time he was on the battlefield fighting the Memradons, the same rage he had felt just a few days ago while fighting Erebus' men in Torund; an intense rage that he could not hide. He welcomed it, pushed it into his conscious and let it fester until he was

able to channel it into an extreme point of focus. It was an intoxicating phenomenon, one that could be mistaken for magic, the way it latched onto his soul like a living thing dying to burst free from him. He bellowed thunderously, so loud that many of the dactyls stopped their blathering and looked up surprised, perhaps even frightened.

“Come on then cowards!” he shouted vigorously, ready for battle. “Let's see which one of you has the guts to take me down!” They all rushed him. The first dactyl close enough to reach out and grab him got both of its hands severed with one clean swipe. Cleaving through each of them, he claimed a leg here, a head there. He even shoved his sword into one of their mouths, impaling the creature all the way through the crest at the top of its head. The dactyl shivered miserably on the end of his blade; blood, skull, and pieces of brain gushing from its cranium. In the heat of the moment, Trulaine caught a glimpse the rest of his men. Bron-tius was using much of his brute strength to fend off the dactyls, Alvantin stuck to his magic, and Philistian swung his swords gracefully through the dactyls. It looked as if he was almost enjoying it, but perhaps it was due to the bent up frustration of being incarcerated for so long. There were still two other members of the company that were still unaccounted for.

Far away from the company Maurelan had been searching for Golondred, fearing the worst. In the dense snow, she could only see the imprint of his body where he had fallen off his horse. Approaching the edge, she could hear his signature grunts and moans coming from over the side of the cliff. Somehow, he had managed to keep himself from falling to his death by grabbing hold of a large fissure, delving in from the side of the cliff. Surprisingly, the round man was adept enough to survive as long as he did, hanging there, looking down at the rocky surface and the ocean ready to claim him. Maurelan grunted as she inched down to save his life.

“Golondred!” she called, seeing his head perk up. “Take my whip!”

“You're crazy lass!” he shouted with a quick, humorous chuckle. “Do ya know how much I weigh?!”

There was one irrefutable quality of Golondred that she could not deny, and that was his unfailing ability to find humor in even the most hair-raising situations. The joke was humorous, but true at the same time. He could pull both of them to their death if she was not strong enough to lift him up or in the least, grip it long enough to allow him to climb up. And even if she could, the dactyls would be upon them in no time.

Throwing caution to the wind, she dangled her whip over the edge. Grabbing a firm hold of it, Golondred tugged cautiously, being careful not to put all of his weight on it. Although he could feel her struggle to pull him up, he was surprised to see how strong she actually was; a young, petite woman such as her with more strength than half of the men in Centronius.

“Come on, hurry!” she called to him.

He had barely enough time to make his way to the surface, when he saw one of the dactyls appear out of the clouded sky from above.

“Look out!” he yelled.

Maurelan shrieked loudly as the dactyl clutched a hold of her hair, fiercely trying to lift her off the ground. This caused her to let go of the whip, leaving Golondred to hang onto dear life merely by the hilt of his knife that he had barely managed to pull out and shove into the side of the mountain. She watched him dangle to the cliff, but was unable to help or pry herself free. She could hear the strands of her hair tearing as she fought wildly with the creature. In the struggle, it released her hair –thankfully, before it was completely torn out - only to gain a solid grip on her right arm. With great force, it yanked her off the ground and straight into the air.

“Maurelan!” shouted Golondred who had finally managed to climb up to safety.

Now airborne, she was soaring in the air along with her captor. Squirming and wriggling, she tried to free herself, but the dactyl's grip was so tight it began to cut off circulation to her arm. They were gaining altitude, hovering above the isthmus, and she in jeopardy of falling to the seas below. Through the corner of her

eye she could see Golondred looking up at her, and a few seconds later she barely caught a glimpse of a blurry figure arriving, running up with his bow pointed high. Before she could even continue struggling with the creature, it had been struck with an arrow through the chest. Clutching its wound, the dactyl shrieked in agony and dropped Maurelan to the ground.

Someone caught her. She was expecting to see the gruffly face of Golondred, but was surprised to see that Philistian was her savior. The pathfinder set her to her feet, looking down at her with the hint of a smirk. She looked up at him – she could have sworn she detected a slight smirk on his face – speechless, unsure of what to say. Although she had released him from his prison, she did not expect him to go out of his way for anyone. She expected the injustices committed against him – as well as those he may have committed against others - had taken away his ability to care about the lives of others, especially considering the situation he had been in just a few days ago. Then again, she did not really know him at all, and she suddenly found herself unsure about what she once thought of him.

“By the gods, lass,” Golondred broke the silence he said with a quick chuckle. “You sure know how ta’ ride of luck, don’t ya?”

“Luck?” she looked at him peculiarly. “I wasn’t the one hanging over the side of a cliff.”

“Here,” said Philistian, retrieving Maurelan’s whip, handing it to her. “You might want to hold onto this. If those things attack you again, you’ll want to... look out!”

He stood in front of her as several dactyls appeared from the mist before them, flying by, attempting to knock the three of them off their feet. The pathfinder clashed with them, dodging several attacks and striking back with several vicious attacks of his own. He was knocked down by three dactyls that charged into him at the same time, but quickly rebounded, leaping into the air, lopping heads clean off with his swords. Maurelan continued to stand her ground as well. With a flick of her wrist she managed to wrap her whip around the neck of one of the dactyls, snapping its neck. Then she took out her dagger and proceeded to stab the next dactyl, skillfully diving and rolling beneath the claw slash of another, rebounding

with a crack of her whip. The whip lassoed around the ankle of the dactyl, and she gave it a hard tug, causing the dactyl to fall to the ground. She stabbed the creature several times and watched it die under the force of her Tovien-accented blade.

One by one the dactyls seemed to multiply and swarm until they were a whipping blur of wings and talons circling them. There were so many of them that the constant flapping of their wings had caused Maurelan's hair to wisp all over her face until she could no longer see what was directly in front of her. It seemed as if the entire pack of dactyls had left Trulaine and the rest of the company in an attempt to swarm around Maurelan.

"Close your eyes," she called to Philistian and Golondred. Treading carefully on core of her very soul, she charged the store within her and burst forth a powerful bout of magic, one that she was glad to finally use on a real opponent.

"GLOOMINUS ZIDIKI!"

A powerful explosion of light burst from her hand, knocking every dactyl that was in front of her clear across the isthmus. Some of them were knocked clear over the side of the cliff, unconscious and plummeting to their death. Those that were farther away were temporarily blinded, but the blast itself had not afforded them with much time at all.

"Where are the others!?" she asked Philistian.

"Still standing their ground," he said. He did not have to point in the obvious direction toward the mountainous gap. She expected to see a flurry of wings accompanied by the deafening sounds of battle, but all was silent. As they ran to aid the rest of the company Brontius stopped them. There was an unsure look on his face. Alvantin and Bernarsu stood nearby, stunned as well, and unsure whether it was safe to approach the fearless, unbreakable leader that stood in the bloody snow, surrounded by dactyl carcasses.

Trulaine was speckled with blood, his eyes still wide with rage, his breathing uneven.

He had left one the dactyls alive. He pinned the creature to the cold surface with a rugged boot delving into its neck and a heavy flow of blood gushing from its mouth. With broken ribs, battered wings, and a large gash bleeding through its side, the dactyl shivered in fear.

“Who sent you after us?!” he said.

“SHALLEMEIGN!” the creature cried out in utter fear with no hesitation.

Hearing the warlord's name escape the dactyl's mouth came as quite a shock to Trulaine; it struck him, punctured his heart in a way that made him shudder. Suddenly his mind was thrown into confusion as he struggled to figure out how this was even possible, and why it was happening now of all times.

For years the warlord known as Shallemeign had claimed himself the sworn enemy of the Centronus, seeing it as his rightful throne. He was more feared than any other man in the known world but even he had never been able to plan a successful siege against the Centronian kingdom. The walls of Centronus had been too high, too strong, and too well fortified to fall to any foreign invader. That was not the only reason Shallemeign's efforts had failed to yield results. Part of the reason was the fact that he had never been able to expand his regime to include any other tribes; only his brethren, the Stenetians were ever allowed to join his ranks. His hatred and ultimate lack of trust in the rest of humanity had always prevented him from doing so. His armies have ever only included only one tribe, and that was a Stenetian one. But if that were the case, then why did he recruit dactyl spies? And if he could recruit dactyls - some of the most vile and hated races among the spellbound tribes - then it was likely that by now he would align himself with any race of cursed men in order to see the free nations fall. And if that were the case, then it was plausible that he would go after Centronius first. But maybe he had other plans before hatching his grand scheme, like making sure that Trulaine, the Centronian heir was dead. It made perfect sense; to hunt Trulaine down now, at a time when he did not have the Centronian army to fight beside. He was alone, with a small brigade, lost in the most dangerous heights in the world. Of course Shallemeign would be hunting them now. But how did he know Trulaine would be secluded with such a small band of warriors, and how did he

seem to know exactly where they would be? How? The dactyls made exquisite spies and even better scouts, but despite their inherent navigational skills it would still be impossible for them to find Trulaine in one random region in all of the nine realms without first being told his exact location. It was no surprise though. They had become fugitives over the course of a single night, so by now every mercenary from here to the Southern Reach probably wanted them. But by now they had received a death warrant straight from the top of their enemy's list if Shallemeign had already caught wind of his whereabouts. This sudden attack had brought up more questions than answers, and he intended to interrogate this last surviving dactyl as much as he could.

He released his foothold from the dactyl, and grabbed it by the neck, thrusting him hard against the side of the mountain. The dactyl stood there, already wounded, trembling with his back against the rocky wall; his arms and wings spread out in a gesture of surrender, fear etched abrasively across his gaunt, scar-ridden face. Trulaine stood with his sword held high, ready to smite his final opponent. He could kill him now, and would have very much liked to, but then he remembered something he had heard being uttered among the lot of them before the attack. The dactyls had spoken only in mumbled squawks it seemed, but there was one thing he had been able to discern from all the rambling, and here was his final chance to understand it completely. With his hand still on the creature's throat, he squeezed, making the dactyl choke a bit and causing blood to flow from its mouth before questioning him.

“What is this map that you speak of? And what does Shallemeign want with it? I heard one of your brethren mention it before we slaughtered them all.”

“I do not know!”

“You lie, demon!” he yelled, putting even more pressure on his throat. “He must have told you something if you were willing to track me down and risk your life to attack us!”

“We are dactyls!” he squealed. “We are unworthy of knowing... his secrets. He does not tell...does not hint...does not trust in his lower subjects...He treats us

as if we are nothing...He feeds us scraps for our deeds...I swear by the gods, he tells us nothing! NOTHING!”

“You must have heard something from the warlord. Even if it was something you might not have understood, surely he mentioned it...TELL ME, YOU SCUM!”

Trulaine shoved his boot even farther into the dactyl’s neck, waiting for an answer. Behind him stood his entire company, everyone accounted for. Now taking in angry glares from not one but seven battle-ready veterans, the dactyl looked up with a desperate flutter in its beady eyes as if praying that its next response would be accepted and some kind of mercy would be granted.

“All I know...is that he is looking for the sources!” cried the dactyl. “He is...looking for them!”

“The sources? What sources?!”

“Please, I do not know!” the dactyl continued to plead and ramble. “Do not kill me! I have...loved ones to care for! Please, just-”

Suddenly, the dactyl perked its head up, gazing into the night sky. A long smirk streaked across his even longer beak, his olive green skin stretching into a devious smile. Trulaine looked up over his shoulder into the sky behind them, and to his utter disbelief, he could see another wave of dactyls swarming in, even more than there had been before.

His heart sank.

“We have to get out of here, now!” he called to Brontius, the fastest runner among them. “Find the horses!” The centaur took off, blazing away in the same direction that their horses had gone, through the mountainous gap.

Everything happened so fast. There was panic, there was confusion, and in that brief moment while Trulaine eased the grip on his captor in an attempt to dissect greater matters, the dactyl sought the opportunity to strike. The creature made a swift lunge straight for his jugular vein, but in the blink of an eye, Trulaine ran the dactyl through with his sword, impaling the creature all the way through

the abdomen. The dactyl gagged and contorted, soon dying a brutal death on the end of his father's fabled Centronian blade. He held his foot against the dactyl's chest, prying the sword loose from the bloody carcass.

There were now dozens upon dozens of dactyls swarming in – maybe even a hundred of them - so many that they covered the night sky like a thick blanket; all of them now moving in for the kill.

Immediately Trulaine and his company broke into a sprint for the mountainous gap straight ahead of them. It was the best chance of surviving this new wave onslaught of dactyls, and if they did not make by the time the horde landed, then they would surely never make off of this cursed isthmus. The rest of the brigade was right behind Trulaine, running at full pace; somehow Golondred who was the largest of the bunch, almost seemed to be the quickest, sprinting so frantically that he was practically in the lead.

Their getaway, as spirited as it may have been, had proved to be fruitless as they were soon overtaken by this new wave of dactyls, which engulfed them in a heavy cloud of whipping wings and thrashing talons. Fighting off so many dactyls had proved difficult enough, but this time the onslaught of terror was swiftly catching up with them. With sword in hand, Trulaine battled his way through the foray of oncoming dactyls, trying to fend them off while also keeping an eye on his comrades who were all being overwhelmed. In just a few seconds, the entire battle had shifted dramatically.

Trulaine heaved into the foray mercilessly, allowing his rage to boil over just a little as he and his men fought to assist her. More than the others, he felt an urge to keep her safe. He didn't quite know why either. It wasn't just the fact that she was the youngest member of the group, or the fact that she was a female, had fewer weapons, and was less skilled in battle than the others. He did not know the reason. Perhaps it was similar to the reason why he had fought so hard to protect the young men in his brigades. Fighting close to them had made him feel less guilty if they had died in his hands rather than alone beside some brook in the enemy's camp. And even though Maurelan had proved that she needed far less protection than he had previously thought, he still felt the need to protect her. He had

to protect all of them. But even for someone with near superhuman strength and prowess, this fight was impossible.

The royal council had been foolish to send them into oblivion so unmanned, so unprotected. And Trulaine was an even bigger fool for agreeing to undertake such a daunting task so unprepared; to save the world on the brink of collapse with only a handful of men and take on forces that the council never even acknowledged had been. They would all lose their lives, and it would be his entire fault. They had trusted him because of his so called ‘legendary combat reveré,’ and now they had been lured into an inescapable death trap, fighting for their lives atop a wintery hell perched over a thousand feet above the sea. And what about the all-powerful gods? Surely they were watching somewhere in the heavens far above them. Trulaine never did have much faith in them, but he still knew they were there, watching.

Please, he thought to himself.

What was he thinking? It was too late to be spared by divine intervention. So many times in the past he had condemned the deities for bestowing this unholy mess upon humanity, he had turned his back on them time and time again, and now just days after entering the hell known as the Southern Reach, he had called upon their blessing. But it was far too late to pray to them now. In fact, they were probably taking delight in the eve of his demise. His impeccable skill in battle, his near superhuman rage, even his prayers were not enough to save him now.

Darkness fell over them, a shroud of wings and talons blurring all around. Trulaine now swung blindly, unable to subdue the feeling that this was the end. How could they lose everything they had worked so hard to keep...here...so unexpectedly...so soon? They had barely been on the road for a week, and worse than that, they had barely even become aware of their true enemy before they had already proved to be no match for his efforts. Shallemeign had crushed them from hundreds of miles away with a single command and Trulaine had been powerless to stop it. This was it. The isthmus would be the last place they would ever see.

It couldn't end like this, thought Trulaine. It just couldn't.

The same darkness that had come over him in the Memradonian fields had come over him now. And even though it consumed him, he continued to fight, but he felt that same cold feeling he had felt when he battled the werewolves. He felt like closing his eyes and thinking of the only place that had made sense to him, the only place he knew of peace that was in the loving embrace of Deneaden. The thought of her had given him something. Perhaps it was strength. Perhaps it was courage, or faith. He could not tell. One final rush of energy, perhaps a second to spare – on Trulaine’s behalf at least – before they were completely engulfed. Darkness had washed over them indeed, but somehow it was not the end.

Just then there was a tumultuous ruckus above them, and Trulaine could feel the pressure of the assault weaken. It was impossible to see what was happening beyond the darkness, but it seemed as if the dactyls had suddenly shifted in a wave of panic. There was screeching, and clamoring. They trampled over each other trying to fly clear of some new, unseen attack. Dozens of them had suddenly dropped dead, riddled with arrows.

“We've got help lads!” Golondred's voice came through the mist, warning the rest of them. As he was a bit further ahead, he could see what Trulaine could not. “It's a volley, take cover!”

In the brief absence of the dactyl's most spirited attack, Trulaine looked in the direction of the volley to see which brave souls had come to their rescue. He could barely catch a glimpse of what appeared to be dozens of cloaked figures standing upon the mountaintop where the drifting clouds obscured his vision of them. He felt his confidence resurface. The dactyls were indeed retreating, and in great numbers.

“Come!” Trulaine shouted to the rest of them. “Make for the mountainous gap! Stay clear of the arrows!”

He continued to fight the remaining dactyls off, trying to get a visual on the status of his company. The volley had only reached the first wave of dactyls near he and Golondred, and those farther away had begun one last, furious final attack. A group of them had pounced desperately onto Bernarsu’s back, throwing him off

balance. Another dactyl rushed up to grab his fallen blade, and stabbed in the shoulder with it. He gave a loud shriek of agony.

“Bernarsu!” cried Maurelan. She ran toward him, fighting off her opponents mostly with powerful bursts of light magic and definitive slashes from her blade.

By the time she reached him, Alvantin was already at his aid, both creating an enchantment to fend off his attackers and mending Bernarsu's wound at the same time. It was not a very strong mend, but a quick cauterization to the wound should be enough to get Bernarsu through the rest of the battle as long as he was well guarded. Maurelan took his arm around her shoulder to aid him in their escape.

The sound of one final volley shot off forth, propelled once again by the mysterious clan of soldiers perched along the mountaintop. It was a viscous flurry of arrows that struck the last wave of dactyls at their core, causing them to shriek and flap their wings in retreat.

The rest of Trulaine's brigade continued to make their way toward the safe gap between the mountain while Maurelan and Shallemeign bringing up the rear as they carried Bernarsu across the end of the isthmus. Maurelan glanced over her shoulder at the remaining group of dactyls that had survived the final volley. They had abandoned their attack, taking flight into the clouds above. The last few dactyls however, soared in Maurelan's direction, managing to get close to her before retreating with the rest of the pack. With a lucky swipe, one of them reached out with the claws on its feet and snatched the chain off of her neck.

“NO!” she cried.

Releasing Bernarsu, she rushed back to pursue the thief dactyl, but it was too late. She could do nothing but watch helplessly as the dactyls flew into the night sky, the very last one, clutching her most valuable possession; the pendant, which concealed the alchemist map. The gravity of what happened hit her quickly. Within the blink of an eye, their fortunes had changed. At this very moment the pendant was on its way to the hands of the warlord himself, and with it, the location of the four remaining gemstones would be compromised.

In the closing moments of silence she did not have to hint to Bernarsu that she had just failed her father's dying wish, she could already see by the look on his face, he already knew. Standing there hunched over in pain, and being supported by Shallemeign, Bernarsu looked as if he wanted to speak, perhaps even scold her for losing the map, but he said nothing. How could she have allowed this to happen, especially after all they had been through to get this far?

That's right, Maurelan, she told herself. Play it off, it's what you're good at anyway. Even if it kills you to be the one to do it, father couldn't have trusted a better fool.

Trulaine finally made his way over to them, wrapping Bernarsu's left arm over his shoulder to help support him the rest of the way across the isthmus. By the gracious look on his face she could tell that he was just glad that they had all survived the attack. This also meant that he was oblivious of course; oblivious of her treachery. She had lied to him throughout the entire journey, withheld the truth from the Centronian king, and now, at the height of her conviction as the sole protector of the map - a map that revealed the locations of one of the most sacred forms of magic known to man - she had lost it. It was enough to make her stomach churn, but she had managed to keep a straight face. It was the least she could do.

"Are you okay?" Trulaine said to her. The last time he had asked her that, he had nearly taken her head off. She did not want a repeat of that instance by telling him what she had lost. She gave him a quick nod and proceeded to make her way to the gap where the others stood waiting in safety. For the rest of them there was only the notion of dealing with the strange new brigade that had just saved them, but for her it would be an entirely different set of mental stresses and moral guilt to deal with. The most dreadful of which was picking the right time and the right place to inform Trulaine that she had possibly doomed their mission before they would ever really have a chance to complete it. Solemnly, almost reluctantly, she followed them into the refuge of the mountainous gap. Nothing could right the horrendous calamity she had brought upon them...nothing.



The Order

So much had happened in the last few minutes that Trulaine could hardly collect his thoughts. They had nearly been torn to shreds by a pack of wild dactyls, had almost lost Golondred to the treacherous cliffs below, narrowly avoided being struck with a volley of arrows, and now Bernarsu had been wounded. And now they were confronted with another obstacle, for the men on the cliffs did not lower their arrows, they had them pointed down at Trulaine and his company.

In the gap just ahead, Trulaine could see Brontius standing there next to the man who appeared to be in charge of the band of warriors. Beside him were their five remaining horses.

With his hands held high, Trulaine stepped forward shouting up at them with a great, loud voice that echoed clearly through the mountainous gap.

“I am Trulaine, military heir of Centronus! We wish to pass through!”

His words were informative yet brief. The commander at the top of the mountain spoke something back to him, but he could not discern the words. Trulaine took a few steps closer to get a better listen. As the commander finished shouting back, he could tell that it was indeed a different language, and not the same Centronian dialect that he was used to. For a moment it occurred to Trulaine that he should proceed through the gap, but the fact that the soldiers continued to point their arrows in their direction did not bode very well with his gut instinct.

Then, something unexpected happened. Philistian stepped forward. It was not something that Trulaine would have approved of especially since it was just moments ago when he had commanded all of them to halt. He reached out to

seize the Philistian arm, but he was ignored. The pathfinder had already spoken in a language that sounded identical to the one he had heard the commander speak on the mountaintop. Philistian and the commander ended their exchange with similar salutes. The soldiers withdrew their weapons.

How did Philistian know this mysterious band of warriors? And more importantly, how did they know him? Was this perhaps a trap that he had been leading them into all this time, planning long in advance to have Trulaine, the Centronian heir, murdered by a vengeful guild of assassins? It was Maurelan who had suggested they locate the pathfinder, under the impression that he would be the only known person with knowledge of how to find the Underworld. It seemed foolish that Trulaine ever thought he could trust Philistian in the first place. Whatever the case, the little trust that he once had in Philistian's resolve was quickly dwindling once more.

“There,” said Philistian. “We are granted entrance.”

“Friends of yours?” said Trulaine sarcastically. He did not want to react without cause in a situation that he was not completely sure of. Just a moment ago, he was ready to cut Philistian down for leading them into a trap, and now he was beginning to wonder if he should be thanking him for affirming their passage. Still, it was a bit unsettling, how little he knew about the pathfinder, and Maurelan for that matter, but they had still proved helpful in situations such as this. Trulaine did not know what to think about it at this time, but perhaps an attack by a pack of wild dactyls sent to do Shallemeign's bidding had made any refuge - no matter how untrustworthy - seem like a welcome retreat.

“You are in luck, captain,” said Philistian as the rest of them began to cross the threshold of the gap. “Your reputation precedes you.”

“Listen to me,” said Trulaine, ignoring the fact that it was his own name and Philistian's words that had just helped gain them entrance. “I do not care where you claim your allegiances lie. I care about one thing, and that is to see my mission to the end. If this is a trap of some kind, by gods, I will not hesitate to strike you down.”

He watched Philistian's expression change to those words.

“If you kill me,” said Philistian, a challenging look in his eyes. “Then you will never be able to find the underworld. Therefore it is my word we will be trusting, Centronian.”

Trulaine watched him carefully as he turned to enter the gap. It took him a few seconds to realize that his hand had wandered to his sword's hilt once again as they finished their exchange. He moved forward, keeping Philistian close within his sights.

As they headed through the passage, the soldiers made their way down the elevated cliffs, working their way toward the gap. Trulaine could see that they were stocked full of arrows, armors, and swords. Wherever their headquarters were located, it must have been strongly fortified and well supplied. Their cloaks were threaded with thick material, and their formations were sound and disciplined. Trulaine got the impression that they were not merely a struggling nomadic tribe, but a sophisticated band of men. They had knowledge of him, and he had never even heard of them. That was one thing he hated about inheriting such royalty. Everyone knew who he was.

As they entered the gap, Trulaine watched as the soldiers made their way down, descending what appeared to be a smoothed, man-made ramp cut straight out from the side of the mountain. Pair by pair they made their way down to the summit of the isthmus where Trulaine and his seven comrades stood, weary and hoping for a greeting that did not involve a quarrel.

“Trulaine of Centronus,” said the commander, approaching him as if he were about to greet the Centronian with a humble greeting. Without warning however, he grabbed Trulaine by his collar. He could hear the objections of his small brigade behind him; even Maurelan called out in protest.

“Bakarne!” shouted Philistian, trying to warn him that any further violence would be unnecessary, but the commander seemed to take personal delight in heaving the Centronian to the ground as he began to rant.

“What high ranking member of The Leadership, who is sworn to uphold justice in the twelve kingdoms, would allow an innocent pathfinder to be imprisoned and sentenced to die without offering proof of his crimes? What kind of-”

Before Bakarne could speak another word, Trulaine broke through his guard, and knocked him hard onto his back, grounding him so swiftly that any further movement was only met by the pointed tip of his Centronian blade, which pierced his neck just enough to shed a drop of blood.

“Now,” growled Trulaine. “If it is execution without charge you accuse me of, then your death would be my first offense.” Immediately, a hundred arrows were drawn, all aimed at Trulaine, ready to end his life at a moment's notice. But he did not care. His anger was too great. It was that same uncanny rage that he had been unable to explain which had just subsided after the dactyl attack, and now it was resurfacing again. He had always made an attempt to manage it, but right now he felt like exploding into it and severing Bakarne's head clean off his shoulders. Following the attack, and after hoping for anything but this unsettling welcome, he did not care about what would happen next. It was Golondred's voice that brought him back to reality, back to the situation at hand; it was probably the only thing that made him realize where they were and how easily it could all end for them.

“Trulaine,” he said, putting a hand on his captain's blade.

Finally, Trulaine lowered his weapon, allowing Bakarne to rise to his feet. The clan's commander looked enraged, yet his eyes seemed to glow with a newfound respect for Trulaine as he considered him again, marveled by his great show of speed and skill. Slowly, his men lowered their bows, but Trulaine who was ever defiant, still held his sword high, ready for yet another battle.

“Why did you attack me?”

“You are a Centronian captain,” Bakarne reaffirmed, pointing to the prancing Pegasus that decorated Trulaine's armor. “I recognize the emblem. As a high ranking member of the royal council, you must have overseen Philistian's sentence.”

“I am a high ranking official. Son of the late king Trumandius, and military heir of Centronus, but I did not oversee any of the sentences issued at the time of Philistian's imprisonment.”

There was a pause, and suddenly Bakarne marveled at him in awe, even more surprised now than he was when he saw how much speed lurked in Trulaine's heavy frame.

“You are...the son of Trumandius?” said Bakarne, an unmistakable thread of regret in his voice.

“Yes,” said Trulaine, bewildered as the cloaked soldiers broke out in whispers of shock all around him. He could not help but wonder what would happen now? Would he be attacked again for even mentioning his father's name? To his surprise however, Bakarne and his men were now bowing graciously before him, and Golondred who just moments ago had talked his captain out of getting them all slaughtered was now speechless, his mouth hung open as if about to ask if he had missed something in between. Trulaine lowered his weapon for it was obvious that they were no longer in danger. It suddenly seemed as if they would be treated like kings; it was indeed a sudden shift of gratitude for something he had barely even understood.

“I did not know,” said Bakarne. “My apologies. We are in your service.”

“Yes, but why?” snorted Brontius, the only other member of Trulaine's group who still had his weapon drawn, and was only now putting it away.

“Just a moment ago you were ready to kill us all,” added Alvantin who was still supporting the injured Bernarsu, now with the aid of Maurelan.

“If it is the Trumandius that we are familiar with, the former king of Centronus,” Bakarne continued. “Then we are indebted to you.”

“What?” Trulaine said, dumbfounded like the rest of his company.

It was a bold claim that Bakarne made, one that Trulaine could not take seriously. In fact he was wondering when the joke would be revealed, but Bakarne continued on with straightforward sincerity.

With that, Bakarne gave commands to his men, and immediately they escorted Bernarsu to an undisclosed location where a series of tents were spread out along a leveled-out stretch of terrain at the peak of the mountain.

“Where are they taking him?” asked Maurelan, concerned.

“He is wounded,” answered Bakarne. “Our shamans have taken him for healing.”

“Shamans?” Trulaine inquired. “Shamanic magic is only permitted within the provinces.”

“Says your king,” Bakarne asserted. “A member of the Order must be versed in all forms of magic. All of our men must learn to acquire magical shamanism. It is part of our culture.”

“You go against the Leadership’s laws.”

“Yes, but we are not subject to your laws because we dwell outside of your jurisdiction.”

Trulaine could not combat the notion, so far out here, away from Centronus. This was their land. Perhaps they had the right to appropriate it in any way they saw fit. Through the corner of his eye he could see Alvantin give a scowl.

The early signs of dawn broke across the horizon. As the wind died down, and the sun slowly rose in the east, the beauty of the python isthmus had just become fully visible to them. It was the first time that it had occurred to any of them that the dangerous cliffs they had once associated with death and peril had suddenly shown them such a great and majestic side of nature.

They came to a cliff that appeared to be steep at first glance, which soon leveled evenly into a smooth peak that housed a myriad of tents. A few members of the Order stepped out of the tents, each taking a peak, curious about what could have possibly brought outsiders into their domain. There were horses herded in small groups here and there, and farther away they saw other animals. An assortment of birds took flight and perched on branches, dogs trotted faithfully beside their masters, and goats crossed their path several times.

Trulaine was intrigued to see that there was an entire tribe of men – to his surprise, uncursed men – patrolling the borders of the Southern Reach. He could not help but to think, if there were tribes in this region, how many others had sur-

vived the curse as well. And although it was his mission to save all that may come to an end, Trulaine could not help but to notice that he was fulfilling the dream that Centronus had sought out to begin with, which involved discovering new nations in the hope of gaining allies. But the fact that this particular group of people had such knowledge of Centronus – and even more shocking, knowledge of his father - and Trulaine had no knowledge of them, was not a comfortable thought.

They were led into a tent. Inside was a nice setup full of wooden designs; chairs, tables, beds, and dressers, even a bookshelf that stood in the corner of the tent. Standing near one of the tables looking over a pair of maps was a tall man; muscular and stern, not much different in appearance from Trulaine himself, but perhaps a bit younger, and his right eye was covered and bandaged.

“Gundomar,” said Philistian. The man looked up, seizing Philistian with his gaze, and his jaw dropped slowly as if he had seen a ghost.

“Impossible,” said Gundomar, shocked. “When my men told me that someone had been foolish enough to trek across the python isthmus and invade our lands, I was expecting to see a pack of insane brutes, not my own kid brother.”

Trulaine was surprised before at how Philistian somehow knew this tribe of nomads, but now he was completely baffled to know that they were related. Confusion swirled in his mind as he saw the two brothers embrace each other with a hug. Was it really some kind of bizarre trap awaiting them, orchestrated by the pathfinder and his minions, or was the world outside of Centronus really smaller than he thought?

“You buyin’ this?” Golondred whispered to Alvantin.

“Hardly,” responded the shaman.

“How on earth did you escape?” Gundomar asked his brother.

“With help,” admitted Philistian pointing to Trulaine and his company.

“Their help.”

“He is the son of Trumandius,” mentioned Bakarne before Gundomar could even acknowledge the Centronian captain standing there with his company, still keeping their humble distance from the rest of Gundomar’s men.

The expression of Gundomar – which had already displayed his gratitude – went from pleased to thankful as he approached Trulaine with just as much appreciation as he had shown his own brother.

“A Centronian,” said Gundomar considering him. “The son of our old ally himself...so far from the motherland?”

“I was unaware of that.”

“You should be unaware of many things, including the location of my people. However, since my own flesh and blood felt compelled to bring you, I am guessing that the matter is important.” He gave Philistian a squinted eyed look that was barely noticeable, but Trulaine did detect it. “So tell me...to what do I owe the visit?”

“The fountain of enchantment has erupted,” said Trulaine, choosing not to make small talk. “I am assuming that word has reached your ears by now.”

“Yes, I have heard. But I did not think that Centronus would begin evacuating its citizens this soon.” He chuckled, a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “To think, your king, on his high throne would even notice the view...hmm.”

“Well he has,” stated Trulaine boldly. “And we are not evacuating, but we have gathered to combat this threat, no matter how impossible it may seem. We must enter negotiations with the king of WinDarrow.”

“WinDarrow,” said Gundomar with a chuckle. “You will not be able to get there. At least not until this season is over.”

“We cannot wait that long.”

“And yet you have no authority to pass.”

Trulaine felt a fluster as he realized that his will was being challenged. It was like a sting to the heart and he wanted to lash back. Another bout of anger began to swell within him but he was able to calm it.

“You are familiar with Centronian law...”

“Yes,” said Gundomar.

“You are also aware that a sworn oath to defend or even save mankind at all costs is apart of that law.”

“Yes, and I am aware that it is the elders of your tribe who call it a holy mandate. But that does not mean that I can just let you cross our borders, for we have orders of our own.”

“Look,” Trulaine continued on. “We do not need your guidance or your permission. The inhabitants of that realm can provide us with the whereabouts of one of the fabled vessel of Ranok. We do not need your assistance to get us there. We have our own guide.”

“I was not offering for any. And you are referring to my brother.”

“Your brother was an assassin prisoner, condemned to die on the eve of morning. We spared his life. He is in our debt. We have joined to help save this world, and all we ask for is an ounce of cooperation. You should be thanking us for all that we’ve done and all that we’re doing. Instead you deny us.”

Gundomar stared Trulaine in the eye for a brief moment, admiring his zeal from across the room, but he took no pride in denying the Centronian captain his request. It really pained him, because with Trulaine being the only person with knowledge of how to reverse the effects of the enchanted fountain made it difficult to deny him passage. But even outside of the request of his superiors, it would be foolish to let them pass.

“All that I have denied you is your own demise, my friend. Surely your king informed you,” he paused, glaring out at the bright, full moon through one of the holes in the tent. “There are werewolves out there, enforce tonight.”

“Werewolves?” said Trulaine in concern.

“Hordes of them. Your king did not tell you about the war that is still waging on, did he?”

“I have heard of no such war.”

“For nearly two full moons, WinDarrow has been under siege by a mysterious horde of werewolves unknown to us. They are bloodthirsty savages. But surprisingly, it is not flesh that they crave this time; apparently there is plenty of that in the wilds.”

“So what’re they after?” Golondred interjected.

“It seems that the savages have run out of their water supply. And that has caused them to migrate through these lands, destroying everything in their path until eventually they found a suitable source. WinDarrow happens to be full of water, enough of it to supply two kingdoms. So you see? I share your sentiment, but if I let you go then I would be sending you to your death, and perhaps the fate the world might truly be sealed. I'm sorry I could not be of more use to you, lad,” he said as humbly as possible. “You can stay in our camp through the night, but in the morning when you leave you must go the way you came. I will send archers to defend you in case any dactyls try to attack you from the skies, but if you try to go around my command those same arrows may have to be used to take you down.”

You bastard, Gundomar, Trulaine thought to himself.

He knew that the leader of the Order was serious about every word, but he did not expect this to be the outcome. But perhaps he was right anyway. If werewolves were occupying the path to WinDarrow, then they would never make it. He was only trying to save them from certain death and Trulaine couldn't be mad at him. If only king Cathedeus had known about this unfortunate circumstance, perhaps he would have agreed to send an army or allow Trulaine to wait until this war was over. But this was the Southern Reach and much that transgressed in these lands never made it to Centronian ears. And who were his superiors anyway? The thought had crossed his mind briefly but there was so much running through it that he failed to ask the question.

How were they ever going to get to WinDarrow now? And how would he tell his king that his mission was doomed to start simply because he could not gain access because of one man who was not even a member of the province. But what could he do? He had already put his company in enough danger and he did not want to jeopardize their lives any more than he already had.

With a heavy head, he slowly nodded, staring straight forward, unblinking. There were a million things running through his mind and none of them good.



A Night in the Southern Borders

That night, while the rest of the company dozed off, Trulaine did not sleep at all. It was not because of the fact that they could not pass - something he was definitely having a hard time coming to grips with - neither was it all the other things that had shattered his focus over the past few days. It was his dreams. Not even the thought of what might happen if they failed gave him more fear than sleeping at this point. He was acutely aware that something was not right with his dreams. He did not know for sure, but after the last nightmare he was beginning to wonder if there was something...unnatural about them. He had not slept in the past couple of nights. In between those times, when everyone else slept soundly, he had only taken a few naps; just enough to keep him awake during their travels. But even during those brief moments of slumber, he had felt the presence of something weighing heavily on his mind. Perhaps it was the guilt of his conscious. After all, Golondred had teased many times in the past that it was a thing that Trulaine lacked altogether. Perhaps he had been right. Maybe it was the guilt of personally knowing countless dead soldiers who had fallen under his command that had finally begun to tear him down.

On this night, rather than tending to his own psychological wounds, he decided to keep his mind occupied by surveying each tent of his company. Gundomar had provided them with three spare tents. Trulaine shared one tent with Golondred, Brontius and Alvantin shared another, while Maurelan and Bernarsu shared the third.

Trulaine could not account for the whereabouts of their newest recruit, Philistian, but due to the fact that they were now in his brother's domain, he did not feel

the once constant urge to keep an eye on the pathfinder. Here, he did not have to worry about him slipping out and leaving them alone in uncharted territory. Perhaps after meeting Gundomar, Trulaine had almost been convinced that Philistian would have found some new desire to see their mission succeed and the earth restored to its normal state. Perhaps now that the circumstances had changed, Philistian would have a change of heart. Perhaps he would even convince his brother to allow them to pass. But Trulaine did not want to fool himself into believing that Philistian still did not resent the Centronians and the Leadership for the murder he had been convicted him of. Besides, he had to check up on the company. All the other members were fast asleep, with the exception of Maurelan whom once again stayed awake through the night to watch over her wounded companion, Bernarsu.

“How is he?” Trulaine asked as he entered her tent.

“Sedated,” she said sitting beside the big, resting brute. She kept close to him, padding his sweaty forehead with a cool damp rag. “He has been sleep for a couple hours now. Whatever they did, it helped, but he is still running a fever.”

“It was nothing Alvantin could not have done himself. I am sure of it.”

“You don’t trust them, do you? The Order.”

“It is not a matter of trust. If we are forced to turn around, this could ruin our mission. I cannot allow that to happen.”

Maurelan looked up at him and he could see that her face was puffy and her eyes watered. She had been crying. At first he had figured maybe she had thought about her father, or perhaps her tears were for the well being of Bernarsu. Maybe she had suffered a wound other than the scratch across the cheek that she had received during the battle with the dactyls. Any of those possibilities could have flashed through his mind, until he noticed something else was different about her.

“Maurelan,” he said, glancing at her neck. “Where is your necklace? Where is the map that you showed me when we first left Centronus?”

Her eyes suddenly wandered around aimlessly in her head as she looked for a suitable excuse. But there was none, and she knew it. Perhaps it was time she

stopped trying to hide things and just told the ugly truth the same way it had been presented to her.

“You’ll kill me!” she screamed, bursting into fresh tears. “I didn’t want to tell you earlier because so much had happened and I didn’t want to burden you with it...”

“It’s okay,” he said, holding her to calm her sobbing. “It’s okay.”

He reached out and touched her hands, letting her know that she could trust him with whatever news she had to tell.

She re-counted the story to him, the brief moment when one of the dactyls had snatched the map from her. He listened, the entire time, comforting her. It was a surprise to her of course. A few days ago if she would have admitted to something so calamitous, there was no telling what kind of reaction he would have had. Her cheek was still sore from when he had slapped her after their escape from Torund, and now for some reason, he was not so angry with her. Perhaps he no longer saw her as the common little thief who had snuck past the Centronian guard and had violated their most sacred meeting.

Over the past number of days Trulaine had connected with her struggle and sympathized with her situation. He knew what it was like to live without a father himself, but he had been a child when his father died. Maurelan on the other hand had just recently lost hers. Recent events had to have rattled her faith, and she was just a local villager, not one of his warriors, groomed on the battlefield. Still, he had yet to see the extent of the fervor that dwelled within her. Perhaps it was for all these reasons that he did not lash out at her this time. He could have lashed out at her, or he could have done something that he felt he had not done since their journey began, and that was to be an actual leader and take responsibility for everything that had happened, regardless of if it had been a result of his actions or hers. They were all responsible for what happened now. What was done was done. The alchemist map was lost. If the dactyls hunting them had really been spies of Shallemeign, then he would have already had the map in his possession, and soon he would find what he was looking for. If their situation was not already bad enough before, Trulaine was certain that it was now. He could blame her for all of

it; losing the map, making them fugitives, rushing them to leave without the consent of the king...everything. But there was no need. These things were not entirely her fault. They were just the way things happened.

“Do not hold this over your head,” he said. “We will find a way into WinDarrow.”

“If we do not stop this,” she looked up at him with both tears and concern in her eyes. “I fail my father, and we fail the world.”

“Trust me,” said Trulaine, standing to his feet. “No one knows the consequences of our plight more than I do, and every man here is willing to put his life on the line. If we do not all end up getting killed fighting our way out of here we will still have a long journey ahead of us. Get some sleep.”

With those words he exited the tent, leaving Maurelan with some solace.

She sat there for a moment, unmoving, unflinching, but still very detached from the moment. She did not know whether to take Trulaine’s demeanor as a personal victory of acceptance or simply just a random mood that for some reason was positive in such a dire time.

She sat back against the cot, still cradling Bernarsu’s head as he slept when she saw a shadow moving outside of the tent. It was Philistian. He poked his head through the entrance, giving her a warm smile.

“How are you holding up?” he said, stepping in.

At first, she remained silent, staring straight forward, trying to ignore him. But the issue she now associated with his face was burning within her.

“Why didn’t you tell us you were leading us, straight into your brother’s domain? You tricked us.”

“It was no trick. My brother is the watcher of the Southern Reach. It is his duty to secure this region and the lands that lie beyond it. Besides, how else did you figure I knew how to get you where you need to go? Surely I have some association with the surrounding area. I don’t lack knowledge of the Southern provinces the way you Northerners do.”

“And still you found yourself ready to die in a Northern prison just a few days ago. I suppose you should thank me for bringing you back to your roots.”

“Thank you,” he said.

She looked at him crossed, unsure if he was being sarcastic or sincere.

“So what’s next for us?” she asked. “Are you even going to try to convince your brother to let us pass?”

“Try?” he chuckled. “Clearly you do not know my brother. With him it is sacred duty first, and all other priorities second.”

“And is the fate of the world not sacred duty?” she gave him a glare and he could not say anything, for he knew that she had a point. Maurelan turned her attention back to Bernarsu, changing the subject. “And what of his beloved brother?”

“Do you really think I would have still been held captive if he had the time to spring my release?”

“Doesn’t that tear you up inside? The fact that he would rather let you die than abandon his post?”

“Perhaps you will understand the mentality of my people. That when we honor a mandate, it is sacred to go against it, and must be fulfilled no matter what. I wouldn’t expect a Northerner such as yourself to understand that.”

“You’re right, I do not understand. If my father were locked behind a prison bar...” she began, but nearly choked with sorrow, forcing back tears. “There is no way I would let him die. Your brother on the other hand, did not even care it seems, and the first thing you do is embrace him as if he were the one who set you free.”

“You’re right,” he said, glancing her way. “Maybe you are the one I should be embracing.”

She did not expect to hear him say those words. It confused her, shocked her, almost to the point of becoming stiff. She did not look him in the eye, but she

could feel his eyes upon her. She did not want to entertain the thought of blushing but it had raced across her mind for a split second. Was that what I think it was?

“Philistian,” she began.

“Hmm?” he asked, inching closer to her. He reached out and grazed her cheek where she had been scratched. The backs of his fingers were so light that she barely even noticed he had touched her in the dimly lit tent.

“During your sentencing,” she began. “In the trial chambers of Stenetia...I was there.”

“So it is true,” he chuckled. “You and the Centronian really did have a hand in where I ended up.”

“No. I am not a Centronian. I am from Tovien. As the daughter of the regent of that realm, being present at some of the Coterie trials was part of my training. I remember your name, and the crimes they accused you of.”

“So?”

“You were not convicted of conspiracy. You were convicted of assassination itself, weren’t you?”

“I have been imprisoned for nearly two years now. How would you even remember that unless you were one of my prosecutors?”

“Trust me,” she smirked. “I have a really good memory.”

“If you were so perceptive then you would know that I did not kill anyone. All I have ever tried to do my whole life was to save people. But the people turned against me.”

“And I guess I’m supposed to believe that.”

“Believe what you will, girl. I am no murderer.”

She looked him square in the eye and saw an essence of truth that she could not deny. What did it matter to her now anyway? Besides, after being forced to battle their way to the Southern Reach, they were all murderers by now for sure.

Philistian did not say another word. He just stood up and exited the room.

Maurelan sat there, unsure of how to analyze his demeanor. Philistian was different towards her than he was with the others. Perhaps it was because she had saved him. She did not know what to think about it, but she was tired of thinking for one day. She made sure Bernarsu was comfortable before blowing out the candle on the table nearby. She rested her head on the cot, and in no time she was fast asleep.

Trulaine entered his tents where he found Golondred fast asleep. Sleep was such a good idea. And at this point, after only sleeping twice since their departure nearly three weeks ago, it was something that he had been craving for a while. But he could not lie to himself any longer. The only reason why he had stopped sleeping was because of the dreams he had been having. The nightmares that plagued his mind were almost too much for him to bear, and he feared them, feared what they represented, or what they might come to mean.

Whatever the case was, it was too late now. He had already found himself easing into a comfortable position on the cot. By the gods, he was tired. Nothing else had entered his mind but the pleasure of sleep. Not the situation they were in, not the loving memory of his wife; nothing but sleep.

Rest, he thought to himself.

Rest. Just rest.



Ninsul and Ninette

Fire scorched his hands. He looked down at them, gripped by his understanding of mortality but puzzled by the fact that he felt no pain.

No, he thought. Not again.

A remnant of his conscious mind was somehow seeping through his unconscious. This was not typical of normal dreams, and so he knew that once again, the nightmare had gripped him. He recognized the flames. They now covered him completely and his every thought perceived them just as clearly as if he were awake.

The flames had engulfed Centronus just like they did in his previous dreams...just like they did so many years ago when he lost everything. When he lost Ionna. And as the explosion ripped through the east wing of the Centronian palace, he saw her. This time she was not running from the flames quickly, but emerging from them slowly; her arms open wide.

“Trulaine,” she called to him. But her movements were sluggish and her voice rang out slowly as if it were in jeopardy of going in reverse.

“Ionna?” he called back.

He tried to reach out her. And although she was walking towards him, her body was moving further away from him. No matter how fast he ran to her, she drifted away. And he realized that he could never catch up with her. He just dropped to his knees, despair all but pouring out of him.

Why? he finally began to ponder the question. Why have you come back now, Ionna?

“To be with you of course, my love,” she said, hauntingly as she slowly vanished. “We are meant to be together...forever, love.”

“But, you are dead,” his words seemed to echo off in the eternity of his mind. They were words that lingered in his thoughts for the entirety of his dream.

“Forever,” she continued to repeat. “Forever.”

“Ionna, no!”

No matter how hard he tried, no matter how fast he ran he could not catch her. She simply drifted away. The farther she drifted, the closer he could feel the heat of the flames; real spiritual fire that burned him. He thought he was actually on fire when he saw that the flames had come back, this time scorching his flesh off. He bellowed in agony, completely consumed by flames.

He was waking. It wasn't the quick, violent waking that was usually associated with nightmares such as this. In fact it was the opposite: calm, peaceful, serene, surprisingly euphoric.

A light flutter tickled his nose, and he opened his eyes in the dark. Someone had roused him. Then when his vision came into focus, he saw her. It was a little woman...no, two of them, with wings fluttering on their backs allowing them to float comfortably in the air.

What kind of wizardry is this? he thought to himself.

He would have mistaken them for a dream within a dream, but the smell of burning wood from the dying bonfires outside told him that he was actually awake.

“Wha-” he said, stirring.

“Quickly,” one of them whispered. “He's waking up.”

Before he could rise, he was hit with something; sparkling dust particles that shimmered above his face. It acted like a powerful sedative, taking him back into unconsciousness, but adding a soothing numb feeling. And just like that, he was sleep again.

The next time he woke up, the first thing he noticed was that the rain had started again. He hadn't felt drowsy at all, but instead he perked right up as though he had been awake the entire time. It had to be a spell of some kind. Someone had used magic to put him back to sleep, and he was determined to find out who it was. He jumped out of his cot, darting outside where the freezing cold air and the blistering rain hit him thoroughly. All of the tents were occupied, not a single person stood outside.

He glanced up as a streak of lightning hit the sky and a deafening roar of thunder crash above shortly after. In the back of his mind, he wondered if the prolonged weather they were experiencing was apart of the earth being affected by the fountain of enchantment, or if this really was just a normal rainstorm raging through the middle of the winter season. Common sense however told him it was the latter. The seas they had crossed the other day were far too perilous to suggest otherwise. He was surprised they had even made it this far, considering the conditions. Philistian was not lying when he said the path would be dangerous.

At the moment however was shocked...shocked by what he had seen. Had there really been little people staring at him while he was sleeping in his tent? He didn't even know if they actually existed. Myth and reality had always been so scoured in the Centronian educational system. Scholars who came from other regions taught students, and whatever they taught was true was considered truth without question. The spellbound races known throughout the Northern provinces were common knowledge in Centronus, but fairies had always been thought of as being myth.

Trulaine passed each of the tents. Those without small lamp lights to illuminate them, he ignored, for he would likely find no little people in them, only resting soldiers. He had no idea why - if they actually existed - people of shrunken size would be out here in the first place.

He could see across the field, Gundomar's tent light was still blazing. If there was one man who knew about what was going on in the tents, it would be him. Trulaine walked up to the tent, careful not to startle Gundomar's steed, which restlessly stood beside a nearby tree. Being caught suspiciously peering through the tent of the leader of the Order would be a good way to lose whatever trust he had already established with the secret sect of warriors.

The closer he got, the more he could tell that someone was indeed talking. It was a females' voice. Two distinct female voices in fact - and there were no women among Gundomar's camp. When he was close enough, Trulaine took a careful peek inside. The first thing he saw was Philistian standing in the corner, and Bakarne standing beside him. They were both looking towards the center of the tent. Trulaine turned to see inside the rest of the tent through the tiny sliver of an entrance, and he saw what his eyes could hardly believe. Two half-inch sized women floating in the air, around Gundomar; one of them wearing a blue-leaf garment, and the other wore a tiny red leaf outfit.

By the gods, Trulaine thought.

It was no wonder the order themselves had been a secret to Trulaine's people. If Gundomar had been chief to a simple tribe, then that would be different. But now Trulaine knew what he meant when he said that the whole purpose of the order was to guide the earth's most pristine secrets. And now, he knew a glimpse of the perspective of those who lived out in this region, and how they thought of Centronus, the first great province. They must have despised Trulaine and his people, knowing that if king Cathedeus knew of such things, then they would intervene too thoroughly in the lives of such people. Perhaps even become harmful to their lifestyle. He wondered what these strange creatures were doing out here, and what their involvement to Gundomar was. Perhaps Gundomar sent them spy on him. Trulaine could only assume that they were one of the spellbound races, undiscovered by Centronus.

"He is cute for a Northerner," said the one clad in blue.

"Shut up, Ninsul," said the other, clad in yellow.

"Well I never thought I would see the son of Trumandius before."

“And you never will again. I can’t believe father let you come out here with me. This is not a game.”

“So you searched him?” came Gundomar’s voice from the corner of the tent. “You searched all of them?”

“Yes.”

“And you found nothing suspicious in any of the tents?” asked Gundomar.

“Nothing out of the ordinary.”

So it is true, Trulaine thought. They are his spies.

“Something is not right,” Gundomar’s voice escaped through the tent. “They must have someone tailing them. How else would Shallemeign’s dactyls know where to find them?”

“Um,” said the blue-clad fairy. “Well, they’re dactyls. They’re all over the place. They can find anyone while searching the skies in great numbers, right?”

“Yes, but they must be given a target before they fall into pursuit. Something is not right, and we cannot have any outsiders compromising us. But if you found nothing suspicious then I suppose Trulaine and his company are who they say they are, for the most part at least.”

“Their leader carries the royal emblem of Centronus,” said Bakarne. “Surely he is who he says he is.”

“I do not care. We must take every precaution if Shallemeign is indeed after them.

“So tell us,” Gundomar continued, addressing the two little drifting twins, a more pressing issue in the back of his mind. “What news do you have for us? Is the king still sitting high on his throne?”

“Yes,” said Ninsul. “And the werewolves are still fighting with them.”

Werewolves, Trulaine thought to himself. So there really is a battle.

So, it was not just an excuse to convince Trulaine and his company from proceeding. Everything Gundomar told him about the war at WinDarrow was true.

“They must have rallied more forces from the east,” said Bakarne. “Our men saw more of them the other day in the canyon.”

“They are still searching for more water reserves, I see,” Gundomar reacted thoughtfully. “Bakarne, can you and your shamans track their movements safely?”

“Their movements are so sporadic, there is no way to be certain. I will take a few scouts with me. Perhaps if we move further east, we can...”

Trulaine stepped on a twig, which crackled in the meadow, and there was a pause inside. He could not believe how clumsy he was. Before he could even slip away, the tent curtains opened and Bakarne stared him right in the face. Everyone in the tent glared at him.

“Trulaine,” said Gundomar, a pinch of disappointment in his face. “You’ve had plenty of rest, I see.”

“Yes,” said Trulaine, unashamed of being caught eavesdropping. In his mind it was an equal exchange anyway. They had been caught watching him and he had now been caught watching them. “No thanks to your spies.”

“Spies?”

“Is that what they are? Is that why they were watching me in the middle of the night.”

“Oh!” said one of the little ones, snapping her finger, scolding the other. “I told you to hit him with a double dose of pixie dust, Ninsul. Humans aren’t always as susceptible to magic as you think they are. They sleep heavy.”

“Sorry,” said Ninsul.

“Pixie...dust?” Trulaine inquired. “You...are pixies?”

It was not every day that he saw people no taller than four inches in height with wings on their backs, but given the fact that he had stepped far away from the world of the familiar, he was not as surprised as he would have been if he had seen one of them back at Centronus. Still, these mortal creatures, which were once thought to be myth to the peoples of the Northern Reach, were actually real. Trulaine was privileged to be the first one to know about their existence. They had ac-

tually existed and apparently survived quite well in the modern world. He was eager to know how.

“Pixies?” asked Trulaine, baffled.

“Yes, pixies,” said Gundomar.

“I’m Ninsul,” said the pixie in blue.

“And I am Ninette,” bowed her yellow-clad twin sister. Then the two of them started finishing their own sentences.

“We are the daughters of lord Thristol...”

“...king of the pixies...”

“...and we are loyal regents to the pixie people...”

“...here at your service!”

Trulaine was a bit taken aback by their enthusiasm - as they flew in close to his face - and their knack for completing each other’s sentences.

“Oh,” Trulaine said, dumbfounded.

“You see?” said Gundomar. “They are not spies, but they do have a very...inquisitive nature.”

“I see,” said Trulaine.

“There are however spies out there...in Shallemeign’s army. A few hours ago you met about three hundred of them.”

“Dactyls.”

“Yes. The warlord has enough of them to start a war, and enough of his own Stenetians to start two wars. Nothing that we hold sacred is safe so long as they are launching campaigns anywhere in the surface world. We need eyes everywhere.”

“Is that why you sent two of your pixies to...watch over me and my men?”

“They were checking you and your men because we believe that there may be a spy in these parts.”

“Well they are not among any of my company.”

“It does not matter. We are obligated to rule out all possibilities regardless of who our gut tells us we can trust. If Shallemeign’s dactyls are so close to dispatching in front of our doorstep, then that is entirely our concern.”

“That’s the way of the Order, is it? If you are going to spy on us, at least have the courtesy to grant us passage.”

“If I did that then there wouldn’t be much of a point in spying on you now would there?” Gundomar said slyly.

Trulaine did not know whether to take it as irony or just plain rudeness, and quite frankly, he didn’t care. He just had to get his company moving.

“There is a secret passage into WinDarrow, is there not?” he asked.

“There is no such thing.”

“There is. I heard your pixies mention it before I came in here. The savage path.”

“The savage path is not a safe passage. It is one of the known paths leading into WinDarrow, but it is overrun by werewolves, which is something that I tried to tell you before.”

“Well if the werewolves are guarding this...savage path so heavily, then how did they get past them?” Trulaine inquired, pointing at both Ninsul and Ninette.

A pause lingered, and the twin pixies eyed Gundomar who soon broke the silence.

“Pixies are much smaller than us human folk,” he stated. “They do not need to be seen if they do not desire it. And even if they are spotted, they can fly into the night or vanish into the willow trees. If werewolves see you and your company, I do not think it will be so easy for you to escape them in one piece. We talked about this already, Centronian.”

“And you are sure there is no other way?”

“As keeper of these lands, it is part of my duty to be sure of it.”

“Well,” Ninsul interjected meekly. “The savage path is not save, but there are safe ways around it.”

“Shut up Ninsul!” said Ninette, smacking her twin sister on the shoulder.

They all looked at Ninsul rudely, especially Ninette who glared at her as if she wanted to punch her lights out.

“So there is a secret passage,” said Trulaine. He had the impression that Ninsul’s excitable impulse had just thrown a huge chunk of valuable information right into Trulaine’s lap.

“Well,” began Ninsul nervously, realizing that the damage had already been done. “It’s not really a secret passage.”

“Actually it’s more magic than an actual path,” confirmed Ninette.

“Magic?” Trulaine asked, puzzled.

“It is no secret, Ninette,” corrected Ninsul.

“Well,” Ninette defended her verdict. “Pixie magic is still a secret to some people.”

“Yes, but there are still places where unearthing is to be done. It can’t just be any ol’ hole in the ground or else the werewolves would find the way into the palace.”

“And if that happens,” said Gundomar determinedly. “Then there will be no more WinDarrow, and that cannot happen if I am the one to blame for it.”

“What is this...magic path?” Trulaine asked again, more prudently this time.

“It’s not really a specific path,” said Ninette. “Pixies have the ability to create pathways, underground.”

“Underground?”

“Don’t you know that? Pixies are the most powerful of the Elven races.”

“Well, before today, I did not know that pixies were real?”

“Well, you’re real, aren’t you?” asked Ninette offensively. “Just because everyone talks about it does not mean that it is not real.”

“We have abilities that others do not possess,” Ninsul stated proudly.

“Yes,” said Ninette happily, zipping into Trulaine’s face. “We are born with natural abilities to wield earth magic...”

“...Unlike surface folk, spellbound races, or the humans races,” Ninsul chuckled. “No offense, Gundomar.”

“None taken,” said the leader of the Order who just stood there, admiring the pixies for their spirit.

Pixies. They were a marvel indeed. And these two were right. None of the people currently living on the surface world were born with magic abilities, at least not to any of Trulaine’s knowledge. But now, everything he thought he had known about the mortal races had just changed. Things that he had been sure were impossible before were actually common knowledge in other parts of the world, and he would not have the privilege of knowing such things had they not taken refuge in Gundomar’s camp. Pixies, the smallest and apparently most naturally endowed of every human race in the world were indeed a wonder to behold.

Gundomar stopped smiling when he saw the look on Trulaine’s face. There was a pause and the two of them stared at each other. He knew that Gundomar was just as stubborn as he was, so he might as well ask politely.

“So,” said Trulaine. “If they can create secret pathways underground, then surely you can grant us passage.”

“Out of the question,” said Gundomar. “We came to an understanding about this before. If you and your men are killed, there will be no one to complete the mission of finding the sources. And even if we could, we would never allow it to be seen in the hands of your king if it is we who are asked to take up the task of retrieving them.”

“You won’t have to. If your pixies can create a magic path then we can make it to WinDarrow without the werewolves even knowing that we are here.”

“And if they do happen to spot you?”

“They won’t. Our spell caster can create invisibility charms.”

“The girl?” he said with a smirk. “Oh yes, my brother told me about her. She does know the proper techniques to invisibility. But can she render an entire group of people invisible for undetermined amounts of time? I think not.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. All you need to fear is what will happen if we don’t retrieve the gauges as soon as possible. You don’t need to take my word for it though. I am sure you have noticed the weather...how it never stops raining...how the seas are being hit by devastating waves. I’m sure your scouts have reported that to you, no doubt. You’ve had all night to think about this and by now. Do I look like a fool to you? Let us pass.”

Gundomar eyed him for a moment, and then glanced over at Ninette, the pixie whom Trulaine assumed was the more responsible of the two.

“Can you guide them into WinDarrow safely?” he asked her.

The small pixie glanced at her sister and then shook her head in approval.

“We can get them there,” she said. “We just need a little bit of stealth on our side.”

“Stealth,” Gundomar repeated to himself. He glanced at Trulaine with a crossed look, but soon nodded his head in sort of a halfhearted approval. “You have my permission to cross. But if you fail, Centronian, then you’d better pray that the werewolves dispatch of you before I do, because if you are unable to answer your mission, and if I am called to answer for it, then heaven help us all. Neither of us will even live long enough to catch a glimpse of the world’s end. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Trulaine. “I do.”

“Good,” he said reluctantly. “Then tell your men to pack up and get the hell out of my lands. Ninsul and Ninette will guide you into WinDarrow. But they must also report back to the pixie king. You can leave at sunrise.”

“Thank you,” said Trulaine, smiling courteously before exiting the tent.

For a while, there was only the sound of the rain outside. Bakarne was the first to speak.

“Are you sure about this, Gundomar?” he said.

“I’m not,” said the leader of the Order, pointing to the two twin pixies, and assuming that they knew more about their own habitat than he did. “They are.”

“You put all that we hold dear in the hands of two pixies.”

“Hey,” said Ninsul, staring up at Bakarne rudely.

“Not just two pixies Bakarne. The person who they will be accompanying is the fabled son of Trumanscion, and based on that fact alone, perhaps I should have more faith in him than I previously thought I should.”

“How could you, brother?” Philistian said, finally breaking his silence.

“How could I?” Gundomar repeated rhetorically, now turning to face his younger brother. “You knew why I could not. But the same notions we once grew up with do not apply anymore.”

“Is that your excuse for letting me rot in that cell?”

Silence now filled the tent as the tension mounted, and Bakarne and the pixie twins exited the tent as well, realizing that this was obviously an intense sibling rivalry rekindled, one that they were confident they did not need to be apart of.

“I was unaware of your location,” said finally once they were alone. “Do you think that I did not want to spring your release? Do you think the secrets of these borders will simply govern themselves?”

“You could have sent someone...”

“To break into a Stenetian prison?”

“Bakarne is skilled enough.”

“Bakarne is not familiar with that region. Neither am I. We stay far away from the indoctrination that has spread due to Centronian lies. And even though we all come from the same conglomerate, we are not allies. We must stay away from that part of the world, you know that.”

“Clearly you don’t believe that all of the Centronians cannot be trusted, or else you would not have allowed Trulaine passage.”

“He is no ordinary traveler,” said Gundomar, once again staring up at the full moon through the tent’s opening. “And I did not allow him passage before because of our mandate sacred mandate, which I thought that your time in the dungeons had not withered your memory of. If I could I would do more for them than I already am now, but I must remember my commitments.”

“You speak of mandates and commitments without even a glance toward your family? Do I mean nothing to you?”

“Of course you do, brother.”

“Then why, with so many soldiers at your disposal, did you allow me to rot in that cell?”

“Do you have any idea what it is like to govern a sect as elusive as the Order?” Gundomar said, beginning to pace. “Do you really think that I did not want to spring your release? That I was not aching to slaughter all of our enemies and conspirators, even Shallemeign himself? If I or any or any other member of this sect were to travel up north to spring you free and were caught, the implications of everything we are trying to preserve would be compromised. And if we lose the Order - the last remaining bloodline of our people - now, while the courts have their last dying thirst for eradicating our people, and the earth may rupture without our aid, then the world is lost.”

So that was it. Philistian simply was not important enough even for his own brother to rescue. The harsh words hurt him, or at least whatever feelings he had left. It had hurt him more than the day he was humiliated, tortured, and told before a hundred judges - all of them, members of the Order’s glorious sovereign, the Leadership - that he would be executed for crimes he had never committed. Hearing his own brother tell him that his life simply could not be spared, that he wasn’t worth the risk, hurt him. It hurt him beyond measure.

“Bastard!” Philistian exploded in a fit of rage. “I was left to die in a cage! Forgotten by the only family that I have left!”

“Your actions are not my responsibility,” said Gundomar harshly. “If you were caught red handed, murdering a high member of one of our own coven, then perhaps justice was not too harsh at all.”

“What?” he said, numb. “You know that I am innocent.”

“Are you?” he asked with a stern look on his face. “Or is this another ploy where you trick me into thinking I can trust you? No, Philistian. I will not risk our coven for your mistakes anymore. We are brothers, but that does not mean-”

“No, Gundomar!” said Philistian, bold enough to point a finger in his brother’s face. “We were brothers. When that sun rises I am gone, forever. And if we do happen to cross paths again, perhaps it will be the last time you see anything at all.”

With a cold, deranged stare, Philistian felt the urge to attack his brother, but he kept the anger at bay. He felt completely and utterly betrayed. Gundomar might as well have been the executioner swinging the axe on the morning of his last day in the prison. There was his brother, his own flesh and blood standing there in smug calmness, unaffected by it all. He had been sentenced to die. Although he had planned to attempt an escape - and his brother probably knew it as well - he was not sure that it would have been much of a success if Maurelan had not arrived to spring him free herself.

Philistian now hated his brother. With a glance of utter dismissal, he stormed out of the tent.



The Shield of Sorcery

The Valora cruised swiftly against the seas, which, for the most part had calmed a bit since their last departure from the temple of incantation along the isles of Meridinath. The warlord stood on the top deck. He had ordered his men - a hundred of them - to row simultaneously, keeping his eyes poised to the dark skies above, waiting for his flock of dactyls to return. Since they had take a while to get back, he decided to go ahead and push the ship south in the direction of the Inthalios islands where his quarry was said to be. Soon, he could see a thick stream of dactyls riding the last remnants of a dying sunset to take refuge on Shallemeign ship.

“There they are,” he squinted.

Behind him stood Saskia, gazing up as well.

In hundreds the dactyls flocked, hovering low, circling the ship. None of them dared land on the deck of the Valora, for it was a known rule that only one or two for them could land, solely for the purpose of communicating information. Besides, this time he had Saskia, queen of the Voranth aboard his ship, and it was known all too well that she despised the dactyls, considering all the countless wars her kind had waged against them.

The sorceress glanced over at Shallemeign who glanced back at her coolly.

“Don’t worry,” he said, sarcasm in his voice. “They know there is a vampire on-board.”

Instead of landing, the dactyls hovered; some of them gliding in mid-air while other flew back and forth along the length of the ship. A few of them had even

landed on the ship's mast. From far away they looked like a thick flock of birds crowding around, and desperately trying to perch to a single piece of bread in the middle of the ocean. From the cluttered cloud of wings spiraling above, a small metallic object dropped right into Shallemeign's hand.

"Ah, success," said Shallemeign, eyes sparkling with delight. "You see Mrs. Voranth. I always get my way."

As quickly as they had come, the dactyls had all dissipated. Shallemeign and Saskia descended into his personal quarters below decks. He placed the object on his great oak, dresser where the moonlight glazed it as it shined through the port-hole.

Saskia could now see that the metal object indeed had a chain attached so that it could be worn as a necklace.

"What is it?" she asked.

"This, my dear..." he said picking up the object and glaring at its fine details. "...Is the very thing that Nelo gave up his life to keep from me, the alchemist map. This is how we are going to find the other cradles. Their contents are revealed herein."

As he spoke he fiddled with the thing excitedly, but soon he realized that he could not open it, and suddenly frustration settled in. It was an obsessed frustration, one that made Saskia see him in a different light. He was not the calm, collected Shallemeign that she had known for the past week. His sudden fit of rage and panic had shown her one thing. All the great things he had accomplished and those great things he was said to accomplish, he would not be able to hold it together. And it was not simply her opinion that was a testimony of her experience; the kind of experience that only an immortal such she - who had been around for a combination of centuries, and had witnessed power hungry men rise and fall - was capable of discerning. She knew in her blood that his conquest was not meant to last. Even psychically, she felt it in her gut.

"No!" Shallemeign yelled. "I can't open it!"

He threw the map against the wall, where it bounced off the wall and rolled across the floor. Then he plopped himself down on his throne, depressingly, his eyes watering. If Saskia cared at all, she would have comforted him, but nothing in her heart felt any loyalty towards him. This was simply a business arrangement between them, and one she had consented to in reluctance. She could already see that the one cradle he had currently possessed was an incredibly powerful magic and not something that a person such as Shallemeign should be in possession of. But that was just one of them. And here was the infamous alchemist map, which Shallemeign should have anticipated would be guarded by some kind of magic. Being a sorceress, Saskia was aware of all these little fact, but she thought it was quite amusing to see the warlord find out for himself.

As the wind and waves picked up outside, the Valora swayed sideways and the map rolled, bouncing with the chain until it reached her. She grasped the item, gazing at it for a brief moment. It did not take her long to assess it.

“Shallemeign, you fool,” she said. “You do realize that this is an alchemist map, forged the Lidalians, right? It is not a map you can read with words. It uses light.”

“So why the hell does it not open?”

“Because you need the proper spell to open it.”

“It does not matter,” he said, calming his nerves. With the power of gravity, he lifted the map out of her hand and guided it to his. He held it purposefully. “Once we find the girl, she will open it for us. And that will be the last thing she ever does. If she and Trulaine were found crossing the isthmus, then Erebus must have been right. They are searching for the vessel. Which means they will no doubt be heading to the lands of WinDarrow. And if that is the case then we may never find the girl alive.”

“And why is that?” Saskia asked curiously.

“Because as we speak, there is a war waging between the giants and the werewolves.”

“And how do you know all of this?”

“I have clients in many different regions of the world, darlin’. I figured you already knew that, being one of them yourself.”

“Let’s get one thing straight, I am not your client, Shallemeign. It would be good for you to remember that.”

“And it would be good for you to remember that at any moment, I could crush you into a thousand pieces,” he said calmly.

She knew it was true. As strong as she was, he wielded the power of one of creation’s cradles, no one would not stand a chance against him. To challenge him would be folly.

“And what of the others?” she asked, changing the subject.

“The pathfinder will die. We do not need him complicating my...other plans.”

“Your other plans?” she said with a slight chuckle. In her heart she owed him no allegiance. If not for the power protecting him, she would have already killed him a long time ago, preferably in front of his own men. Whatever plans he did not include her in did not matter to her at this time. She would pardon his last statement.

“As for the Centronian,” he continued, ignoring her interest. “The man whom I could not kill for decades will finally die. But before I kill him, I have something special for him special planned for him.”

Trulaine did not sleep for the rest of the night. Instead he stayed awake, staring at the moon until the sun peaked its nose around the bend of the sky. The only sound in the tent was Golondred snoring louder than a Centronian horn blaring through a hall. By the time the overweight Centronian awoke, Trulaine had told all the other members of the company that they would be leaving to WinDarrow, had explained how they would do it, and had gathered himself something to eat; several apples and a hot steaming pot of stew with chopped pieces of rabbit in it. Now he was relaxing finally just gaining a peaceful moment without his mind be-

ing so cluttered. For just a moment he forgot about the nightmares, the fountain, and the quest to save the world - the many burdens placed upon him - and just relaxed with nothing on his mind but the beautiful warmth of the sun.

Soon enough the savory smell of stew woke Golondred. He sat upright with one eye perked wide open, looking around frantically.

“Food!” was all that he said.

“It’s outside,” said Trulaine. “They’ve prepared enough for everyone.”

He tossed Golondred an apple, nodding his head in approval.

“Meat?”

“Well there was plenty. Not so sure about now though.”

Golondred jumped out of bed, tossed his clothes on and darted out of the tent faster than he had ever seen him move in battle. Trulaine sat back with a chuckle.

It was not long before someone else stepped in. It was Gundomar. He was stood there at the entrance, the sun behind him casting a shadow on the ground. Half of his face was shaded in the silhouette, the other half revealed a grim expression fading. He appeared extremely somber. Trulaine did not know why and he did not ask. Besides, the shield in Gundomar’s hand diverted his attention. It was a medium sized shield, round, not too large, with ridges carved around the sides. On the front of the shield was a morbid face; an oblong-shaped head with a twisted mouth gaping wide open. It was odd; strange.

“Are your men ready?” asked Gundomar.

“Yes,” Trulaine said.

“If you reach WinDarrow, be diplomatic, and be cautious of their king. He has a reputation for theatrics. He treats his hosts graciously, but in these times, kings cannot always be trusted.” He gave a chuckle. “Whatever you do, stay on his good side. That should not be too difficult. Still, know your place in WinDarrow and perhaps you will come out alive. Before Ninsul and Ninette take you underground make sure you are not too far in that you run the risk of being seen. Werewolves are quick, and quite vicious.”

“I’ve fought them before.”

“Not at night, you haven’t, because you had you would not be here to tell me about it. In the day, they still adhere to their own customs and seem to maintain some resemblance of humanity, but at night, the luminescence of the moon drives their rage to even further heights. And if it is a full moon, like the one that has been out for the past several days, then their minds have become completely lost... pure savagery.”

“I will take that into consideration.”

“So you have fought them.”

“A horde of them...and it was during the day of course.”

“Here, in this region?”

Trulaine shook his head. “Near the outskirts of Centronus.”

“Then that would explain it. It must have been the fountain explosion that caused them to migrate.”

The fountain, Trulaine thought to himself.

Now it all made sense. It was the fountain that caused the werewolves to migrate all the way to the Southern Reach where they must have picked a very ambitious fight with the inhabitants of WinDarrow. No one knew exactly where the werewolves had originated from, but Trulaine now had a good idea that their initial vicinity was near the fountain of enchantment. And it did not take a master spell or classified verification from the Leadership to figure that the fountain eruption had driven them out of what must have once been a safe, discreet location.

“They were near the fountain when it exploded,” said Gundomar. “And yet they survived even though your mage custodians were killed. So if they truly did come from that region, how then, may I ask, did they survive?”

“Perhaps they were quick enough to flee unharmed. Or...their curse prevents it.”

“Perhaps,” Gundomar said, glancing down at the shield in his hand. He lifted it, handing it to Trulaine. “Take it. It was carved from shamanic sculptors to the east. The face on the front symbolizes the power of the jiiin.”

“The jiiin?” said Trulaine. “But they do not exist?”

“Do not believe everything you hear from your homeland, Centronian.”

Trulaine had heard myths about the jiiin. They were said to be the mystic spirits of warriors who had died in the Hellion war to protect the first great nation from the creatures of the underworld. As saviors of humanity and therefore, divine protectors of the mortal world, their spirits were anchored to the earth, and so they roamed the afterworld. They were said to keep communion with the gods, acting as divine messengers to those select members of humanity worthy enough to heed them. The explosion of the energy fountain is exactly the kind of thing they would have been tending to if they were real. But real was something that they have never actually been to the people of the north and to Trulaine as well...real. They had always been apart of myth; mere entries in history books about what people once believed were real. But already living in such a strange world of magic and curses, Trulaine was beginning to accept the fact that the extremely well educated world he had come from was just the tip of the iceberg when it came to rest of the world; a mystery which he had recently been given the privilege to explore through the perils of their plight. Sometimes the truth had seemed like a sick trick to him and everyone in his life, so much that the myths them selves did not seem so ridiculous. He only knew one truth that he was sure about, and that was the truth of his own sword, and now he had a shield to match.

He held the shield reluctantly, unfamiliar with the thing, but appreciative.

“Thank you for the shield,” he said.

“May you find good use for it in times of need,” said Gundomar. “I cannot accompany you on this mission, but you do have my brother to assist you along the path. I would tell you to look after him, but I am not sure if he would accept my blessing.”

“He is apart of our company now. I will look after him.”

And with that, they exited the tent.

Trulaine took the rest of the morning hour to prepare his company for departure. No more than ten minutes later and his crew was ready. They seemed ambitious, almost eager to continue on. Even Bernarsu was in good spirits. The shamans had done a good job of healing him, and everyone appeared to be gracious for the outcome.



The Savage Path

Within a day's time they had nearly reached the outskirts of WinDarrow with twin pixies Ninsul and Ninette leading the way. Although their timing was decent (considering the setbacks they had experienced) and their pacing was moderate, Trulaine's company did not stop to rest along the way. He felt that still there was no time to waste, but despite the heavy storms that plummeted them in the previous days, there had really been no difference in the weather.

More acutely aware of the weather's temperament and fluctuating consistency was Maurelan. She had taken note of the changes as well as the steady flux it had shifted into in the past few days. She could feel the earth whispering, no longer needing to touch her flesh with the ground in order to feel the earth energy beneath her. The recent steadiness in the weather represented a calm before a storm, a calm that no one could detect. And the constant outpouring of magical energy forced daily from the fountain was a regretful reassurance that the months to come would not be pleasant for any form of life.

The company had trekked through several regions and two days of travel, arriving at the end of an open field at the top of a hill, when they halted abruptly. Something was moving in the ground beneath. It was a faint rumble, hardly even a rumble. It was not the familiar rolling sensation that one typically felt during an earthquake. It was subtler, more constant.

The last time they had noticed something out of the ordinary on their quest, a pack of dactyls had attacked them from the air, but this peculiar sensation came from beneath them. This was much more subtle; a thing that was slowly building in intensity, far too slow to be an earthquake. There were other sounds that came

with it, gnarled sounds. And while Trulaine and his company could not quite make out what it was moving toward them, they did not want to take any chances this time.

“What is it?” asked Golondred with a gasp.

“They are creatures,” said Alvantin. “Moving swiftly through the field.” With the aid of his shamanic abilities, and the touch of his hand, he could feel the vibrations through the earth, far better than Maurelan could it seemed. She marveled at his magical act, wondering herself if she could produce such a charm.

“Werewolves!” said Philistian, jumping off his steed and heading for the long grass. “We must get out of here! Hide the horses! And get rid of that damned centaur! He’s so big he’ll get us all killed!”

“Hmm,” Brontius snorted while glancing at Trulaine. “This pathfinder may not last long if he continues tempering me.”

Ever since they departed the mountains that made up the passage into the Southern Reach and the company of Gundomar and his Order, Philistian had expressed a change of attitude. It was not a subtle change either. He had already expressed a dislike of half the members of his company in the past – Centronians and centaurs in particular – but now he seemed to not care about showing his frustration. Something had angered him. But the pathfinder’s temper was the least of their concerns, for now they had to avoid detection.

They all broke into a sprint, heading for the highest peak of the hill. Once they had reached a safe distance above the endless plains below, they watched the werewolves cross. Trulaine watched them even more intently than the others had. From the view over the hill, the werewolves looked much like a brigade of obedient soldiers marching slowly, almost rhythmically through the meadow. They moved slowly, almost rhythmically. From a distance, they could have been mistaken for Centronian soldiers, albeit their savage gait and the large amounts of fur protruding from their large yet extremely agile frames.

“See the way they move?” asked Golondred whispering into his ear.

“Yep,” replied Trulaine.

“Single file like that...like a legion of damned Centronians. Where the hell do you think they learned that?”

“It does not matter,” Philistian interjected. “We must hurry and make for the secret path.”

“Well, that won’t be easy,” said the little Ninette.

“And why is that?”

“Because the path is directly below us,” Ninsul shouted noisily. “Right in the same direction as those werewolves are heading, don’t you see?”

“We have to wait until they pass,” said Ninette. “Unless you want to end up on their dinner plate.”

“And their dinner plates are not very comfortable.”

“Then we will wait until we see the rear of their pack,” said Trulaine.

When they finally saw the rear of the werewolf horde, they all got up to move - Brontius as well, awkwardly getting back to standing on his hooves. Trulaine was about to move himself when something caught his eye.

“Wait,” he said.

Golondred who was right beside him paused. The others eventually halted as well when they saw that their captain had not moved.

“What is it?”

“Down there,” pointed Trulaine.

Trulaine had the best vision out of everyone in the company, except for perhaps Brontius, who could shoot an arrow and strike a target farther than any archer they had ever seen. There among the tame, yet savage horde below Trulaine could see one solitary werewolf parading on the side of the others, waving a banner of some sort high into the air.

Finally Golondred saw what he was pointing at.

“Oh,” said the rotund Centronian. “What do you make of it?”

“That has to be their leader,” said Trulaine.

“You sure?”

“Well I don’t have proof, but I know what it appears to be. Come on.”

They darted off, joining the rest of the company. They headed down to the field below. Once they finally made it into the Field that was shaped more like a canyon due to the tall heights of the hills above, hills that they had just come down from. Now seeing the view, Trulaine was surprised that they had not been spotted earlier. Quickly they moved to the side of the path, near a huge bolder that was large enough to conceal all of them from the view of the passing werewolves who passed them without detection.

“We’ll get started on opening the path,” Ninette whispered into Trulaine’s ear. She and her twin sister immediately zipped over to the base of the hill to conjure an earth spell.

With a wave of their tiny hands, they began a magical enchantment together. The dirt moved beneath the earth as if a great head would poke out through the surface, and suddenly the ground opened up. It unraveled root-by-root, twig-by-twig, pushing aside the moist, heavy gravel. They all stood by and watched in awe as a new, underground path had been revealed beneath the earth.

“Wait,” said Trulaine, perplexed and still looking out for danger. He had been too distracted to catch all of what the pixie had said. “What?”

“Well this place is just as good as any other.”

“No. We have to get away from here, now. It’s dangerous here.”

“We must find the path,” Alvantin interjected.

“But this is the path!” cried Ninsul as she and Ninette struggled with her spell, trying to work her magic.

“Well, one of them,” said Ninette.

“And it goes on for about a mile or so.”

“A mile?” Trulaine asked, concerned. “Well how long will it take you to open it all the way?”

“Well,” Ninette explained. “We could open up small portions of the ground pretty fast, but that would leave no gaps in the tunnel, so it’s possible that the earth could swallow us whole, and we would not be able to escape through the surface.”

“And that would take seconds to open,” Ninsul called over her shoulder.

“But if we hold the gaps,” continued Ninette.

“Which is what we’re trying to do...” finished Ninsul again.

“Then we’ll be able to make it to the other side safely.”

“And that could take anywhere from five to ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes!” Trulaine exclaimed. “We don’t have that much time. If one of these werewolves spot us then the entire horde will descend upon us.”

“It’s the only way to make it through!” Ninette yelled stubbornly.

Trulaine could see the miniature beads of sweat dripping from her tiny face. The effort the two pixies were putting out must have been exhausting, and their poise of conviction was convincing. Such heart these little people had. It was enough for Trulaine to suggest that he must heed their advice.

“Okay,” he said. “Do what you must, but be quick about it.”

“Are you kidding me?” said Ninsul, beginning one of her rants that only Ninette could see coming. “We have been rushing to get back ever since we left. If Akabremnar, king of the giants finds out that our lord let his daughters out to assist the Order, then that won’t be good for any of us.”

“Wait,” said Philistian very peculiarly. “Akabremnar is the leader of your realm?”

“Well yeah, genius. Who else did you think could hold off the werewolves for this long? Certainly not us little folk. That wouldn’t be a war. It would be extermination. Haven’t you ever been to WinDarrow?”

“And since when did that charlatan take over leadership for the gargantuan people?”

“Gundomar did not tell me about this,” Trulaine interjected.

“There are many things that my brother may have failed to mention,” Philistian rebounded in anger. “Although even I cannot be sure if he knew about my affiliation with the giants of the southern world, unless he really does wish me dead. I cannot go to that place, for I am outlawed among the presence of the giants. If they truly do hold dominion over this realm, then I will be slain on the spot without question.”

“But you were not tried in this vicinity.”

“And still, my crimes have reached far and wide, and have sparked the interest of many a king. I am not favored by any of them, especially king Akabremnar. I hear he despises me most upon those who were not affected by the curse, possibly more than anyone in the world.”

“In exchange for your freedom, you agreed to guide us to WinDarrow, and to the underworld beyond.”

“And now you are asking me to risk humiliation and certain death for yet a second time.”

“For springing your release, you are to do as I say. That is your charge now, or else you will face certain death. Whatever your crimes truly are, they do not apply to me. You are under my jurisdiction now.”

“Really,” Philistian smirked. “And what if the great and revered Trulaine of Centronus has no jurisdiction in that region? The giants do not follow the will of Northerners. My brother may have entertained the idea that there would be no danger once we are behind the gates of WinDarrow, but do not be misled. Giants can be more dangerous than the savages themselves, given that they have a crazy enough leader to cause misery to others.”

“Perhaps your brother does not know this region as well as you thought he did.”

“Or perhaps he wishes to see both of us perish.”

Trulaine glanced at him peculiarly, and was beginning to wonder how much information he had withheld about his brother.

“If the king sees that I am a part of your company,” Philistian continued. “Then you risk the safety of everyone, not just my own. When he sees that you have taken a prisoner of Torund under your refuge, none of us shall see the light of day.”

“It does not matter,” said Trulaine. “We are headed to WinDarrow, together, whether you like it or not.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then you dishonor our agreement. And if that is the case, then I might as well just kill you here, now.”

“I have tried living in honor, Centronian. All it got me was shame, and the Leadership’s favorite weapon against the people of the free world...death. You can go to WinDarrow without me. I will even give you my blessing.”

“Philistian, we have no time for this,” said Trulaine, drawing his sword. “You are coming with us.”

“I don’t think you heard me, Centronian.”

With a sudden move that shocked everyone - one that had only caused an exhibition of latent gasps among them - Philistian snatched Ninsul right out of mid-flight and squeezed her, abruptly ending her bout of pixie dust that she had used to help her sister open the path. Immediately she was thrown into a struggling fit of discomfort - her small arms wriggling to free herself, her tiny wings protruding awkwardly from his hand.

“What are you...doing?!” she cried, squealing angrily.

“Philistian...” said Maurelan. She looked at him with a sort of jaded expression; confused and speechless as though she were searching for some elusive answer within him. She had deduced, in her heart, that he was a good person. Even if the scrutiny of the dungeons had damaged his ability to show compassion, she

had genuinely believed that he was a good man deep down. Now, she was not so sure.

Trulaine on the other hand, had finally made up his mind about the pathfinder.

“How...dare you!” he shouted in rage. “We should have never aided you in escape, and we should have never trusted you to keep your word. We give you your life back, for the sake of the world, and this is how you repay us?”

Trulaine did not wish to show any leniency. He wanted to strike him down for such brash actions. But they still needed him, and as usual, he was making that a very difficult enterprise. To the rest of them - and maybe even to Philistian himself - this was seen as an act of diplomacy, but to Trulaine, a man of such hardened tactical discipline, this was a mutiny. And although he had never experienced a mutiny among any of his brigades, the very thought of it sickened him. Before, it was the kind of thing that he could only imagine as being punishable by death, but these days he was learning to be a little more lenient in his attempts to control the rage within.

“What are you doing?” said Trulaine. “We are in this together.”

“No. I got you far enough.”

“What were the merits of your crime? Why do the giants hate you so much?”

Before Philistian could answer that question, Brontius entered the tunnel.

“Quiet,” he said with a shrill whisper. “We may have been spotted.”

“Oh no,” exclaimed Maurelan, surprised. She moved to the edge of the tunnel where she saw a small pack of werewolves glaring straight down at them near the top of the hill on the opposite side of the valley. They knew exactly what it was they were after, and had already begun making their way across the field heading straight for them. Whether they had been seen or heard during the exchange was irrelevant now.

“Maurelan,” Trulaine called to the young fishnet, chain mail clad mage. “We need cover.”

Maurelan took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and raised her hands to chest height. A brief moment of intense focus and concentration was all that she needed before speaking her spell enchantment. “Eluviel lucendum.”

In just a few seconds they had all been rendered invisible, and now - or for at least as long as Maurelan was able to hold up her spell - they were protected from the wild, prying eyes of the werewolf pack. Soon they were upon them, one by one, passing through the brush ahead, searching and growling at every little creature they saw scurrying across the path, knowing that that something bigger and far more intelligent was hiding in the vicinity. Trulaine watched them sniff around on the outside of the tunnel, already approaching the boulder that they had originally used to hide behind. But they could not be seen, due to the dazzling brilliance of Maurelan’s spell.

Trulaine glanced back over at Philistian, who continued to hold Ninsul. Although the pathfinder loosened his grip a little so that the tiny pixie could breathe, he still showed no intention of letting her go. But now werewolves were besieging them, and Philistian appeared to be beside himself a bit, perhaps he was even thinking of releasing her. Maybe the new situation had almost prompted him to have a change of heart, but when he saw the still angered look on Trulaine’s face, he remembered his conviction.

“Do you want to go back now?” Trulaine asked.

“I would rather take my chances with the werewolves than entertain an audience with the giants,” Philistian said stubbornly.

“But we can protect you.”

“You do not understand Centronian. If I go with you, then I risk the exposure of my people as well.”

“And suddenly you have developed a level of commitment to the Order,” said Brontius. “Despite the fact that your brother did not warn you that Akabremnar was the new ruler of WinDarrow.”

“Perhaps he did not know,” Philistian said doubtfully. “Clearly he would not have done anything to jeopardize the Order. He cares far more for them than he does for me. But none of that matters anymore.”

Philistian gripped Ninsul tight once more and the tiny pixie squealed again.

“Let her go,” Trulaine demanded. “Now!”

“Just...do what he...says, Philistian,” cried Maurelan, still struggling with her enchantment. “I can’t hold this up for...long.”

To render herself invisible - or even the likes of a few people - was not difficult for her, but to shield their entire company, along with the entrance of the tunnel for an extended amount of time was a feat of abundance of focus. It was a side of magic that she had little training in, and it had caused a considerable amount of mental strain on her. Her invisibility charm was waning along with her energy, and Trulaine could see the illusion around them beginning to buckle in silent waves, barely visible within the spectrum of sight. Philistian could see it as well. He gazed at her and that was when Trulaine took his opportunity to strike.

With lightening speed Trulaine swung his sword, leaving a huge gash on Philistian’s forearm, and slamming the ruby encrusted tilt of his sword against his head. The force of the blow knocked Philistian off his feet, and had nearly rendered him unconscious. Immediately he released Ninsul who caught herself in mid flight before she hit the ground.

The pixie drifted to the ground briefly to catch her breath and then zipped back into the air help her sister. Together they continued to expand the underground tunnel into unknown lengths ahead. It was already enough having one pixie working alone to open up the path underground, but when Ninsul joined her twin sister and, the process sped up considerably. It would still take them longer than the time they were given, for now they still had to contend with the small pack of werewolves, approaching from them.

Trulaine threw Philistian against the muddy tunnel wall, grabbing him by the throat, easily lifting him off his feet with a single hand.

Everyone who saw this was now gasping more than they did when Philistian had grabbed Ninsul. Brontius and Bernarsu looked at each other, lost, Alvantin squinted, but Maurelan did not notice since she currently had her eyes clenched as she strained to keep them invisible. And Golondred...well, Golondred had known Trulaine better than most people, and although he pretended to be oblivious of the fact that his best friend had concealed something strange about his physiology - something that Trulaine himself may or may not have noticed until recently - it was something that could not have remained hidden for long. He had seen the signs of Trulaine's freakish strength displayed on the battlefield countless times - most recently, during the Memradonian siege.

"The man I knew my whole life is suddenly a well conceived myth to me," he said, half talking to himself, and half addressing Alvantin who seemed to be more worried about the werewolves discovering them than he was of Trulaine's show of strength.

"What are you gonna do?" Philistian squealed, barely able to force a smile. "Kill me? Go ahead...show everyone the monster you really are. The one I saw back in Torund. The one that nearly took my head off."

Before Trulaine's rage boiled over, he checked himself, heeding the pathfinder's infectious, yet true words. He glanced over his shoulder at all the shocked faces. How would he explain it to them? Explain the fact that he was an abomination that no one had ever been able to understand, one that most people did not even know existed within the world of men, much less him. It was a thing that Golondred did not even have the luxury of discerning. And somehow on that night while escaping the outskirts of Torund, Philistian had felt his strength and made note of it. Now the clever bastard would use it to distract everyone from the fact that just a moment ago he was willing to betray them all. Apparently, granting him freedom in light of the fact that everything in their quest actually turned out the way it was supposed to was not enough. He would have to use a different approach to get through to such a man, and perhaps the violent one was not the best for this scenario. Still, the damage had been done. Whoever did not notice before could surely guess it by now. Trulaine was far stronger than the average man.

He dropped Philistian to the ground where the pathfinder gagged in pain.

“You want to go back so bad?” said Trulaine. “Be my guest, I won’t stop you. But just realize this one thing. It is not the world you are running from...it is yourself.”

“Spare me the indignation,” breathed Philistian. “I care not.”

“It is yourself you run from,” Trulaine repeated. Because sooner or later, there won’t be any civilization, no wildlife, no dungeons, no Leadership...there won’t be giants or any other king of the free world to trouble you or your brethren. There will be no Order. Yes, I understand, you’re angry, we all are. In the dungeons they took away your spirit. They tried to make you hate everything about the world that you once loved. But a pathfinder loves the world beyond the life he is given, or else he would have never gained the desire to explore the many paths that lie within. It is yourself you are running from...too afraid to glance over your own shoulder, so you turn your back on the world you swore to protect.”

Trulaine could hear the werewolves outside the tunnel, snooping and searching something out of the ordinary that their noses told them was there.

“Fight with me Philistian,” Trulaine urged the pathfinder who had managed to catch his breath. “Fight with me, and I swear by Centronus, by the gods, by all that I hold dear, you will be granted your freedom. We can kill all these savage bastards and figure this WinDarrow situation out together, or we can fall divided now.”

“How can you make that promise, when you can’t even keep it?”

“I have never made a promise I could not keep. Never in my life.”

He held out his hand. After a brief moment of contemplation, the pathfinder accepted, and the Centronian pulled him to his feet. Philistian looked at him for a moment and then nodded his head in approval. Trulaine did not know if he had talked some sense into him or if the violence and brute force actually worked, but this time, Philistian’s compliance felt genuine.

Together they charged out, rushing and attacking the werewolves swiftly, catching them off guard and in the process, turning their gaze away from the bolder which - along with Maurelan's dying invisibility spell - hid them.

"This was a bad idea Centronian," shouted Philistian.

"We only need to fight them long enough for the pixies to finish the tunnel," said Trulaine.

"Well, I could just use you as a shield."

"And I could just feed you to the werewolves."

The two of them fought tooth and nail, slaying werewolf after werewolf. But the more they put to the edge of their blades, the more grouped up, and soon it was evident that they would soon be fighting an entire horde.

"We have to get out of here," said Trulaine inching his way back toward the boulder. He kept his distance from the werewolves who were weary of his unnatural strength and cautious about attacking him, but they were also slowly amassing and no longer afraid of him or Philistian. It was only a matter of time before they became the next meal.

"Hurry!" he could hear one of the small pixies shouting out to him.

Immediately he bolted, and he was pleased to see that Philistian was right behind him instead of taking the opportunity to dart off. They ran into the tunnel, passing up Brontius who stood near the rear shooting off arrows, connecting with the werewolves who had made it the closest to snatching Trulaine on the way in. Alvantin waited to cover Brontius' escape with a spell that rent the branches from a nearby bush to grow magically and wrap itself around the entrance, entangling the werewolves as they tried to enter. As Trulaine's company escaped further into the tunnel, and the pixie-dust magic died into lifelessness, the spell's effects dried up and the earth closed up behind them, sealing the werewolves out of their secret passage. And now, only darkness could be seen in front of them.

Once again Trulaine had pulled off the seemingly impossible by not getting his entire company killed, and now there was only the task ahead. So far his record

had been impressive, regardless of the fact that they had narrowly missed certain death at every turn. If only there were safer means of travel, perhaps they would not have had to leave their horses back with the Order, perhaps they would not have to worry about outmaneuvering werewolves at every turn, and perhaps he would not be in jeopardy of losing the obedience of his company. But this was yet another price he would have to pay for taking the savage path. Even more disconcerting were Philistian's actions. Initially he had figured that the prison break would gain the pathfinder's obedience - no matter how much he despised Centronus, and civilized order - but he had been wrong. He had no idea just how long he could side with such a loose cannon, but he hoped he would at least get them to the jiin.

The tunnel extended for about a quarter of a mile beneath the hill until they reached the other side. Soon, the light at the end was visible, and for the most part they were able to guide themselves through the dark.

When they reached the surface they were marveled by a fantastic botanic world of wild and magical plants that could not have been present in any other part of the world. Giant redwoods beamed high up into the sky appearing as if they were part of the heavens, giant mushrooms sprang from the ground, glowing with life, an assortment of colorful butterflies and other insects flourished around them, and flowers of every type of color or texture sprung up in groves around them.

"It's beautiful," Maurelan marveled.

"It sure is," Ninsul exclaimed proudly. "This is the pixie garden. We helped groom all the plant life in WinDarrow."

"But..." said Maurelan, holding a giant leaf from a nearby tree in her hand, baffled. "These plants are magical. How is this possible?"

"It's simple," said Ninsul.

"Yes," Ninette interjected. "Unlike any race on earth, pixies are the only people born with magical abilities..."

"So we were brought into this world with the power to alter it."

“And in more magical ways than you know.”

“Amazing,” Alvantin whispered to himself.

“So you are the magical custodians of this realm,” said Trulaine. “Much like the shamans of our realm.”

“Yes,” said Ninette. “But we do not own this province. We only help to make it better.”

“We’re kind of like servants.”

“That doesn’t seem right,” said Brontius.

“Well,” Ninette explained. “The giants are way bigger than us. If we want to share this province with them, we have to follow their laws. Our father has done everything he can to keep the alliance going. This is the only place we have ever been able to call home.”

The great garden was the purest example of magic and nature working in harmony. It was a stunning sight to behold indeed. But the farther they went, the more the environment changed until the grand, beautiful feeling that Trulaine’s company had just felt was quickly fleeting.

WinDarrow was talked a beacon of achievement, and the giants were known for their admiration of color and construction. They built high towers, and the outskirts of their lands were traditionally littered with wondrous, magical, monuments, marketplaces, and other attractions designed to please the eye. They were big on trading goods and their profits had made them more accustomed to the rare privilege of celebrating. With the help of the pixies, they had decorated the fields with magnificent redwoods that towered into the sky, and wild lilies that produced pleasing aromas through the air. And on a normal evening, beyond the great garden, even from afar, the landscape would have been a wonder to behold, but here, WinDarrow appeared to be nothing more than a barren wasteland of smoldering ash and scorched trees. There were muddy pathways where chunks of the earth had been scraped out by huge catapults that the giants had hauled through the terrain in order to set their early positions in a battle, which had clearly. In the trenches were scant signs of plant life. Only the magical mush-

rooms that the pixies were known to harvest had survived, still glowing blue, still somehow finding their way through the soil and surface, pleading for life through the ruptured terrain.

They all looked up in awe at the destruction that lay before them. It was an obvious sign that the battle between the giants and the wolves had peaked at its full stage.

“What happened here?” Trulaine asked, just as curious as the rest of them. Ninsul and Ninette fluttered by, each speaking in turns.

“It was the werewolves.”

“They brought fire.”

“Lots of it.”

“On torches.”

“They burnt it all.”

“To bits!”

“Now, much of our beautiful garden is gone,” said Ninsul, sadly.

They continued on, making their way through the first battlefield where the werewolves began their siege. Farther ahead, the true toll of the battle was evident. There was a field of massive dead bodies; giants and werewolves alike had littered the ground everywhere. Supply horses, and members of other slave races were among the dead as well - ferals, centaurs, even men who were uncursed were among the casualties. It was an eerie scene, one that told a story of many lives coming to an end, a story of people with different backgrounds coming together to defend themselves against the savagery of the werewolves. It was a harrowing sight indeed, and although Trulaine could not stand the sight of seeing the results of another drawn out battle, he knew that he could not escape seeing another. Not in these dark times.

“This is where they first tried to hold them off,” said Ninette.

Huge boulders that had been used in catapults to launch several long-range attacks were now sunk deep into the earth. In the distance, the battle raging afar could be heard. The sound of barking and howling could be heard, coupled with the boisterous shouts of gargantuan generals shouting commands, and their large mechanisms shook the ground. The mixture of the two created an eerie cacophony of synchronized noises and intense rumbles that made the air around Trulaine and his company stand still. Fear hit all of them as they anticipated what the environment would be like just a little ways ahead, and how they would avoid any further conflict with the werewolves than they were already forced to endure.

“The battle rages on ahead,” said Alvantin, somewhat surprised.

“Well of course it does,” said Ninette.

“If it didn’t,” Ninsul finished. “Then getting into WinDarrow would be such a hassle, now would it?”

The pixies led them beyond the forest edge where they could faintly see the conflict raging in the distance. A very uncertain feeling was beginning to come over them as they paused, considering the incalculable dangers that lay ahead. Trulaine could feel the intensity of the conflict from where they were standing the way the heat from a large flame can be felt from far away. And then, he saw a brilliant flash of light go off in the distance. It was unmistakable and had the glimmer of a falling star. It had certainly caught his eye, but he could not let that distract him.

“This is it,” said Ninette, stopping them. “Once we go beyond this point we will enter the palace, but we must go underground again because the battlefield lies ahead.”

The pixie twins waved their dust once more, creating a second tunnel. Much had been going on the first time they had opened up the ground, and Trulaine did not get a chance to appreciate what a wonderful display of magic it was. There was something pure about pixies, and Trulaine could sense it. Perhaps it was the fact that they were naturally kind and meek creatures, or perhaps it was the fact they were the only being he could think of that had been born with magical abilities. Perhaps that was why they were considered myth in the Northern provinces. Whatever the case, he now had a moment to marvel and appreciate the brilliance

of the magic which they called pixie-dust as it shimmered from their fingertips. They had possessed innate, magical qualities over the earth and had been a major contributor to why the planet had survived for so long.

When the incantation was complete, they all entered with ease, but the farther they walked into the tunnel the narrower it became. Being pixies - hardly standing an inch in height - Ninsul and Ninette zipped around with ample space to maneuver, but it was not so easy for Trulaine and his company. From top to bottom, this tunnel was barely four feet in height, and as fast as they were being urged to travel, they could barely maneuver at all. Brontius could hardly squeeze through, and Golondred became full of grunts. Even Maurelan, the company's smallest member - had trouble progressing through the tunnel.

The ground closed up behind them and they were now sealed in total darkness.

Using one of her incantations, Maurelan created a ball of light that drifted in front of them, illuminating their way. Before their eyes, a mass of giant insects scattered in every directions. Spiders, beetles, centipedes; there were hundreds of them trying to find their way back toward the darkness. Golondred cursed under his breath as several large bugs made their way across his boot. He stomped on them frantically, crushing as many as he could.

“By the gods!” he cried in panic. “Please, turn it off!”

They had traversed nearly a mile underground, and the ruckus above became more and more intense until they could hear the giants pounding the ground just above them. It was an unsettling feeling, and they soon feared that the ground might cave in on them. But it was the earth, and no matter how much they all questioned its durability in a time when the fountain of enchantment was free to release untold corrupting energies into the world, the natural walls and ceiling above them withstood the brunt of battle.

The ground opened up again, and once more the world around them could be seen as the moonlight illuminated the night sky. Already the battle seemed to die down behind them, and the serene, starlit night sky complimented the bloody fields below. They could hear the battle nearby, wondering why they had not yet encountered any giants yet.

“I’ve taken us through to an alley,” Ninette informed them before zipping through the dark, desolate street walled off by concrete. Before them was a massive palace looming nearby - one larger than any Trulaine had ever seen. Finally they had arrived to their destination.

That was when he noticed it. Suddenly they were one member short.

“Where is Philistian?” Trulaine asked, glancing at his company, puzzled.

The pathfinder was no longer among them. Philistian had vanished. He had taken advantage of the many distractions they had encountered just within the last ten minutes. In fact, there were too many distractions – from the beauty of the garden, to the darkness of the tunnels, to the battle raging in the distance – for Trulaine to guess exactly when he had taken his opportunity.

“The bastard is slick,” replied Golondred. “I’ll give that to him.”

They all took a moment to look around for the pathfinder, but to no avail.

“Dammit!” Trulaine shouted. “After all I have done to keep this company intact, he still managed to escape.”

“There is no one to blame,” Brontius responded. “He did not desire to be with us from the beginning.”

“Yeah,” said Golondred. “Just let the little sneak go back with his brother.”

“Whatever he was banned for better have been worth it,” began Trulaine. “Because if he did not see Philistian again after they left WinDarrow, then the fate of the world may be precipitated upon that fault. And the responsibility would lie solely on me.” He paused and looked up at his company, a million things running through his mind, and none of them were good.

“Perhaps it does not matter,” he said. “We have reached WinDarrow safely.”

“And if the other gauges happen to be scattered out here,” said Golondred spitting on the ground. “Then so be it. We’ll find it.”

“You’re right. We don’t need him.” Trulaine shook his head in acceptance, convincing himself. He then smiled, carrying a new, yet jaded sense of confidence as he addressed Ninsul and Ninette. “Take us to see king Akabremnar.”

“Follow us,” both of the twins responded, and with zipped through the air, they guided them toward the palace entrance.



The Infalion

“And here we are,” said Ninsul, enthusiastically and rather thrilled to have the opportunity to welcome guests into her homeland, despite the chaos that filled the air around them. “WinDarrow! City of giants! Not to be confused with DunHarrow of course.”

“DunHarrow?” Alvantin asked, clueless. “Well what is the difference?”

“What's the difference you ask?”

“Well,” added Ninette. “I hope you didn't think us pixies actually lived with the giants.”

“Eeewwww,” the animated Ninsul shook her head in disgust.

“Although they can be good hosts, giants are not well mannered.”

“Why else do you think they need pixies around to fix everything for them?”

“Uh...I-” Alvantin was cut off by Ninsul.

“DunHarrow is the home of the pixies...”

“The comb temple,” finished Ninette. “But here, the first thing you will see in WinDarrow is the courtyard.”

As they paced the courtyard, they were introduced to an abundance of activity on a scale much larger than any of them had been used to in the past. Huge towers and buildings spiraled into the sky, pixies flew around by the dozens, and giants paced through the courtyard, bumbling and glancing down at Trulaine's company as they passed - curious, but obviously far too busy to be bothered with them. The

feeling was a little discomfoting at first. Trulaine had never been near a giant, had never even seen one, and now here they were, real and larger than life; so real that he had to worry about being stepped on every few minutes.

“Wow,” said Maurelan.

“Tell me about it,” said Golondred. “It’s not every day you see somethin’ like this.”

“No it is not.”

Everything in WinDarrow was huge, larger than life, and now they were about to enter the kingdom’s royal palace. It was an incredibly large citadel looming magnificently in the distance amid the fog in the air that gave it the appearance as if it were beaming into the sky. Of course it was not quite that tall but it was tall enough, and wider than five Centronian palaces.

“This is the king’s sky parlor!” Ninette did not fail to announce.

They approached a massive door that had been crafted of shiny mahogany. There was one huge metal hook on the door used for knocking and right beside it was a small emblem with a tiny hole in it, one just small enough for a pixie to use.

Ninsul flew up to the hole, and shouted into it.

“Ninsul, reporting!” her voice echoed throughout the chamber on the other end.

Soon enough, the doors creaked and swung open and they stepped inside.

On the other end was a gargantuan, dressed in elegant attire, standing in a tall, hospitable posture.

“Welcome,” he said graciously. “Trulaine of Centronus. “You have been expected. I am Thorog. I will be your host for the evening. Your rooms have been prepared, and your dinner has been served.”

“But we didn’t...”

“This way please,” said Thorog, turning and walking away as if he were literally too tall to notice the Centronian speak.

Well this is strange, Trulaine thought.

They continued on, following after their host, feeling largely out of place.

The hall of the parlor was stretched so wide that they could barely tell where the hall began, and so long that that they could hardly see the end of it. Everywhere they looked they saw a giant walking along the tile floor, and unlike on the gravel outside, the tile floor jolted with their every step. Surprisingly, they had been met with nothing but smiles and courteous gestures. It was not quite the reception he was expecting. Everyone spoke of the gargantuans like they were some vile and vicious race, but they had given Trulaine and his company a welcome practically better than the one he had received back at home. They were only guests, and even though they were not of the gargantuan race, they had still received a warm reception. Even in the middle of a battle.

Soon they entered a massive dining room; the table itself took up half the space, a giant rectangle fifty feet long and nearly twenty feet across. At each end of the table were large throne-like seats and each side of the table was lined with twenty smaller seats. With so much space there was no need to sit across from each other, and since it would have been difficult to sit across from each other without shouting, Trulaine and his company sat side by side. Brontius had been given a padded area where he could rest his large frame while they waited for the king to enter. Trulaine sat at the corner seat of the table, near the head of the table where the empty throne awaited the king's presence. He didn't know why, but he felt nervous, and he could tell that the others were too.

Playing in a string of choirs were several quartets of pixies, all floating in the air singing together to create a most harmonious sound Trulaine and his company had ever heard. It echoed beautifully off the walls around them. It was a wonder that put a smile on the faces of Trulaine's company, for the weary journey completed had suddenly seemed to be so far behind them. It seemed as if every accommodation and every form of hospitality had been afforded to them. Brontius found himself delighted by the pixies, Maurelan and Bernarsu seemed to be content, and Golondred gazed at an assortment of oversized plates, bowls, and silverware which had been placed on the tables previously, before they had arrived, and

still lay on the table in front of them, neatly placed and ready for dining. He marveled at the art of their craft and design.

“Splendid!” he said closely examining the spoons. “They don't make em like they do in Centronus, do they Trulaine? Wood ware perhaps, but not metals like this. They have taken the craftsmanship necessary to forge swords and made it useful for cookery. Ha! Brilliant.”

“A craft perfected by the Lidalians I see,” said Alvantin. “Curious. I did not know that the Gargantuans had such close dealings with the once flourishing people of the sea.”

“They're gifts!” Ninsul's tiny voice floated between them. She zipped up, seeming to appear out of nowhere, and she gazed at Trulaine with large eyes. Golondred jumped back, nearly falling out of his chair because she had startled him so much.

“From the Lidalians, yes,” said Ninette who had been perched on a spoon near one of the many empty seats at the great, oak table.

“Two hundred and fifty-five sets of the world's finest cutlery, crafted out of silver and gold...”

“...as a tribute to our two great nations coming together, pixie and giant...”

“...recorded in all our historical scrolls...”

“...and celebrated once every four lunar cycles...”

“Facilitated by The Leadership.”

Interesting, Trulaine thought.

Moments later they were greeted by half giants; female members of the gargantuan race who sat them kindly and served them food in large and such unexpected quantities. Walking in from several hallways, a whole slew of them brought great platters full of exotic foods. Wild boar-meat, honey soaked hams, rabbit stew, whole rabbits stuffed with mushrooms, and turkey roasts were placed before them. There were selections of lush vegetables swiveled in spices and royal bread dashed with garlic herb. Seafood had been brought in, and several types of fish were pre-

sented to them, and wild shark meat littered the silver platters that were brought in. There were an assortment of fruits, soups and cakes, whole selections of ale, mead, and fine wine; there seemed to be every type of elegant dish known to man presented before them, larger than any feast Trulaine had ever seen in Centronus.

Brontius marveled and Maurelan gasped. Most pleased of all was Golondred. He let out a great bellow of laughter that echoed through the high halls, slapping his large belly in delight. This was a glorious moment indeed, and Trulaine felt at ease, knowing that his company would at least have a well-deserved meal following all the mayhem they had encountered, even if they were dining right in the midst of a battle. They had led a tough journey, but now things were finally looking up.

Soon after they began eating, a great bellowing laugh echoed hideously through the chamber, and somehow, everyone just knew that the king had arrived.

King Akabremnar entered the hall, accompanied by two half-giant courtesans, each decorated in dangling jewelry. The great king himself was being carried in on a large throne by four servants; being giants themselves, they all struggled to uphold their master who appeared to be larger than most of his subjects. He was draped in heavy robes and large bolts of jewelry, which had increased his weight even more. They set him down, and silence filled the hall, only the sound of war filled the air outside.

“My guests,” he spoke with a large, booming voice and a speech impediment. “I hope that you’ve enjoyed yer visit. As yeh can see, we’re having troubles with our, eh...locals.”

The great king chuckled as a giant rock slammed into the building adjacent from the one that they were in. With a mountainous jolt, the halls rumbled, the windows cracked, and small pieces of the ceiling chipped and cascaded onto the dining table. Golondred grabbed his plate, holding it securely. Everyone looked around cautiously, but the king, ever the endorser of hospitality held a huge grin even while chaos seemed loomed everywhere else but the great hall.

“So what brings you all to the land of WinDarrah?” he asked, but before Trulaine could answer, the king held up a huge hand, interrupting him as politely as possible. “Never mind, don' answer. I've heard...the energy fountain has

erupt...that the winds have changed, that nothing can stop this world's end before the prophecy has been revealed.”

“And pardon me my lord, but how did you know that?”

“My pixies have informed me of course,” said Akabremnar with a smile.

“I did not know that they were psychics.”

“Not innately, no. And this bein’ no surprise visit, let us get straight to it. The fountain of enchantment has indeed erupted, yes I know. But otherwise, why have we been graced by your presence, this evening?”

“We are looking for the vessel of Ranok,” said Trulaine.

“Ah, de vessel. That is a thing unique to us of course. It is something we cannot part with, not today no. My apologies, perhaps another request would be suitable.”

“That will not do. The fountain has erupted, and if we do not use the vessel for its intended purpose then we may face a catastrophe such as the world has never seen. What you risk losing here is nothing compared to what you may lose if we are not granted permission to use the vessel.” Trulaine was through with being polite to every stranger that took his words lightly, and he now spoke with fervor. If king Akabremnar would ever side with him on a logical basis, then now would be the time for Trulaine to make that impression. They had come too far to go back empty handed. Trulaine just hoped that the king would not be as stubborn as everyone else he had encountered along the way.

“The vessel has many uses,” he said. “I will consider your request

“You are right. There are many things we need to know about it. What is the vessel? What are its properties? How is it used? We will need any other information you can give us as well, such as where we can find the other gauges, who else knows about them, and how they are being protected.”

The king looked down at him with eyes so large that even when they were half closed they appeared to be bulging to a normal man. Trulaine wondered what could be going through such a mind as the gargantuan king of WinDarrow pos-

sessed. What was the psyche of a typical gargantuan was like? And how vital was it to the citizens of WinDarrow that their king was hesitant to give it up for the world's sake? Perhaps he did not trust the Centronians. What was the king's perspective? Trulaine would give anything to wield a psychic mind at this point.

Before Akabremnar could make a response, he was greeted by one of his generals, a heavily armored warrior who took the king to the side and whispered something in his ear to which the king nodded graciously. He then turned back to Trulaine's company, bowing quickly.

"Forgive me, I must be excused for a moment," he said. "When you are finished eating, Thorog here will take you to your rooms."

"But we do not wish further accommodation," Trulaine protested.

"We don't?" said Golondred, still sucking on a piece of roasted chicken.

"You have been generous enough for the feast you have prepared for us. If the vessel does lie in these lands, I would at least like to see it to confirm that my quest has not been in vain. Will you at least afford me that, great king?"

"Hmm," Akabremnar grunted under his breath. "When you are done, come see me on the balcony, Trulaine of Centronus."

"But, where-"

"Thorog will assist you of course," he said, exiting. Trulaine, being a man of few words who only spoke when something was of utmost importance couldn't help but feel slightly offended. Then again, gargantuans were tall and perhaps they were used to picking up more boisterous sounds with their ears and were not used to listening to people smaller than they were. But if that were the case, then how did they communicate with the pixies so well.

Rather than dwell on small things that he had no control over, Trulaine chose to focus on the present and now. For the entire journey, he expected exactly the opposite of what he had actually gotten from Akabremnar. Trulaine expected him to be rude but he was polite, and although he expected the king to be eager to comply with the sacred mandate, the king actually seemed reluctant and hesitant. But

while he sat there finishing his meal - the best he had had since back at Centronus - he thought about how his quest had changed at every turn, and ever since he got there, he had only been presented with more questions that needed more answers. When did Akabremnar have contact with Valindolin, and Cathedeus? Was it before or after his quest had been set in motion? And if it was before, then why hadn't they informed him at the council? Could he trust Akabremnar? Philistian obviously didn't, but the entire Centronian royal council had. Now that he was actually out here in the Southern Reach he had a new perspective on these lands, how they differed from the places Trulaine had known about, and how, being out here - despite everything he thought he knew about the rest of the world - changed his entire viewpoint.

He may not have been granted all of the information he had initially inquired about during the feast, but now that he had a chance to walk through the palace alone with the king, he had gained a wealth of information simply by observing the environment around him. He noticed that the farther they went from the palace, the more desperate Akabremnar's soldiers appeared as they shuffled through different battle stations, and the longer he walked, the more he could see that WinDarrow's commonwealth consisted of giants who lived in utter poverty and were running around even more frantic than the soldiers were. And even though the environment outside was nothing like the pleasant facade of the cozy sky parlor, the difference was not present on the face of the king. He wore the same smile as he did during the feast, an uncanny assurance exuding from him. His demeanor had not changed in the slightest since they stepped out, but it was obvious that all was not well in the land of WinDarrow, no matter how much he tried to hide it.

"I appreciate your hospitality," said Trulaine. "It is the best welcome I have had in a while. But we are pressed for time, my lord."

"Yes, I understand," said Akabremnar stumbling through the halls. "King C'thedeus is always pressed for time. I have always considered your king to be a great man."

“You’ve met our king?”

“Well of course. All the kings must convene during trials. The opinion of every king, or at least their presence, is required at the trials. N’I ave been part every trial since I was a lil grub, you see?”

Trulaine was puzzled by this small detail. So his uncle had met the gargantuan king before, and maybe have even been a close ally of his in the political trials. Trulaine did not know why it didn’t occur to him before, and just because none of the Centronians had ever been to WinDarrow does not mean that their kings had not met before. The business of kings had never been one of Trulaine’s concerns and so he never thought it, but now that was finally crossing his mind, it didn’t seem too far-fetched. It made him wonder however, how astounding the communication had been between kings of the Northern provinces and those who resided in the Southern provinces. Clearly it was better than he had previously thought.

“I brought yeh here for a single reason, Trulaine of Centronus,” said the king. “To show you how we survive here.”

Akabremnar - along with one of his escorts - led Trulaine to the armory, which had already been emptied out of artillery a long time ago. All that remained were a few of his soldiers grabbing the last of the swords; swords specially designed to fit the grasp of a gargantuan, and fitted with blades strong enough to cut a tree in half with a single swing.

Perched on one of the shelves typically reserved for weaponry Trulaine saw something that he did not expect to ever see in an armory, something that looked very much out of place. There on the corner mantle was a small rusted cage that housed what to Trulaine looked liked a pixie. Although she was small, she did not appear to be quite as small as Ninsul and Ninette, although the lights were dim and he only a glimpse. Perhaps she was a different breed. He was having a hard time believing that a pixie was indeed the thing he saw. She lay in the cage, her eyes closed serenely, her breaths coming in low, quiet gasps, and her hands placed calmly upon her chest.

Akabremnar rang out a series of demands in the gnarled gargantuan language and immediately, several of his guards rushed in to take the cage out of the ar-

mory. Trulaine felt a moment of cluelessness wash over him as the words nearly escaped his lips.

Where are they taking her?

“The werewolves are thirsty for flesh, as well as our water supply. You may not believe this but she is our most formidable weapon. Tonight we shall defeat the werewolves. Then, at sunrise - since they horde like roaches - they will begin yet another siege and will be repelled back again.”

“That is not a defeat. That is only delaying the inevitable. The werewolves are many in number, and you cannot defeat them all.”

“What would you have me do? Evacuate my people?”

“You should have done that a long time ago.”

“You say that we should flee, hmmm?” Akabremnar chuckled. “Is that the kind of courage one can expect from a Centronian king?”

“I am not a king.”

“And yet you pretend to know what is best for my people.”

“With all due respect, your troops are all but defeated. The conflict has reached its peak. It is now so bad that ever since I arrived here I have been cautious, and pondering if it is safe enough to even stay the night, because it looks as though WinDarrow may not be here in the morning. I have seen sieges of this magnitude before. They never end well.”

“Hmm,” the king chuckled with a mumbling pause as if he was considering whether he liked Trulaine or not. Then after another tumultuous laugh, he gave the Centronian another one of his huge, gracious smiles. “Perhaps after the smoke has cleared I shall make you advisor to my throne!”

Trulaine chuckled with him, but in the back of his mind he considered the idea seriously for a moment. Quite frankly, the thought of being Akabremnar's advisor had nearly made him cringe. WinDarrow was in too much of a mess for an advisor to the king's throne to even sound remotely pleasant. He would rather tough out the rigors of his mission and risk all the possible dangers that may lie ahead

rather than be Akabremnar's advisor. But still, laughing along with the joke was a good enough way to keep within his good graces...or so he hoped. Trulaine only needed to keep himself liked until he could figure out how to walk off WinDarrow with the vessel. He hoped he would at least show him the thing.

They continued to walk through the exterior of the palace, out onto the courtyards. Trulaine was still getting used to how massive all of the buildings and monuments were here. The greatest and most elegant of which was a towering, colossal statue carved in the king's likeness, perhaps a tribute crafted by his servants to honor his greatness. There it stood, looming in the distance of the town square, but even still, the incessant sound of raging battle afar was enough to distract him from the ever-expanding splendor of WinDarrow.

“Some of those who live here, consider me to be something of a tyrant,” said Akabremnar. “Can you believe that? They believe me not fit to be king, but they are forgetting the rigors of ruling such a nation.”

“And what exactly are they forgetting that you are having trouble reminding them of?”

“Well, we are giants!” he called down to Trulaine as if it that were just as obvious as the fact that they were giants themselves. “Do you think it is easy to support a nation of citizens who consume more space, more food, more water - ten times that of your average nation? Hmm? Just keeping this place in one piece is more than even the Leadership was willing to deal with. So when they appointed me king of these lands, they wanted to make sure it was ruled by someone who could keep the strength of these witless worms high, as a good king must be seen as both benevolent and malevolent at times, if you catch my drift. But all I have ever done has been for the commonwealth.”

Trulaine glanced up at him in that moment, and he could see on the king's face that he actually believed those words. Perhaps WinDarrow was a farce to contend with, perhaps it had truly fallen on disastrous times, perhaps there really was nothing any king could do to save it, but Trulaine felt deep down that perhaps Akabremnar was not the best choice of a king to rule over these lands, but then again they had only just arrived a few hours ago. The full extent of the situation was not

all clear to him yet, and so a part of him just accepted that Akabremnar knew WinDarrow better than anyone, and so somehow, he must be correct in his convictions. None of it really mattered to Trulaine anyway. He just wanted to finally see what the vessel of light was and how he could leave WinDarrow with it as soon as possible.

He took Trulaine to the center of his wide balcony, one that overlooked the entire battlefield where corpses of both giants and werewolves could be seen lying strewn in the desert wastelands about. The balcony itself stretched for the entire length of the palace, and beside it was a huge building, something of a command center.

From the building emerged his guards, the same soldiers who had carried Angelinus out of the armory still in her cage. She was still in that same cage when they brought her over to a strange, metallic device that was not too big and not too small. It stood maybe three feet in height. It was made with a strange shape; supported by three legs and topped with a triangular roof. It was composed intricately with many different points on the device that held spaces within for the flowing of magical energies. No matter how much he examined it however, Trulaine could not decipher their inner workings. Whatever this thing was, it did not take him a manual to know that magic had somehow governed it.

“This is the infalion,” said the king, bowing in front of it invaluablely. His soldiers placed Angelinus inside of the device as she still slept in her small metal cage. “It was crafted by the Lidalians, you know.”

“The Lidalians?” said Trulaine, puzzled. “But their nation sank into the depths of the Krelenic Sea centuries ago.”

“Of course it did, but does that mean that their wonders of alchemy should perish to the world? Not at all, my friend.”

“The infalion,” Trulaine began curiously. “What does it do?”

“Its purpose is to magnify magical energies and then displace them. Someone with the knowledge of alchemy could make very good use of it. That is why we keep it hidden as well as possible.”

“Is that...the vessel of Ranok?”

The king did not answer him. Instead, he smiled proudly and gave a command to his technicians in the gargantuan language.

As his soldiers started the machine with the cranking and winding of gears, and the incantation of one very long pronounced spell, the wondrous device known as the infalion droned loudly, almost ear piercingly. It drummed and fumed, acting like a wild thing constructed of its own will, terrifying to anyone not used to this kind of thing, and Trulaine was far from used to it, but after being in the Southern Reach he had learned to accept things that were not apart of his world.

Trulaine gazed at the infalion, mesmerized.

And there was Angelinus, locked in the device, still sleeping serene and motionless, every part of her - everything except her hair which began to wisp wildly about her - remained completely still while two dozen metal rings spun swiftly around her little cage which began to rattle from the vibrations. The outer framing of the infalion discharged a bright blue light rose from the roof and shot straight into Angelinus. Trulaine reach out his hand in caution, initially believing her to be killed, but instead, quite the opposite happened. Her eyes opened wide and she gasped as life and much more, flooded into her. The energy was channeled through her. It magnified until it burst, projecting out of her with an intense flash of heat, so bright that the dark vision of the werewolves could not handle its fury, Once again, just as Trulaine had seen from miles at a distance when he had first entered WinDarrow, the light shone incomprehensibly bright. So bright indeed, that Trulaine, Akabremnar, and the rest of his men - whom had been notified beforehand - had to shade their eyes to prevent instant blindness. So bright in fact, that their shadows were framed to the ground. And once the incredible displayed had ended, and the dying light faded, Trulaine could see the werewolves scurrying in the distance.

It was both a marvel to behold and a tragedy all at the same time. Trulaine did not know why, but something about it did not seem right, did not seem honorable. All this time Trulaine was under the impression that the giants had created some true ingenuity to fend of the werewolves, but now he saw that it was just the trick-

ery of magic yet again, fooling opponents into withdrawing time and time again. And what of poor Angelinus whom he had not a word from yet? She just sat there in the device, staring straight forward, blankly, awake but somehow not conscious. Did she even have an opinion about what she was being used for? Did it even matter to her? Was she even considered an actual human being? And what of the infal-
ion? Was this the vessel of light? It seemed as if Akabremnar was willing to show him things, but he had not been very clear on what exactly the vessel was, how it worked, and when he would be able to leave with it. All of these questions lingered heavily on Trulaine's mind. At first he did not even realize that the brute gargantuan king had been glaring at him, but when he saw him from the corner of his eye, he cleared his throat, sucked back into reality.

“How...” began Trulaine, speechless at first. “How long has this been happening to her?”

“It matters not,” answered Akabremnar, smiling at his work, barely paying attention to Trulaine. “She is the byproduct of a beautifully successful prophecy. By right of the Leadership itself, I have jurisdiction to use her in the ways that only the gods have intended. These are sacred mandates. I believe in your mission, Trulaine of Centronus. I hope that you see it through. But you must give me some time.”

“Time for what, they’ll keep coming back.”

“And with each retreat we will strike down their wounded. For as long as it takes until either they leave this land or we’ve killed every last one of them!”

Akabremnar had only raised his voice a little and already Trulaine could feel the intensity change in his demeanor. He dared not challenge the king on his own turf, and even if he did, it would only get him into more trouble with locals of such lands foreign to him. Besides, he could now see the king's perspective, a perspective that, despite their moral differences, he could not entirely argue with. His people were on a desperate front against the werewolves and without Angelinus to power the infal-
ion there was nothing to prevent them from pillaging and killing the inhabitants of WinDarrow.

Trulaine had feared the same thing would happen to Centronus before he had left on this mission. It was part of the reason why he had elected to fight the werewolves on their own ground before the situation became even worse - much like the case of Windarrow. If anything, Trulaine's battle with the savages - which already seemed such a lifetime ago - had probably been the result of them migrating to the Southern Reach, and finally, WinDarrow. And for that reason, he was beginning to feel a sting of guilt for not agreeing with Akabremnar earlier, especially after the gracious hospitality he had shown he and his comrades.

"I understand," said Trulaine, bowing his head. "We will stay here until this war is over. That is of course, if we are still a suitable enough audience for you to entertain as guests."

"Well o'course, o'course!" Akabremnar bumbled joyously, his great voice booming in the night air.

A slew of pixies flew in to unhook Angelinus and remove her from the infalion. That was when he noticed something he did not notice before. The top of her head appeared to be locked into place by some invisible anchor, restraining her head from movement. He could tell because when he jerked the cage free from the infalion, the rest of her body jerked with the motion but her head remained stationary. It was a curious thing. Trulaine was almost convinced that he was seeing things.

The pixies secured the cage, and flew off with her.

Trulaine felt a deep grievance for her and what she was permitted to withstand. Especially for someone that small to possess something so great within them must be exhausting for such a tiny person. Perhaps if he and his company could wait it out for a few days, and maybe a miracle would come along and the werewolves would call off their attack for good, perhaps then he could take her away from here, do what they intended and end this celestial pestilence, and indirectly, out of that he would have saved her. At least with the fountain destroyed and the earth restored to its natural state, Angelinus - along with all the other races of the earth - could live free of curses, spells, and unholy battles with beasts that kings like Akabremnar found himself in this very moment.

Whatever the case, Trulaine would just have to be patient, and wait to see the entire scenario before making a judgment call. Besides, he might be here for as long as the battle waged on, which could be an unforeseen stretch of time, and although he did not intend on waiting for the entire length of that time, he would have to swallow his pride and focus solely on gaining the full perspective of their situation here. It would not be an easy thing, but for Trulaine who had already lacked patience at times like this - especially with all the unnecessary setbacks it took just to make it here - getting the hell out of here with the vessel was his top priority.



The Vessel of Ranok

The rest of Trulaine's company spent the evening getting acquainted with the locals and becoming accustomed to the over-sized, grandiose structure of the palace. Immediately following the feast, they had attended what the giants called, a display of wit, talent, and other theatrical performances. The first was a pair of giants who had mastered the art of juggling an assortment of heavy objects. They each performed solo routines and then together, tossing the objects back and forth to each other at varying distances and height. Up next there was a giant gentleman, and a poet of sorts. He conducted a speech about the ongoing battle that waged around them. After the poem, there was applause and then a somber moment of silence. The third act was a cluster of twelve pixies banding together to creating a sparkling display of exploding pixie dust and magical enchantments, visually telling the story of a little girl wandering out into the big world.

The three acts were spectacular, and it had all been put on specifically for them.

Maurelan enjoyed the show. It was certainly something that she had ever had the privilege of seeing back home, but even an a hour of WinDarrow's finest entertainment was not enough to deter her mind - or the others who wore straight faces as well, save Golondred who continuous ranted and cheered, far too pleased with the feast he had gorged himself in - from all they had been through and all they were still trying to achieve. For one thing, she had overexerted herself when she had put up the invisibility shield for nearly ten minutes back at the hill when they had encountered the werewolves. Her enchantment had saved them from being detected, but had put considerable strain on her mind, body, and especially her

spirit. The strain alone from holding up such a spell for so long had made her nose bleed, and the headache she had gained had only begun to subside. Since the charm required her to hold the spell, it was considered a mold, the very thing Bernarsu had scolded her for years for not mastering, and now she knew why. A few minutes longer in such a weakened state would have killed her or rendered her comatose. Spells were a very dangerous thing, even for the caster, which is why many people in the civilized world typically stayed away from them. But this is why her father trained her so rigorously, to be one of the few people her age to be as versed in magic as she was. And still she had not achieved the level of prowess she had thought she had. That was a disappointment to her as well. Then there was the fact that their mission seemed to come to a dead end at almost every turn, and also the fact that her father and homeland were destroyed. All of these things were boiling inside, eating her alive.

Following the encore, they were escorted to their sleeping quarters.

Being as huge as a dining hall, the room was too great and elegant to be nothing but royalty, but to the giants it was just a common storeroom. It was draped with long, silk curtains, decorated with huge beds covered with elegant quilts with colorful designs on them. Everything about the room, from the way pinks and blues were assorted, coordinating through nearly every object including, tables, walls, and teacups, suggested that the pixies' artistic sensibilities must have been responsible for the design of this place, as well as that of the courtyard, the palace, and probably all of WinDarrow. It was truly marvelous.

“Well this is a whole lot better than the last place we were in,” said Alvantin.

“Hell, better than home,” replied Golondred, humorously.

As Thorog left, they took their time to take in the splendor, awed in silence for moments, until he came back with something of an announcement to make.

“Pardon me,” he said. “But there are some pixies who wish to have a moment with you.”

Since Trulaine was gone, Brontius was the first to speak on the group's behalf.

“Sure,” he said.

Thorog bowed and stepped out. An instant later Ninsul and Ninette poked their heads in with smiles wide enough to see even from a distance on their little faces.

“I have a few friends,” said Ninsul shyly. “They have never seen a centaur before.”

“Can we...introduce you to some of our friends?” asked Ninette.

“Sure,” said Brontius. “I guess I-”

Suddenly, the room filled up with the sound of fluttering wings, and dozens of pixies flooding in enthusiastically. They flew in, laughing and chatting amongst each other, causing the room to burst into life. All their many little sharp tones and voices chirped simultaneously like a class of chattering children swarming a bouquet of treats.

It had taken them by surprise, none more than Brontius of course. He looked around nervously as they swarmed about him; handfuls of them peering closely into his face, examining his tail, and touching his fur. All of them making very ‘pixyish’ remarks, showing just how mesmerized they were to see a centaur, not a skinny malnourished man with a horses’ frame slowly killing him, but an actual brute, warrior centaur straight from the Centronian province. It amazed Trulaine’s company. Despite the many wondrous things that they never knew existed - including the pixies themselves - the pixies were equally awed by seeing a centaur in their midst. It was a reality shifting moment for everyone; Trulaine’s company could now see that there were things in the Southern Reach that they could learn from and appreciate, and likewise, the pixies were discovering that there were things in the Northern Reach to marvel over as well, and the best thing about it was that these things were people and not objects. If there was one defining moment when they all saw the bigger picture of why they were out here on the other side of the world, trying to save it, and not just their local homelands - it was now. It was proof that people from opposite ends of the world can still share and appreciate each other’s differences regardless of their customs traditions, and ethnic origins.

Maurelan could certainly see it. She stood in the corner beside Bernarsu with a frown because she was still not feeling cheery, but deep down, she smiled, reveling in the sight of this; Brontius bombarded by pixies so fascinated by him that Maurelan was convinced that they did not even notice the other members of Trulaine's company. Golondred - always the cheery one, especially after a good meal - expressed nothing but laughter. Alvantin on the other hand had the opposite expression. He did not say anything, but his crossed arms, stiff posture, and sour face suggested that maybe he thought this was all a waste of time. Perhaps he did not like the pixies. Something about them annoyed him.

"These pixies are too many," he complained. "I wish they would go away."

Among the miniature crowd, Ninsul could hear what he said. She glanced rudely at him, but he could not distinguish the differences between the myriad of pixies that swarmed before him and the two twins who had helped get them to WinDarrow.

"Now now," said Brontius nervously, while trying to keep track of how many of them were buzzing around his hooves. "Careful. If I step on one of you, I will squash the pixie dust out of you."

Golondred and Bernarsu both laughed, and the positive energy in the atmosphere had now reached a healthy high. The pixies had really taken a liking to Brontius. And while it was one of their more heartwarming moments in their journey, there had still been much on Maurelan's mind as she stood there, blankly.

She excused herself to step outside on the promenade just outside of their room. Here, she gazed into the night sky, which was cloudy and red with the falling ash from the kindle that had been lit hours earlier for the sake of battle. After a few moments, it began to sprinkle again and Maurelan peered farther out onto the balcony. She glanced to the east in the same direction that the wind was blowing, the same direction, a single tear scrolled down her cheek, disguised in the rain that caught her cheek.

She could hear Bernarsu's footsteps behind her. He stopped to stand beside her, first looking into her face and then glancing up at the night sky trying to see what she was trying to see. But it was obvious.

“We will avenge our father,” he said. “And our people.”

“Yes,” she said, no longer trying to deny the fact that he always seemed to know what she was thinking. “Bernarsu, do you remember when we were young?”

“I remember when you were young,” he mused, pointing out that he was actually older than her by ten years.

“When I was young?” she chuckled.

“Yes, and all you wanted to do was to see the world.”

“And all you wanted to do was to please my father by trying to keep me confounded with chores.”

“Yes,” he chuckled even harder.

“It’s almost as if you knew my dream and you wanted keep me from it,” she said, giving him a light punch on his arm.

“Yes, and now you are finally seeing the world, and you are still young. Who would have thought? He would have been proud, had he seen the courage you have mustered these past few weeks. You know that right?”

Maurelan said nothing. She just continued gazing into the dark, red night. Now whenever she thought about her father, she just thought of Shallemeign. It pained her to know that he was even still breathing. Someday she would have her revenge. But right now the thought was still fresh and so painful. If there was one thing she knew however, was that her father would not want to see her in pain, and no matter how much she would have denied it before, once again, Bernarsu was right. Her father would have been proud. The things she had done were astonishing and the fact that she had done them in order to fulfill her father’s dying wish was perhaps the only thing giving her the strength to keep going on; keep going on even though she had nothing left of her life except Bernarsu.

“We will help Trulaine see his quest to the end,” he declared. “Then we rebuild our home. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

They turned to head back inside, and a single howl could be heard faintly far off in the distance. Maurelan knew what it meant; that the battle was not yet over, that they would be gathering their forces against the giants soon for another assault. She did not know how long they would have to be here, but the fact that the werewolves were still out there after the battle had apparently subsided had given her a bad feeling. And the king's gracious, larger than life hospitality would only sustain their comfort so long if they were asked to enjoy it during an incessant war.

Maybe we should leave this place as soon as possible, she thought.

Following his brief meeting with the king on the balcony, Akabremnar had shown Trulaine took him on an extended tour of the palace of WinDarrow. The king had shown him just about all that he could be shown of their illustrious nation – the high members of their council, training facilities, and religious temples. He had even been shown the great water reserve that had started the battle in the first place, appropriately named the Swallow Lake (due to its value for consumption). Trulaine was beginning to get a better understanding of everything that the gargantuan's stood for, and he realized that they would not give up this fight. Even if they wanted to, the king would not allow it, for he took far too much pride in this great province to ever surrender it.

A stout male pixie flew over to the king, bumping something in his ear. The pixie was so small, compared to Akabremnar that he looked like a mosquito buzzing around, whispering, but trying to speak loud enough for that giant ears could receive his words.

“Ah,” said Akabremnar. “I suppose Lord Thristol has received word that you've arrived. Ah'm guessing he wouldn't mind a few words with you. Follow Wimblystrom here, and he will escort you to the honeycomb temple. There he will...inform you on everything you need to know about your quest. Perhaps he can even point you in the right direction when...fate would have you ready to leave. Well I have other matters to attend to o'coarse. You have my blessings.”

“Okay,” said Trulaine as he found himself chasing after Wimblystrom who was already flitting across the balcony.

From the small amount of information he had already gathered about the honeycomb temple, it appeared that he was about to meet the leader of the pixies. He did not see how such a meeting was relevant when he was already been speaking with the king of WinDarrow himself, the only person - giant, pixie, or man - who had the authority to release the vessel to him.

Trulaine had spent the last twenty minutes admiring the craftwork of DunHarrow, the pixie city - a small city within a giant one. When he entered the pixie lord’s chambers he saw that the walls - which were covered in a special seaweed decor - were oddly shaped. Numerous candles lined them, and the shadows from their flames danced on the ceiling which was low enough for Trulaine to touch it with the top of his head if he stood up straight, but high enough for him to fit.

Lord Thristol sat on a tiny throne in the middle of his chambers. His appearance was almost spot on to the way he had imagined him. He was an old pixie with white facial hair and a large gut (or at least as large as a pixie’s gut could be without greatly augmenting his already minuscule height). His outfit was bejeweled with DunHarrowan beads, and his head was topped with a tiny crown carved from a single piece of mahogany. When he saw Trulaine approach through the entrance of his small, royal domicile, he flew from his throne, greeting him as an equal, with a warm and generous smile.

"Ah, Trulaine," he said, flying close to Trulaine's face, gazing into his eye with arms wide open as if he would hug Trulaine if only he were the appropriate size. "Son of Trumandius, nephew of the great psychic, Valindolin. She has been a friend of mine for many years. She speaks very highly of you."

Trulaine had to keep reminding himself that Thristol was a psychic and so was Valindolin, and so they did not have to have met each other in person to already be well acquainted. As far as he knew, there were five psychics. Up until a few moments ago, he had only ever known one of them, and that was his own beloved

aunt, Valindolin. He would have never expected the second psychic he would meet to be a pixie, the regent of a race of people he did not even know existed.

“I have spoken to your king,” said Trulaine.

“My king, is it?” asked Thristol sarcastically. There was an air of wisdom and positivity about him. “Akabremnar is no more my king than a pirate is the king of sand. He is the king of WinDarrow, and the king of the gargantuan race. But I do not always answer to him. Come.”

The lord of the pixies led Trulaine out of his chambers through a small hallway and finally they entered the Honeycomb Temple. Trulaine did not need a tutorial to recognize this as the pixie’s most sacred temple, and immediately he could see why it was called the Honeycomb Temple. In here the walls were riddled with golden brown pockets, the culmination of each created the illusion that the entire temple was made of honeycombs, although that was not the case. The beauty of the temple was increased by its subtle glow of yellow and blue lights. To the far left of the temple was a small pool of water where he could see pixies in religious garbs performing baptisms of young pixies. The further they went, the more it was apparent that the Honeycomb Temples housed their entire population. Down here they were huddled in sections like bees, all working in distinct roles to preserve their way of life. Trulaine was seeing first hand that the two cultures were entirely different factions.

“The inhabitants of the pixie race are a very well reserved people,” said Thristol. “These caves have been our home for nearly four centuries.”

Trulaine observed the further depths of the temple. The ceiling was decorated with historical figures; the ancestors of both fairy and giant covenants were carved into the rock high above them. It had been built larger than he had expected for the accommodations of such tiny people.

“This hall was built by the giants, nearly half a century after the formation of our republic,” said Thristol.

Trulaine found the information interesting as they continued on until Thristol led him to a larger portion of the temple where multitudes of pixie could be seen

working on various tasks. In this new factory-like setting, there were many sections; areas for storing and preparing food, training in pixie magic which were plenty in number. Other areas were walled off and reserved for schools, magical botanical gardens, and places where the young could play. It appeared as though their entire community was down here. And the place was not small either. Some places were large enough to house the giants in fact. It was amazingly deceptive actually, because Trulaine could barely fit through the first entrance he had walked through. And there was no telling what other smaller living quarters they had hidden beneath this place. He wondered if the giants even knew about all the places in which pixies dwelt.

Finally they came to an empty room, and the only thing there besides the candles lighting the place was the small golden cage he had seen earlier in the king's armory and on his balcony. There was Angelinus still perched inside, still sleeping as if she had never known consciousness.

Trulaine leaned in close to take yet another look at her. Now that he could see her in a brighter light and at a closer angle, he was actually able just gaze at her in pure amazement.

“She is Angelinus,” he said. “The sleeping savior.”

“Correct,” said the old pixie. “I am guessing that the king did not leave you completely clueless. Knowing him myself, I am also guessing that he did not ask you if you had any questions of your own, so I will let you riddle me for the time being.

“Is king Akabremnar the psychic that informed our people about the vessel?” Trulaine asked first. “Or is it you?”

“Ha!” the little old pixie lord chuckled, his crown nearly slipping off his head. “King Akabremnar, a psychic. Heavens no, giants hate magic, they won't meddle in it. Besides, I have had an entire lifetime training, and yes I am one of the five secret psychics in the world along with your beloved Valindolin, such a sweet lady she is.”

Trulaine was surprised to hear of this small pixie speak of how well he knew his aunt when Thristol had even never been to Centronus, and lived halfway across the breadth of the central empire. And he was indeed one of the five psychics; Trulaine could feel him prancing around subtly in his mind as they spoke. He wondered. If he was one of the psychics, and Valindolin was the other, and Maurelan's deceased father Nelo was the third, then that were the other three? Valindolin had always been very clear to him about how important it was to keep the identities of the psychics a secret. She had never told him (which was part of the reason why he or no one else he knew, had ever known that the pixies were real; all except Valindolin who must have never shared that piece of information due to the holy mandate that the psychics kept between each other. Trulaine wondered what other secrets his beloved aunt had kept. She was the most revered elder in all of Centronus and it had been no secret why. Her psychic abilities alone meant that she was a rare gem of his people, and the secrets that a psychic kept were contained for a reason. Who knew the damage that some of their knowledge could do in the hands of someone who could not comprehend the things that they were meant to see? He knew lord Thristol had his secrets, but he was willing to divulge them to Trulaine which made the Centronian wonder if he were apart of something more than just the mission he had been asked to embark on. He was having a difficult time seeing how all this was starting to fit together but he had a feeling it would be far more to take in than he had previously thought.

“So,” said Thristol. “I do know your questions, but still you must ask them if I am to see into your heart, hmmm?”

“I suppose.”

“And there is one question in particular that is burning through your mind. One very pertinent question that I do not have to probe your mind to know that you want to ask.”

“The vessel of light,” Trulaine said without hesitation. “What is it?”

It was without doubt his most pertinent question, his only question at this point.

Thristol gave a deep sigh followed by a smirk that Trulaine could barely see on his tiny face. Finally it seemed, after all this time, and following all the rigors it took just to get here, he would actually get the answers he had been pondering since before he had even left home.

“It is what the name suggests,” said lord Thristol. “It is a vessel with the capacity to hold transcendental light within. And transcendental light cannot exist without a living host.”

The old pixie glanced at Angelinus who rested peacefully in her cage, unaware of the conversation they were having - or anything for that matter. Just like that, a huge, puzzling piece of the truth hit Trulaine hard, and his eyes widened in shock. He understood what lord Thristol was really trying to tell him, but the fact that his mind had begun to process it - as indeed a fact - had left him in a state of shock.

“So,” he began, confused and dumbfounded. “She is the vessel?”

“That is precisely what I’m telling you, my dear boy,” confessed Thristol with another jolly chuckle. “She is the vessel of light. I am proud to say that she is also my daughter.”

So the infalion is not the vessel, he marveled in thought. She is.

“Right,” said Thristol in a corrective tone. “The infalion is not the vessel of light.”

Trulaine squinted his eyes.

“My apologies,” Thristol chuckled. “Occasional force of habit.”

Well that’s an awkward exchange, old man, he thought, wondering if Thristol could tell what he was thinking. The pixie lord made no reaction, and so Trulaine assumed that he was not snooping at the moment, and if he was, he was kind enough to pretend that he could no longer tell what he was thinking.

Trulaine was sure that the infalion was indeed the vessel of light, because he was under the impression that it would be a mere object. Never did it occur to him that it would actually be a living person, but with all the talk of prophecies and saviors in this region of the world it was no surprise. King Akabremnar had shown

him the device, how it worked, and how much they had depended on it to defend themselves against the werewolves. He had also shown him Angelinus but did not tell him that she was what he had come all the way out here in search of. Magic had always come in the form of objects, but one of human form (a pixie nonetheless) was something he had never expected. For the past few days that he had been granted to learn about pixies, Trulaine could now see that all of them - especially Angelinus - had possessed innate magical abilities; abilities that they were born with which was something that no other race of creature or man on earth could boast. There was something unique about their entire race, but there was something even far more unique about Angelinus. He had seen it during the marvelous but unfair display that Akabremnar had forced her to endure. She was the savior...the vessel of light.

“How is this possible?” asked Trulaine.

“Long ago,” lord Thristol began. “A vile and evil sorcerer named Mephisto lay waste these lands.”

“Mephisto?” Trulaine pondered.

“Yes. These days he is only a myth to your people, but at the time of the uprising, he was the greatest enemy Centronus had ever known. We know this of course, because we have carried our history down through oral tradition.”

Mephisto. Trulaine had heard the name briefly in his past, but figured that it had no historical significance to his people. He had always figured just as Thristol suspected, that Mephisto was just another part of the many myths created by his people. There had been, however some of those who alluded to Mephisto as a great sorcerer who had once traveled to the Northern Realm to strike down the Centronian king, but that might as well have been myth also. But now that he was receiving new information from the lord of the pixies himself - a being that just the other day he did not believe was real - he was willing to reconsider that claim.

“Only one man was able to defeat him,” Thristol continued. “The people of this province called him the shadow warrior because of his elusiveness. Oh yes, it was one solitary person, or at least myth calls it a person, for all I know it could have been a fallen god, or a kindred spirit floating through the fetters of time.

There were several sacred objects that he possessed which were used to seal the gates of sorcery forever. And since he could not bare witness to the objects in one single lifetime, he secured them by using the sacred laws of the gods. These forbidden forms of security would ensure that tampering would be impossible; that even if they were to fall into the wrong hands then they would still be impossible to use. For the vessel, he created a living host. One that could attach itself to the soul of a living person before it's birth." He nodded at Trulaine before continuing. "Consequently, wielding the forbidden forms of magic with a pact he had sealed with the gods, he tracked the sorcerer here, where he fought and slew him. Our people were very thankful. Intrigued by the fact that pixies were born with magical abilities, he picked us as the chosen race to fulfill the prophecy.

"And that is where we come to this pretty little angel here," he said, looking over at Angelinus.

"A prophecy?" said Trulaine, bewildered. "A prediction."

"Not quite a prediction, but a safeguard for humanity. In human form, it is known as a sleeping savior. The alchemists refer to it in their mechanical vocabulary, as a vessel of light, one of the rarest forms of magic we know of to be bestowed upon a person, one that allows its caster to 'shed light' on certain future events. One that they are also born with."

"And what does that mean, exactly?"

"If only we knew," he said with a chuckle. "But what we do know is that she was chosen to partake in that prophecy. Since her birth we have been molding her, shaping her to be the divine pinnacle of mortal creation. To outsiders, the idea of a sleeping savior was but a myth. The giants were among them. But that was before the war; before Akabremnar became king. But when he saw her power, he could not resist the urge to use her gift for his own ends."

"But I have seen the infalio and what it has done to her. It is not right."

"That is not for us to decide."

"You are her father. How can you say that?"

Lord Thristol flew over to where Angelinus still lay asleep inside of her cage, looking down at her lovingly. “Of course I do want to see her live a normal life. But perhaps if you succeed in your mission then that may still be possible.”

“I am uncertain at this point. Your king would have us stay until he is confident that the werewolves will not return.”

“Well that may take a very long time.”

“Perhaps. The power of the infalion only keeps the werewolves at bay, it does not kill them.”

“The eruption of the fountain has caused an imbalance in the weather. Some regions are struck heavy with floods while others have experienced draught. These lands have experienced such a draught, with the Swallow Lake being the only isolated body of water that still flows in abundance. If the werewolves could find another region such as this before they all died of thirst, then perhaps this battle would not be so hard fought. Perhaps the king believes that if he can keep the werewolves out of WinDarrow long enough, then they will die of thirst. Either way, waiting for that long increases the chance of us losing this world. For all we know we may only have mere months before the planet is no longer uninhabitable.”

“The fountain is the cause for all this.”

“And it will be the cause for much more before the end comes, unless you find a way to succeed on your mission.”

“But the fountain has erupted before.

“Yes, and seven provinces, five kings, an entire generation of the commonwealth, and five generations’ debt paid the price, I know. No king in his right mind would risk that again without knowing for sure he really ought to. Your elders have much insight, but they do not know the earth like we do. For centuries we have helped keep the splendor of the world intact, but this time, we will see it all wither away, for the earth continuously replenishes itself but not at a faster rate than humanity is killing it. And that was just before. Now the fountain has erupted and it will not stop until this entire planet withers like a dying fruit left to rot in the dry

sand.” He turned back to face Angelinus, his little wings being the only sound echoing from the honeycomb walls in between their talking. “She is the key - quite literally - to preventing this. If your superiors ever had any doubt in the severity of not seeing this quest to the end, then may I say this to you...count your blessings that you have made it this far, and pray for many more to come, because you will certainly need them, for your quest does not end here.”

“And what does that mean?”

“What exactly did king Cathedeus tell you to do?”

“He told me that I was to find the vessel of light. I was also made aware of the fact that there may be other sources that I would need to acquire, but he was not specific on where or what I would need to find them. I was under the impression that the king of WinDarrow would further inform me of that.”

“And that he did not, correct?”

“He did not even explain to me the truth about the vessel.”

“Well of course he did not,” Thristol chuckled again. “He is a king.”

“But he was consulted by Cathedeus.”

“Cathedeus is a king as well,” Thristol chuckled. “Perhaps he knows something that you do not. Regardless of the fact, there are bigger things going on and for the most part, you must proceed with this mission.”

“But what of WinDarrow? What of DunHarrow? If the werewolves succeed in taking this land then everyone many be slaughtered. Even the pixies. I will not let that happen.”

“Ha!” he laughed, amused. His tiny voice was surprisingly sharp and echoed through the temple. “We are very resourceful. And the giants may have all the strength but we are far better survivors, I am sure you know that.”

Trulaine could not argue with the old pixie. Now that he really thought about it, the pixies - despite their small size - had inherently shown all the characteristics of being able to survive nearly anything. Being small meant that they could blend in and disappear easily. Being able to fly meant that they could soar high above in

the air and escape any ground threat. Being earth handlers they could adapt to nearly any natural condition by altering the land behind them and purifying the plant life with their magic. Even the fact that they lived underground in sealed temples meant that they could continue thriving right below the werewolves without the savages even realizing they are there. Trulaine could go on and on thinking of reasons why they were perfect survivors and therefore why lord Thristol was not worried about the outcome. He was right. The savior was made for a different purpose rather than frightening dark creatures away from the light.

“You say she is the savior,” said Trulaine finally. “The vessel of light, that the power dwelling within her could help save the entire world. But how is that possible? How is something so powerful able to dwell within her?”

“Through the power of the halo,” said Thristol, his voice echoing through the temple. In an instant, he created an enchantment from thin air, a dazzling beam of light that flashed brightly in the dimness. Once the light hit the top of Angelinus’ head, her eyes peaked wide open - although she must have still been asleep for her body did not stir and her eyes did not wander - and the air around them was suddenly alive with things that could not be seen before. There were tiny illuminated objects floating before him, but he could not quite comprehend what exactly he was seeing. After several moments of dumbfounded observation, he could see that they were more images than objects. Entire fabrications of forest settings and various waterfall panoramas were visible. He could see other things as well: images of lord Thristol, whole communities of pixies, even the visions of the battle between the giants and the werewolves were visible.

"What are they?" asked Trulaine, mesmerized.

"You are looking at her thoughts."

"Her...thoughts?"

"Yes," Thristol gave another warm chuckle. "Or in her unconscious state, you might refer to them as dreams. Something she has spent the majority of her life doing. But once an outside source of magic hits her mind's eye...then, my friend, we have focus."

As he spoke the brightly illuminated objects and images grew dim and shrank until they were all synchronized dots of light, just mere specks of energy burning at the same size and intensity, now closely resembling twinkling stars in the night more than anything else. It was an enchanting sight to behold, one that took Trulaine's breath away.

“The prophecy,” Thristol continued. “It resides in a secondary mental domicile within the mind, capable of produce a true bout of enlightenment known as a halo. It is a perfect unison of mind, body, and spirit, all focalized into the living host. The halo can be found on the crown of the head but is not typically seen by the human eye.”

That part made sense to Trulaine. Now he knew why her head appeared to be anchored by something invisible in the cage. It was a fascinating form of magic; one that he felt would never make sense to him. But the demonstration however had given him an idea of the scale of her power. She was the vessel of light because she had the light of the gods dwelling within her. It was difficult concept to imagine, but it made perfect sense.

The gods and there harmony, Trulaine thought.

Perhaps magic was a thing to be appreciated after all.

This light of hers was captivating, almost to the point where Trulaine could not think of anything else except for its brilliance. He could faintly see the ring of light above her head. It consumed his mind, and he may have slowly been hypnotized by it had lord Thristol not ended the enchantment abruptly.

A long silence filled the room, and Trulaine found himself snapping out of a trance where he had zoned out, staring blankly into one spot. Suddenly in his mind, all of his rights, all of his wrongs, all of his regrets, insecurities flashed before him. His mind flooded with the morality of his being and in that moment he realized - even if it was only for a couple seconds - that he had succumb to something he was not aware of at first. It wrenched him from the inside, so much that suddenly he felt as if his spirit had the urge to jump from his body. He was comatose for moments on end, stuck staring straight up at the walls.

Then suddenly, he blacked out.

Pain ripped through his head; searing pain, strong enough to split his skull in half. Then the pain stopped and there was only blackness. It had the same heavy feeling that his nightmares had had. Somehow, he had to be in another dream. And he didn't see her this time, but he felt her presence. Ionna. This time she had come to torture him in the flames that had taken her, and he could feel that the heat was real this time. It crept up his leg, scorching him, and in the agony he yelled as loud as he could.

“Studdingtralon!” Thristol's voice echoed through his ears just beneath the veil of his consciousness.

In an instant he was awake again, full of sweat and panting feverishly.

“What...what happened?”

“I do not know,” said Thristol flying over to inspect him. “Usually there is an effect on people when they are in the presence of the halo, but yours was quite different.” He gazed freakishly into Trulaine's eye. “Are you sure you are not under some sort of spell yourself?”

“What?” said Trulaine making his way back to his feet. He did not know what had happened to him but he would just try to cope with it. There were too many things to consider at the moment, so he figured he would just try to focus on the situation at hand. It did spook him to the core however. “I'm sure.”

“Well I have never seen that before. Although I do not see how her halo could have caused such a reaction. Perhaps it means that she is actually stressed in her unconscious state.

“Listen to me,” he said flying over to Trulaine and looking him in the eye very carefully, unsure if he was in the right state of mind following what just happened. “You have to take her away from here, but you must be willing to do exactly as I say without fear of the possible consequences. Because I tell you this now my dear boy, if the king catches you running off with what he considers to be his most prized possession then there will be no place on earth or in the hell beneath that he will not find you. You must go to the Cryxx Cove near the Thunderlands and

find the jiiin, but beware. They are keepers of the dead and they do not admire the living. Find out where the other sources are and you must find out how the shadow sorcerer intended for them to be used.”

“Perhaps I can seek him out,” said Trulaine,

“This was centuries ago, my dear boy,” Thristol chuckled. “The sorcerer, whoever he really was, I am sure is long dead by now. It is believed that perhaps a few people knew of his true identity but even their identities are kept hidden from the world of knowledge.”

“And what do you believe?”

“I do not know what I believe. But I know what is true.” He pointed to Angelinus who continued to rest in her cage looking just as peaceful as ever. “That young pixie holds the key to saving us all. And if we do not find a way to get you and her out of WinDarrow as soon as possible, then your mission may be doomed before you are even able to find the other sources.”

“Why did king Akabremnar withhold that information from me?”

“The king is corrupt. His greed is dangerous to the well being our nation. Or did you not assess that upon your arrival at WinDarrow?”

“But it doesn’t make sense. It should not matter whether he is corrupt or not. The well being of the world may be at stake.”

“Yes, but not everyone believes in the things that our prophecy says is to come. They would rather cling to what they believe is already theirs. And that is exactly why we cannot give in.”

Trulaine could see a new fervor on the face of lord Thristol; one that was self-explanatory.

“So,” Trulaine finally asked. “How do you propose we go about taking her from this place?”



All That is Worth Fighting For

The excitement was high in their great room, but it died down quickly, because the day had waned behind them, and eyelids became heavy soon. They had all went to doze early and were now fast asleep. It was a peaceful quiet night until the first faint sound of battle rang through the air.

Maurelan woke, sighing, disturbed by what she heard. Not only had the battle continued, but also she could swear that the fight had moved even closer to them than before since the very walls around them began to rattle with every explosion that rang nearby.

Despite the danger that was looming around them, Maurelan thought to herself about Philistian and what he might have been up to. He mentioned that he had been outlawed in the Northern provinces as well as the land of giants but she had failed to understand why. Whatever the reason, it had caused him to disappear before they had even entered the palace. Was he still in WinDarrow, somehow hiding amongst an entire city of giants? Or did he desert them entirely, fleeing back to the refuge of The Order? And what about king Akabremnar and his promise to let them take vessel? Did he hold true to his words? Whatever the case, rest did not come easy without answers and she was becoming desperate. The thought of snooping around the castle did cross her mind. She could easily vanish and slip past the king's guards unnoticed just like she had done in Torund. Then again, she would hate to make the same mistake twice.

She rose from her bed. Quickly, quietly, and with no sure plan in mind, she got dressed, and snuck out of her private quarters. She poked her head down the empty corridor. When she could see that not a single guard was in sight she pre-

ceded to walk through the hallway. Soon however, she could hear the faint sound of pixie wings fluttering behind her. She spun around and saw Ninsul floating before her, small as button. She was identical to her twin sister Ninette, but Maurelan would never be able to tell the difference between them if not for the distinct, light blue color of Ninsul's leaf-laced attire.

“What are you doing here?” asked Maurelan, somewhat startled.

“I couldn't sleep,” said Ninsul, wiping her eyes drowsily. “Too much war going on outside. It's always BOOM this, and BOOM that! How do they ever expect-”

“Shh!” said Maurelan. “Be quiet! I've only stepped out for a short time, just to get some

air, but I don't want anyone to know I'm out here.”

“Oh, sorry,” Ninsul whispered. “I know it's late. I didn't mean to be loud, but...it's a bit of

a habit me and my sister picked up, always shouting in the mines...us being so small and all.”

“It's okay.”

“No one will care if you're out for a late night stroll. You're guests here.”

“Good,” said Maurelan, only pretending to be reassured. She made her way over to the balcony for some fresh air, Ninsul following close behind her. She could almost enjoy the serenity of the cold breeze if it hadn't been for the constant storm of explosions raging on in the distance.

“Nothing is off limits to guests of the royal palace,” claimed Ninsul. “Except maybe the king's secret quarters.”

“Secret quarters?”

“That's where the king discusses his most private matters. My sister and I...sometimes we pass messages between the king and our lord Thristol. It's rare, but once or twice we have been allowed to enter the king's secret quarters to de-

liver urgent messages that could not wait. They don't think we know anything about what goes on in the king's secret quarters, but we do hear things.”

“What kind of things?” Maurelan probed, interestedly.

“Sometimes we overhear the king talking about his riches, and how much charity he can afford to give. Other times I've heard him argue with his advisers about spies, and which of his allies are traitors. I can tell you right now that he doesn't trust Lord Thristol. He believes that someday after he defeats the werewolves, the fairies will rise up against him as well. As small as we are?” she chuckled. “I think he can be quite paranoid most times.”

“In the past couple days since we've been here,” Maurelan began. “He hasn't mentioned anything about us has he?”

Instead of giving an answer right away, the little pixie paused.

“You can trust me,” said Maurelan. “You can trust all of us. We're here to help save the earth, not destroy it. There are those who seek only power, even now. We need to know if king Akabremnar is someone that we can rely on or else we are just wasting our time.”

“It's not that I don't want to help, because I do. It's just that I'm afraid of what will happen if I did. If he finds out that any fairies have been giving away his secrets, then our entire covenant may be in danger.”

“Your covenant is already in danger, Ninsul.”

“You don't know king Akabremnar. If you make him your enemy, you won't be the only one who suffers.”

“You don't understand,” said Maurelan, urgently. “If we do not get aid from the sleeping savior, then it will be much more than just your covenant that will be in danger, and it won't be the king you will have to fear. Everyone will suffer. The energy fountain will destroy everything; the earth and all its creatures. You must know this.”

“Being a keeper of the earth, I do,” said Ninsul, struggling to push her words out. “But... well, just the other day we overheard the king discussing battle plans

with his advisors. He seemed pretty upset when they brought up Trulaine. He's mentioned that he doesn't trust the Centronians, and even if he did he would never give up the savior, especially at a time like this.”

“What?” said Maurelan, baffled and unconvinced. “B-but, he must understand the severity of the situation. What about the fountain? He said that he would comply. He said that he would help up us.”

“Maybe he lied,” exclaimed Ninsul, bold-faced. “It seemed odd in the first place that he would even consider it given everything that is going on. He needs her to power their device. It's the only weapon he has against the werewolves. What will your commander do if he does not honor the agreement?”

Maurelan could hear Ninsul's question, along with every other word she had spoken but a subtle anger that could not be contained wound up so tight inside her that she could not focus on the pixie's words. Even the steady boom from the explosions outside seemed to escape her notice as she swelled with rage.

“Where is the king's secret quarters?” asked Maurelan.

“It's in the sky parlor, located in the dome above the palace. It overlooks the city. No one is allowed entrance except for the king and his advisors.”

Without another word, Maurelan stormed through the hallway with a brazen strut, making her way to the emperor's headquarters. She knew where the sky parlor was because she had seen it before when they first entered the palace. Struggling to keep up with her, Ninsul zipped by here and there, guiding her to the parlor and looking around cautiously along the way. Maurelan figured that she may run into a few of the king's warriors on their way out to the battlefield, or perhaps some of the wounded, returning to seek medical attention would pass her, but she was surprised to see that there were none to be found. It was obvious that all the king's soldiers were currently in the battle, and it was a clear sign that king Akabremnar might be losing.

They climbed a massive stairway composed of large, brick steps that stretched nearly thirty feet from wall to wall, but the stairway itself did not ascend beyond fifty feet. It was a lengthy climb for someone of normal height, but it

seemed rather pointless to have a stairway built for a king, leading to his private quarters, and still be such a short distance to the top. Perhaps the giants were not fond ascending great distances, and it was likely that the sky parlor may have been built for the king's comfort more so than his privacy. She received her answer when she reached the top.

At the summit was a series of hallways that led to several rooms on both side of the great sky parlor, each serving a different purpose for the king. There was a large sauna, a great suite, and a room with a locked door on left side. On the right side there was an extensive balcony, and a meeting room concealed by two massive swinging doors. Ninsul pointed to the meeting room on the right, hoping that would satisfy Maurelan's curiosity.

Looking between the crack of the doors and into the dimly lit room, she saw the king having a very in depth conversation with two of his advisors and his top commander. The advisers looked rather short and stocky for their kind, but the commander was a burly-looking giant who was soaked in heavy armor and sweat dripping from his face. In his left hand, he brandished a great lance that seemed to soar into the air at such a length that he had to hold it to the side so that it would fit in the room. Maurelan held her ear close to the doors and could faintly hear their conversation, but it was not enough to make out the words.

“No,” warned Ninsul whose tiny face began to exude fear as Maurelan approached the swinging doors. “Don't.”

“It's okay,” Maurelan whispered reassuringly. “They won't be able to see me.”

Repeating the spell Maurelan had practiced on so many occasions in her mind, the light around her body twisted and stretched, smearing her image violently until she disappeared completely. She watched Ninsul look around in frantic gestures trying to see where she had gone.

“I'm right here,” she said, whispering over her shoulder, completely invisible. Her next enchantment was slightly more complex to conjure, and so she couldn't just think the spell, she had to speak it. “Eluviel lucendium.”

This special enchantment had rendered her completely intangible, and if she were still visible, Ninsul would have seen her walk straight through both swinging doors without moving them an inch, straight through to king Akabremnar's private quarters where he continued to consult his subjects without any knowledge that there was a trespasser watching and listening in on his conversation. She moved to the farthest, darkest corner and observed silently.

“...not many of them now,” she heard the commander speak to him. “But we fear there may be another force regrouping in the east.”

“That is blasphemy, my lord,” said one of his two advisers, groveling with loyalty, and trying to debunk the commander’s opinion. “The werewolves cannot stay on the offensive for long, and they are not likely to continue through the night. Eventually they will tire out and we will outmatch them. Besides, the Swallow Lake is almost dried up for the remainder of the year. Soon, they will have no choice but to retreat, back to the swamps.”

“Yes Hesperus,” said the second advisor who broke in disapprovingly. “But what you fail to realize is that without the savior, his Excellency leaves the realm vulnerable to future attacks. If we give up the pixie now, we run the risk of losing our entire kingdom later.”

“Don't you think our great king is aware of that?” shouted Hesperus. “Consider the gravity of the situation. The pixies have spread rumors of a prophecy to our people, signaling the world’s end, and now they have associated them with the eruption of the enchanted fountain. They have been fed these fables by every pixie that lives beneath that miserable rock they call the Fern or the Honeycomb, whatever it is. And now with the arrival of this Trulaine of Centronus, they will be looking to you my lord...” he now addressed the king with his hands open lovingly. “...to make the right decision. Anything that may contradict their belief at the height of their faith could cause a rebellion.”

“A rebellion of what?” chuckled the king. “Of being whose entire population cannot confront a single giant?”

“They are no threat to a king as great as you my lord, but they are essential for our kingdom to thrive...or have you forgotten?”

There was an awkward silence between them and for a moment the room had become so quiet that Maurelan was afraid that if she so much as breathed, they might detect that someone else was in the room with them. She held her breath, taking long, steady gasps in between, hoping to learn something of value. The room was so quiet, and she feared that they could hear her heartbeat.

The king rose from his great, round seat and paced the room idly in thought, contemplating his next response. The continuous sound of battle had become louder, the thunder and rain outside pummeled heavier, and Maurelan could feel the tension in the room rise as the king raised his head to speak.

“Well I suppose none of that really matters if I cannot first save us from annihilation,” he began. “We will not give up the vessel. And to make sure Trulaine and his company do not interfere with our plans, we must mark them as fugitives and prosecute each and every one of them.”

“But, my lord,” asked his advisor. “Are you sure that is a good idea? Is it even legal?”

“Do not ask me what is legal,” the king snapped. “How else do you think I will get rid of them? Murderous kings are the first to be executed by the Leadership’s courts. We will do these things with consent of course but must make sure things do not go awry. And most importantly, Trulaine must not get away with that blasted pixie. My employer will not be pleased if that happens.”

Maurelan could not believe what she was hearing. She wanted to escape. She wanted to forget about everything she had just heard; spin on her heels and phase right through those huge swinging doors again without leaving a trace. But how would that change anything? She would go back and tell Trulaine that their entire journey up until now had been folly, that all of the king's kindness and prudence was just a facade, he had lied to them about handing over the savior. In the morning they would negotiate, and try to convince him that taking Angelinus was the only way to save a dying world, but they would be refused, perhaps even arrested. What proof could she present to anyone that the king of Win Darrow was only concerned with lining his own pockets? All of his subjects feared him and whatever court system they had would only sympathize for their own kind, not distant

travelers. There would be no way to present proof, or sweet talk the king and his advisers into changing their minds. Their mission was doomed from the beginning.

“What was that?” asked the advisor. He appeared to be looking directly at Maurelan.

Oh no! she thought. She must have lost concentration, because when she looked down she could see pieces of her hand coming into view as her spell suddenly dwindled, and she would not be able to put it back up for a number of minutes.

“I see it too,” said Hesperus.

“Well don’t just stand there,” said Akabremnar.

Suddenly Hesperus sprang into action, surprisingly agile for his size swept over, clearing an incredible distance, grabbing hold of Maurelan arms before she could even attempt to phase through the door with an eluviel spell. Before she could even struggle, he struck on the back of the head.

Blackness.

Slowly, drowsily, Maurelan began to regain consciousness. There was a terrible stinging sensation where she had been clubbed in the back of the head, and the wet trickle of blood flowing down her neck had served as a friendly reminder of the assault. She tried to move, but something had held her in place. Her wrists and ankles were bound tightly with iron shackles, and her body was stretched out, laying perched upright against a hard, flat surface.

“Wha-?” she squinted in pain, looking around in frantic confusion at what appeared to be a death chamber of some sort. On each side of her were several other racks made for restraining prisoners, each identical to the one that she was strapped to. Across from her near the corner of the room was a large device; an angular shaped, jagged-looking, metallic thing that had a glass enclosing around it,

inlaid with many spikes. It had surely been designed to trap and torture victims within it. The rest of the room was spread out, complete with a command center in the far corner that had been walled up with a great glass window that stretched nearly halfway across the room. There was a door far off on the other side nearly invisible in the shadows. High above was the illustrious skylight, green-tinted and gilded with a golden, spider-shaped decoration that made up one portion of the glass dome. The words had nearly escaped her mouth as she gasped. “Where-where am I?”

Her neck gave a horrible snap, and she gave a mournful groan as she continued to struggle, even though she knew it would be impossible to free herself from the shackles. All of the noise she was making had obviously caught the attention of someone else in the room.

“Awake, I see,” the voice of king Akabremnar blurred into her right ear. He walked over in front of her so she could see him, large and monstrous as he was, glaring into her face.

“Where am I?” she demanded.

“Oh, this is a room that was built before I was inherited the throne,” he said with a spirited laugh. “It is a room for questioning. I’m glad you like it.”

“You were plotting to betray us!” she gasped. “King Cathedeus trusted you to do what’s right. All of Centronus trusted you. How could you?!” The last thing she remembered was confronting the king, and the next thing she knew, his top general had attacked her. Now she stared at him, demanding an explanation with fierce, watery eyes. “We trusted you! The psychics, they trusted you!”

“Now listen!” he shouted, beaming down at her with a fervor that was quite different to the jovial side that he had performed so well when she had first met him. “Do you think I wanted this? Your leader wants to take away our only means of defense.”

“That’s not why you captured me, you traitorous dog.”

“Silence!” the king yelled, his huge voice echoing loudly off the walls. “You, my dear are apart something bigger than you are, and you’re stepping knee deep in

it.” He glared at her peculiarly. “Hmm. You are the daughter of Nelo, one of the five psychics, are you not?”

“How would you know that?” she asked, baffled.

“I have eyes, ears and telepathic minds at my disposal. You see, the pixie lord Thristol is one of them, and he provides me with a wealth of knowledge.”

“And that gives you the right to use him whichever way you see fit?”

“Everything I do is for the sake of my people.”

“If that were true then you wouldn’t be trying to stop us.”

“And how is that so when I am facing down a horde of werewolves day after day, hmm?”

“Because the fountain of enchantment-”

“Bah!” he roared. “I have had it with this fountain of enchantment. The pixies buzz about it my ear everyday, it is driving me crazy. How many times to do I have to tell you cretins that fountain erupts every time its epoch peaks? That does not mean that the earth will rot! I swear, I do want squeeze that little bastard every time he mentions it! I don’t want to hear anything about this blasted fountain ever again, or the next person who speaks it will be tortured properly! I am keeping the savior here where she can safely live of her days.”

“This is the last place I would consider coming to for safety, ” she said with the sound of battle ringing outside.

“I like you, Maurelan,” said the king. “Nelo did well in raising such a charming, persuasive young lady. And being one of the uncursed races, you are quite clever, but you will not dissuade me. Most of your kind is composed of sniveling creatures that I do in fact hate the most of all the races on this earth.” He got closer to her, close enough to smell her skin, and she writhed in fear. “It’s not the fact that we are cursed, and you have retained all your natural human form, which is such a beautiful thing, and we have been meant to suffer for eternity like this, oh no my dear. It is the fact that your kind enjoys life too much while we are meant to suffer through it. And the fact that you are so unaffected by our torment has made

me realize that we can never meant to coexist in this world. If it were up to me you would all be extinguished.”

He leaned forward, licking her face with a huge, slimy tongue.

“Hmm,” he smirked. “Not as sweet as gargantuan women, but not bad either.”

Maurelan writhed in disgust. She was fearful of what he might do to her. Her first impression of him the other night was not so bad, but now she realized that the king of WinDarrow was a despicable psychopath, and she had to get away somehow to warn the others.

He bellowed in laughter as she screamed, and suddenly the two of them were cut off by a disturbance. The creak of a small door open far off on the other side of the room, where the sound of heavy rain told her that it must have led outside to the extended balcony. In the flash of lightning that lit up the open doorway she could see three silhouettes entering the room. She would have expected them to be guards or possibly soldiers coming in from the battle to demand the presence of Hesperus. But to her surprise and utter fear, she realized that two of them were smaller, human shapes and one of them was overtly large, yet not quite big enough to be a giant.

“Ah,” said the king, bowing his head as the three figures approached. “My lord. Good evenin’.”

For a moment Maurelan thought that maybe her spell for invisibility had dampened her hearing because it sounded like the king addressed one of them as a lord. Who in all the land of WinDarrow could possibly outrank the king of giants, in his own realm nonetheless? She could not believe her eyes when she saw who had walked into the hazy overhead light, greeting the king with a sulky smile. It was Shallemeign, flanked by Saskia and Brog who stood lurching halfway into the light, his face still covered in darkness.

“Now let’s get down to business shall we?” he said with a smirk.



Illusions

Bernarsu was the first to wake, spending the early hours of the morning, pondering when Maurelan would return. The next to wake was Brontius, then Alvantin, and then Golondred who could hardly rise from bed, his large belly still full of food and beer. The rest of them were surprised that he was able to stand to his feet, knowing that just the night before he had eaten enough food for three people. They dressed themselves, noticing that something was different but they couldn't quite tell what it was for a few moments. It seemed peaceful outside; quiet and secure once again.

“What happened to the battle?” said Golondred, peering out of the open porthole in the wall, inching to get a closer look at the faraway scene. “Hmm. Few skirmishes down yonder, but mostly looks like the giants got em beat again. Plenty are dead, werewolves mostly though. Put up a damn good fight though, them wolves.”

“So what does this mean?” asked Brontius, putting on his centaurian cloak. He was also the first of them to begin packing their gear.

“Well, if the battle dies down for the remainder of the day, we might be leavin.”

“With the savior?” asked Alvantin. “Or without.”

There was a skeptical tone in his voice as he worked quickly to secure some of his magical ingredients into one of his potion's pack.

“The king gave us his word,” said Brontius.

“Then perhaps they will retreat for good this time. And let us be on with our business.”

“Yes. We need to get out of here.”

“Trulaine has not yet returned,” said Brontius, already beginning to pack some of their gear.

“Neither has Maurelan?” said Bernarsu with look as though he had been waiting to ask that question ever since he awoke. The rest of them paused as if they had just realized that she was gone, and Golondred began to glance around the room as if she would pop up behind a corner or from underneath one of the beds at any moment.

“Maybe she went to look for Trulaine,” Brontius suggested.

“No,” said Bernarsu. “She would have let me know.”

“Really?” Alvantin replied. “And how can you be so sure of that? In Tovien we could not even trust her to stay put, and look how much trouble that cost us.”

Before Bernarsu could defend the honor of his closest companion to the shaman, there was a soft thud followed by a quick shuffle of the curtains and Maurelan herself entered the room. She stood there silent, sullen with a somewhat vague expression on her face. As if suddenly remembering to act as normal as possible, she cracked an awkward smile and gave a quick chuckle.

“Where were you?” Bernarsu stepped forward, concerned. “You are lucky I did not wake sooner or else I would have stormed the halls looking for you.”

He approached her, grabbing hold of her shoulders, concerned. For a brief moment, she gave a look of surprise that would have caused him to notice her already odd behavior if she had not rebounded intelligently.

“It's okay,” she said, giving him a quick, awkward hug as if she had never embraced a single person in her life. “I was summoned into the king's quarters shortly before dawn.”

“And why only you?” inquired Brontius.

“I was the only one awake,” she said convincingly before continuing. “I have good news. Very good news.”

“What?” Golondred said, jokingly. “Has the king decided to bless us with a parting feast, and ten pounds of mead?” He laughed heartily, but he was the only one. The others might have shared his enthusiasm, but Maurelan suddenly showing up and her account of good news had rendered them too eagerly focused on what she was going to say next.

“Even better,” she said, clearing her throat, and checking her abnormally thick accent. “We have been granted permission to take the savior with us.”

“What?”

“Come. We must see the king now.”

“But what about Trulaine?” asked Brontius.

“He is waiting in the king's chamber.” she said, standing there calm, silent, and unemotional as if she were just a life size porcelain doll staring at them through rotating, glass eyes; swirling green eyes that had their own allure oozing from them.

Any one of them would have recognized that her behavior was strange, even suspicious, but for some reason, none of them did. Perhaps it was the sudden rush of news that had stirred the moment. Maybe they were so eager to leave the war-ridden burrows of WinDarrow that they did not yet notice the difference in her mannerisms. Maybe it was too early in the morning and they were still too groggy to notice, or perhaps none of them had had enough sleep lately anyway, and they figured it to be expected for Maurelan to act a bit different. For some unknown reason, neither of them could resist the temptation to believe her without question. Then, something very subtle happened; something that not many people would notice unless they had known Maurelan for a long time.

Bernarsu was the only one who realized that the eyes of the woman that stood before him were green and lacked the normal tint of hazel that he had been so

used to seeing on Maurelan. This struck him as particularly odd, even spooky. Eerie enough for the spell that had been placed over him to be lifted momentarily as he looked her intently in the eye.

“Maurelan,” he said with a puzzled expression, putting two and two together.

“What?” she asked.

“Your eyes...how...?”

Suddenly her eyes had just swiveled into the hazel hue that Bernarsu was so familiar seeing her with. He dropped his jaw in shock, and was about to speak when a flush, euphoric feeling of easiness had suddenly swept over him once again, and the very thought of speaking had slipped his mind. He stood there without saying a word, his face still focused on her, his eyes unmoving. The others had remained silent as well, and soon it was as if the entire room had sunk into a gloomy stupor. Even the walls around them seemed to darken unnaturally as if the décor itself had changed and even the environment around them seemed to reach out and attack their senses. They were so powerless to combat her spell that they hardly even realized that they had been hypnotized ever since she had stepped into the room; a trait that did belong to Maurelan at all.

“Come,” she said, repeating her previous request. Without another word, they all filed out of the room behind her, one by one.

On the way to the sky parlor, they passed the first balcony in front of the stairs. Through the porthole, the battlefield had become visible again. It was now evident that those small skirmishes Golondred had pointed out earlier which they had once thought were the last remnants of the werewolf struggle had now appeared to be the beginning of a new battle which had already become dangerously larger than it had been just a few moments ago.

They had all noticed the scene outside. Golondred glanced, and Brontius gave sort of a snort at the view, but other than that, there were no responses. Any one of them would have mentioned how fast the werewolves had regained their ranks if only they had not been mysteriously focused on the news given to them by the

girl they perceived to be their ally Maurelan; the girl with the hazel eyes walking before them.

Beneath the haze of her disguise, Saskia reveled in delight. She was pleased with herself that she was able to ensnare the hope of humanity so easily. At first she was not sure if her ploy would work, but she was surprised at how thoroughly successful her spell had become. As a psychic, she could only forge illusions upon the mind and twist the will of another person, not control a throng of men entirely. It was difficult enough tricking them into believing she was Maurelan, but it was an even harder task pulling it off while trying to match her mannerisms long enough to lure them into the sky parlor.

Eventually however, she had managed it.

They reached the landing of the sky parlor where the hallway had divided the six rooms connected by the giant glass dome that circled above. She led them to the last room at the end of the corridor which had been shut; its two, large, rust-laden shutter doors swung ominously, resembling the entrance to a slaughterhouse that would have undoubtedly been full of bloody parts slumped on tables and sharp instruments swaying from the ceiling. It was not a pleasant addition to Win-Darrow like the hospitable mead hall or the luxurious holding rooms where they had slept. This room was created for a less friendly purpose, but they could not tell the difference, because the woman with the hazel eyes had shielded their vision from noticing anything out of the ordinary.

“Through there,” she said, pointing at the shutter doors, suggesting that they go before her. Without so much as a pause, Golondred stepped through the doors first, followed by the rest of them.

Walking in together, they first saw the king speaking to several of his soldiers. Trulaine appeared to be standing among them. Nothing had seemed odd to them in their current state of mind, not even the escalating torrent of battle outside, but there was something. It was the faint sound of screaming; a voice perhaps, muffled in the waves of their dreamlike state. Just then, the remainder of Trulaine’s company, all of them, had suddenly shuddered as if trying to gaze through cloudy eyes as the witches’ spell began to fade within their minds. The illusions were becoming

too obvious. The woman with the hazel eyes whom they could only perceive as being Maurelan began making her way over to where Trulaine stood with the king, but she did so with a hunched posture, clutching the side of her temples as if she had suddenly been struck with a massive headache. She spoke a few words to Trulaine that could not be discerned, and the captain cocked his head up to look at them.

“Well?” said Trulaine, speaking to her yet looking uncharacteristically in their direction. “Can you hold them?”

Hardly able to speak, Saskia shook her head as she trembled, trying to keep the spell strong, but she was losing her mental grip. The spell was breaking and in mere seconds the cloud of her illusion would be lifted over them.

The first one of them to respond was Golondred. He was the only one of them who had consumed so much ale the night before that the hangover he was still recovering from appeared to make him slightly more resistant to her dissolving spell. Feeling the sense of normality slipping back through his veins, he rubbed his eyes thoroughly. He looked at Saskia, confused as if he were trying to decipher whether she was a ghost or perhaps a figment of his imagination. He had never seen this woman before, and there was no fervor in his eyes, but when he saw Shallemeign, familiarity and rage were soon present on his face. Bernarsu was the next to react, shouting in rage. It was not until he looked to the right, and saw the real Maurelan strapped and shackled to a vertical platform near the wall with her mouth gagged, that he drew his sword. The others had also drawn their weapons as the strength of Saskia's spell crumbled and died away.

The fight that ensued was brief, for not only did they have to worry about contending with Shallemeign and his other two minions, but ever since the early morning following his last victory over the werewolves, the king had armed himself with a dozen of his gargantuan soldiers, obviously hoping not to be engaged in battle himself.

Immediately, Bernarsu lunged toward Maurelan, trying to pry her shackles loose but his efforts were fruitless because the metal constraints secured tightly around her wrists did not budge. Alvantin was subdued quickly before he could

produce any harmful spells. Several giants pounced on Bernarsu at once, and Golondred was subdued before he could even sheath his weapon. It would have been a valiant effort, but they were too overpowered, too outnumbered, and far too outmatched. Brontius on the other hand was so strong and so agile that few of the king's guards were able to catch him, and those that did were unable to subdue him. He wrestled and grappled with the giants who were clumsily outmatched by his swift footing, impeccable combat skill, and wonderful feat of strength that was surprisingly almost up to par with the giants. The centaur chuckled, glancing over at the king who still stood near Shallemeign.

“I've fought men who were uncursed that were stronger than half your brigade, gargantuan!”

Before Brontius even had a fighting chance of saving his comrades however, the two great fists of Hesperus, the king's most powerful and skilled of the captains, pummeled him from behind. The giant stomped on Brontius with a massive boot, holding the struggling centaur in place as if taking delight in his own strength.

“I shall tell you a secret,” said Hesperus, lowering his head next to Brontius' ear, a devious smile streaked across his face. “In the land of WinDarrow, we loathe centaurs.” And with his massive hand wrapped around Brontius' neck, the gargantuan proceeded to pound the right side of his face into the elegant, marble floor with his other fist. After three jaw-shattering blows, King Akabremnar's voice shot out from the other side of the room.

“That's enough Hesperus! We do not wish to kill them,” he chuckled with a tint of sarcasm in his voice. “After all, they are still our guests.”

By the king's mercy alone was Brontius spared the fate of having his skull crushed. The oversized general, Hesperus lifted the centaur in the air and tossed him into the arms of a few other giants who had just made it back to their feet after being outmatched tackled by their latest catch. Brontius had just withstood blows to the head that would have possibly killed a normal man, and although he did not lose consciousness completely, he was far too stunned to fight them off. The guards shackled him with the rest of Trulaine's crew.

“In the name of the gods!” cried Golondred. “What is the meaning of this?”

There was no answer, only a bitter silence that filled the room as their captors considered them like animals in captivity. Even though it was King Akabremnar who oversaw the kingdom, the battle outside, and the brawl that had just taken place, it seemed that even he was subject to answer to Shallemeign. The warlord walked over to their new captors, surveying them one by one. When he reached Maurelan, he paused and a bitter silence filled the air. His expression changed as if a new one had interrupted his previous thought. His gaze swept once more over the rest of them and then he turned to Saskia with a contemplative look of displeasure.

“These were the only four men you saw in the room?”

“Yes,” said Saskia confidently. Shallemeign then turned to the king.

“The pathfinder from the prison of Torund escaped with them a number of days ago,” Saskia said to the king, speaking for Shallemeign.

“The pathfinder?” exclaimed the king, perplexed. “You’re referring to that despicable filth, Philistian, aren’t you? Well they did not arrive with him. You say he escaped with them? Interesting.”

“The pathfinder is of no consequence,” Shallemeign interjected. “Our scouts will eventually find him and bring him to me. I am told that there was a Centronian captain that accompanied them.

“Ah, yes,” said the king. “Trulaine, the leader of their company if I am not mistaken.”

“And you let him roam the palace unaccounted for?” said Shallemeign, raising his tone, demanding an explanation. “Surely he was among this group of simpletons when they arrived, was he not?”

“Well of course,” said Akabremnar. “I...”

Pausing in mid-sentence, the gargantuan king looked over at Shallemeign, wide eyed and shocked as if something imperative he had previously forgotten just came rushing back to memory. Trulaine was the only one who did not show up

when Saskia lured his company away, and perhaps the only one who had never even slept a wink in the private quarters given to them. And now, as the king stood there realizing how foolish he was for failing to keep a better eye on his guests, he had just noticed that Trulaine was the only unaccounted for member of his company. The king did not think of it before, but the fact that Trulaine had not yet come back from his visit with the pixie king, then by now he would have been free to kidnap the savior if he had already somehow acquired the means. It did not occur to him that Trulaine would go behind his back to take Aneglinus himself, but now that Shallemeign showed caution, he realized that perhaps it was not such a good idea to have the two spent so much time in the absence of Akabremnar's watchful eye.

"Hesperus!" he called to his second in command. "Find the Centronian captain! If he is not still in the refuge of Thristol, then he is probably off snooping the repository for weapons!"

"Yes," added Shallemeign. "And there is one weapon in particular that we cannot allow him to escape with."

Everyone in the room knew that without a doubt, he was referring to Aneglinus, especially the king. The pixie was his most powerful weapon against the werewolves and by letting Trulaine roam free through the palace, not only would he have to answer to Shallemeign for it, but he may need to answer to the werewolves for it as well, and something told him that they would not be as obliging as his colleague. It struck him like a pierce through the heart.

"Approach him kindly," continued the king. "That way you can just lead him here with no problems."

"But what if there is a problem?" Hesperus asked. "What if he is unable to be tricked? I saw him consorting with Lord Thristol during yesterday's eve. What if that wretched fairy has already spoiled him against us? You know the lot of them can no longer be trusted."

"Yes, yes," said the king with a contemplative look on his face as if he were about to express a thought.

Ever since the battle between the giants and the werewolves, his plan to defeat them using Angelinus as a weapon had only sparked a series of retreats rather than a decisive victory over the savages. Akabremnar had never wanted to admit it but the battle outside had actually proved that he was slowly losing control over the WinDarrowan province. And now that this Centronian, Trulaine had come into his lands in the name of peace and the intention of saving the entire planet from destruction, it was with a sense of irony that he felt such noble intentions might actually be his downfall. The issue had been pressed so hard upon his mind that he nearly forgot about Hesperus who was still standing there, waiting for him to express the thought he was having.

“Ah-ah,” Akabremnar mumbled meaningless jargon. “Hurry! If he does not come willingly then cut off his head and bring it to me.”

“No!” shouted Maurelan from the far corner of the room.

“And Hesperus...do not fail me.”

With a smile of pleasure on his face, Hesperus turned to address two of his guards, and they all walked out of the tower together into the stormy night where the balcony led straight down to the city below.

“So,” Shallemeign said, breaking the king's concentration. “When were you going to inform me that you let the imperial son of Trumandius, the greatest threat to the Stenetian empire slip beneath our notice?”

“It was not my intention. I-”

“What did I tell you before when we first made our agreement?” said Shallemeign, now simmering in rage. He looked up at the affronted king who stood nearly three times his height. In the brief silence that followed it appeared as if Shallemeign's bark was bigger than his bite, but he continued with persistent bigotry. “Do you think this is some kind of game? We have precisely three days' time before I am to meet my benefactor, and everything must be in place for my reemergence in the north.”

“But I-”

“Furthermore,” said Shallemeign, cutting him off again. “Never was the Centronian to be shown any favor or pardon! We cannot trust him!”

“But he was pardoned nonetheless!” Akabremnar shouted back with the sudden urge to stand up and defend his ego. Although Shallemeign had employed him for this particular task, the king was in no way, shape, or form obligated to obey him. For the sake of his own throne he could not show any signs of weakness in front of his men or else they may be tempted to band together and overthrow him after this battle with the werewolves finally ceased. And although Shallemeign had an impressive army at his command and a strong will for conquest, he was still just a man. Akabremnar on the other hand was a gargantuan and with his pure strength alone he could probably rip a man in half with his bare hands. When it was all put into perspective, this was Akabremnar's kingdom, and he would not be challenged, not even by the warlord of the seas. “If it would not have been for me treating these vile creatures as guests in my realm and granting them favor, then this hell might have broken loose earlier and you would never even have had the chance to get the answers you seek!”

“Ya’ know,” the gargantuan king continued on, getting close to Shallemeign’s face. “You uncursed slops are not very strong. The only strength you’ve got is behind the courts. Why, if I wanted ta right now I could snap you’n half!”

The warlord eyed him furiously.

It happened subtly, so discreetly. No one else in the room had noticed why the king had suddenly stopped talking. There was not enough time for Akabremnar to make another sound before he was viciously gripped around the neck by a powerful, invisible force. As he croaked and writhed in agony, the entire demeanor of the chamber shifted horrendously as everyone now realized that Shallemeign had become something more. Maurelan watched from across the chamber. She knew that it meant he had already found one of the sources. Did he really have the skill to open the map despite the enchantment she had locked it with? This was not the turn of events she had hoped for, not by a long shot.

“I am not the same man you once knew Akabremnar,” said Shallemeign, effortlessly lifting the giant off his feet with the power of the mythical source. “I am no longer warlord, but warlock.”

“But...the Leadership,” cried the king, trying to force the words through his lips. “You...will...suffer for this!”

“Times have changed, king. I no longer answer to the Leadership like you regents of the so-called free world. The established order...everything you know has existed to ensnare fools like you and the rest of the world into a millennium of obedience and servitude, but not I. So watch your tongue, or next time I shall wrench it from your oversized throat!”

The magical grip was lifted from the king who fell to the floor with a thud, gasping for air. His guards all rushed over to help him back to his feet, inching around Shallemeign with caution as a new found fear swept over them. Intimidation swept through the room like a drift of cold air.

“you...you’ve got one of the cradles!” marveled Akabremnar, inching backward toward the wall, shocked as if he had just seen a ghost. Although he shoved his soldiers away, refusing to accept their help in an effort to show that he was still not intimidated by Shallemeign's new found abilities, his fear had become clearly evident now that he was cowering away from the warlord. “You've had it all this time?”

“Yes,” said Shallemeign, glaring at the small sphere of pure energy floating before him. “So you see, it would be unwise to challenge me.”

“The-the Leadership!” stuttered the king. “But, that would mean...”

“Yes. I took this from the Leadership.”

“How?”

“With force.”

“But...how?”

“By killing every last man, woman, and creature that dwelt within, that’s how, giant!”

Silence filled the room, and Maurelan could feel what had come with it. It was a heavy silence that swept in and took everyone by surprise; a silence that was cold like the misty afternoons in Maurelan's hometown that would creep up on her and chill her until goose bumps protruded from her arms. It was a silence that felt greater than the current situation at hand, almost greater even than the secret agreement between Shallemeign and the king to ensnare the only chance humanity had of surviving, for if The Leadership had truly fallen then there would be no humanity for anyone to go back to.

“Lies!” Golondred blurted defiantly. “The Leadership has stood for over a thousand years! It would be impossible to even sneak into one of their temples, much less steal one of creation’s cradles. To even think of it would be folly...unless-”

“Unless I had someone very close on the inside, both feeding me information and exploiting The Leadership's weaknesses, yes.”

Jaws dropped all over the chamber.

“But you see,” Shallemeign continued. “The Leadership with all its' wisdom and prophetic vision, had one major weakness, and that is weakness itself. The time of kings and borrowed land is over. Allow me to introduce to you, the new ruler of humanity. I am your Lord Shallemeign, once, warlord of the seas, now... warlock over the breadth of the entire known world. For those of you who are familiar with the name...”

“We've heard of ya, ya rotten sea rat!” spat Golondred. “A tyrant of men both cursed and uncursed...plotted to invade Centronius in the second age of 1642 with every ounce of ignorance ya could muster...miserably failed! That pretty much the way of it?”

“You will speak...” said Shallemeign lifting his arm. “...when you are asked.”

The tiny orb of light trailing around him began to glow again, and Golondred shrieked in agony as the invisible force of gravity contorted his body.

Just then there was a disturbance near the rear entryway where king Akabremnar continued toward in quite fear of Shallemeign’s newfound abilities, hoping

that he would not turn them against him again. One of the door guards poked, whispering something to the king. Akabremnar shushed him a few times and the guard left. A moment later, the guard entered again and suddenly, the king snapped.

“Can’t you see this is a bad time?”

Everyone stopped to look at him, even Shallemeign who had currently been busy causing Golondred the most pain he had ever experienced. He released his gravitational grip, and turned around, glancing at king Akabremnar.

“Is there a problem?” he asked calmly.

“Ah, no, my lord,” said the king humbly (words he never imagined uttering). He sold his newfound obedience with the same beauteous assurance and professionalism he had shown Trulaine’s company when they first arrived at the feast hall. “Nothing’s wrong. Continue.”

“Indeed I shall,” said Shallemeign, ready to use the cradle to torture Golondred again.

“Stop!” cried Maurelan. The words came out of her mouth, but she had no idea she had spoken them until she saw Shallemeign suddenly turn around to consider her.

He approached her as she stood restrained and defenseless, bravely waiting whatever came next. He regarded her with wide eyes and an interest that seemed to have been previously concealed.

“Ah,” he said. “Maurelan. Just the lady I wanted to see. I’ve heard so much about you, beautiful creature. The orphan girl who escaped the village that I burned to the ground.”

“I am no orphan, scoundrel.”

“Right,” he said approaching her. “You had a father. Nelo, I believe was his name. Poor fellow.”

“What do you want from us?” she said, trying to turn her face away as he lightly brushed his hand across her cheek.

“On the way through the Python's Path, I believe you lost something of value.”

With his free hand he pulled on a chain that had been wrapped around his neck, and something clung to it. He pulled the object out of his shirt. It was Maurelan's map; the same map she had inherited by her father the last day she had seen him alive, the very same map she had lost to the dactyls just three days ago. Her heart must have skipped several beats as the smoldering feeling of hopelessness had just increased tenfold in the core of her stomach.

“This is a map,” he explained, holding it before the puzzled faces of Golondred, Brontius, and Alvantin. The only two who did not share the same look of wonderment was Maurelan and Bernarsu who were both all too familiar with the object. They knew the extent of what it meant for Shallemeign to have one of the sources in his possession. Not only did it mean that he had now become an exclusive threat to Trulaine's mission and the preservation of the entire world, but it ate her up inside to know that the survivors of the chaos that would soon come would have to answer to one of the vilest men ever known to the free world. Soon there would be no hope for the future, and somehow it had all been her fault. If only she had secured it better, none of this would be happening right now, and the fate of the entire world would not be left in the hands of a madman.

Maurelan dropped her head; her eyes gazing aimlessly at the floor, a single tear sliding down her cheek, her faith disrupted. She would never forgive herself for this calamity.

“I know what you're thinkin,” Shallemeign continued on, addressing all of them, but Maurelan had barely even been cognizant of his words for she had suffered a devastation that had still gone unnoticed by the rest of them. “How can a map be contained within something so small, so round, so metallic? But this is no ordinary map, is it, Maurelan? You see, the alchemists before their unexpected demise on the Lidalian continent made it. It is a special map. One that shows the path which leads to what I seek.”

“A map which you already have,” said Brontius. “So what do you need us for?”

“Actually I don't need you, you're quite expendable,” said Shallemeign, sounding optimistic and adding a sick chuckle. “All of you. But, fortunately there is one of you that can help me. You see, the Lidalians were able to sow incredibly powerful enchantments into their alchemy and use them for different purposes. Perhaps for protection, or security...”

He turned his attention back to Maurelan. She saw through his gesture, his smile, that unmistakable glint in his eye. He knew that she alone possessed the necessary spells to unlock the enchantment cast upon the contents of the map. He had a mind to expose her little secret to the rest of Trulaine's men, and by the surprised look that began to emerge on each of their faces as they glanced at her, she could tell that they were catching onto the horrible truth far quicker than she had anticipated.

“I understand that one of you would be able to tell me the correct spell needed to unlock certain alchemical objects. One such enchantment has been placed over this particular map.” He paused, holding up the small, circular device again, making sure to let the chain dangle between his fingers so that they could all have a good look at it.

“You see,” said Shallemeign, turning back to address Maurelan. “Knowing our old man so well, he would never have allowed for his secrets to pass into my knowledge without them being well protected. I half expected an army to be guarding this map, and instead I find that you are its' only guardian. How touchin'. His most prized possession protected by his second most prized possession. Or perhaps it is the other way around, seeing as how he put you in so much danger for the sake of securing its' contents. You would think that a lovin' father would have the decency to protect his only daughter when he sees his end approaching as fast as he saw it. But still that did not stop him from securing his vanity, did it, girl?”

Even though he had the map in his possession and had just exposed the remainder of Maurelan's secrets to the rest of Trulaine's company who had already found cause not to trust her, and even though she was shackled and completely

held against her will at the hands of a man who was already on the verge of becoming a god, still she knew she could not give in to his demands.

Shallemeign must never see the contents of that map.

Without a single plan in her mind, she watched him blankly, through watery eyes as he continued to enjoy his game of interrogation. There was nothing that could be done; her only comfort was in knowing that he would still need her to break the enchantment from the map willingly. All she could think of was to stall him out; keep him talking long enough for Trulaine to help spring their release – no matter how unlikely it seemed. She had no idea how it would be possible, since King Akabremnar controlled all the forces of WinDarrow. Perhaps the fairies had some secret line of defense that she did not know about, and perhaps they knew about the king's treachery and were planning to rescue them at this very moment. No matter how unlikely it was that they would escape, she still had to stall Shallemeign as long as she could. This time it was much more than just her reputation on the line or the fact that Trulaine and his men had never really trusted her and probably never would. This time she fully understood the task that she had been sent to fulfill in the name of her father who had perished by the scum standing before her. She wanted to get her hands on Shallemeign, tear his throat out with her bare hands, but she was shackled and left helpless while he was mighty and all-powerful. Never the less she had to keep him stalled, try to distract him as long as she could.

“How do you know my name?” she asked. “And how did you know about the map?”

“I try not to pride myself too much on my powers of persuasion, but having a vampire by my side has presented me with some interesting options.” He glanced at Saskia with a smirk. “You are familiar with blood memory are you not?”

“Traces of memory held intact within the human bloodstream,” said Bron-tius.

Yes, centaur...precisely that. You'd be surprised what remarkable truths you can extract simply by the vampiric sucking of the blood. It can be a touch too harsh I'm afraid, but the results it yields are spectacular.”

Maurelan looked up, hatefully at Shallemeign and Saskia. She could see the look on Saskia's face, the smile that streaked across those thin, lifeless lips - the sharp, menacing fangs that protruded from her jaws - and now Maurelan knew immediately how her father had died. Horribly. Shallemeign had asked Saskia to bite him, thus draining his life force, securing his blood memory, allowing the sorceress to access any one of his last remaining memories without even being psychically linked to his mind. It would have afforded them all that they needed to know about Maurelan and her attempt to keep the map hidden. All they had to do was murder him for the information he withheld.

She could feel the rage swell within her as she imagined her father's final breaths, silenced by such a heartless crime. As the tears filled her eyes, she no longer felt like keeping Shallemeign going; stalling him out until they would be rescued. She no longer had the strength. Her spirit had been so drained that she probably could not produce a magic spell even if her hands were free. She no longer cared for conversation, nor did she care what Shallemeign did to her beyond this point. It was all over before it had ever really begun. Trulaine, king Romulus, and all of his advisers back at Centronus had been wrong. This mission was doomed to fail from the start, and it was all her fault.

“Now, now,” said Shallemeign, cradling her head with his free hand in parent-like mockery. She cocked her head up with a fierce look of vengeance in her eyes and spit, aiming for his face. He moved quickly and was grazed on the side of his helmet. He grabbed her violently, wrenching her by her long hair, holding the map up to her face.

“Open it.”

“I cannot,” she said with her chin high. “I do not know the spell to unlock it.”

“Lies!”

“My father gave it to me only to keep in my possession, but he did not show me how to open it...I swear it.”

“You swear?” Shallemeign said with a devious smile. “You swear? You swear on what my dear. Would you swear on your life? Would you swear on any of theirs? I like swearing, by the gods I do.”

Shallemeign could have easily ordered Saskia to bite her and drain her blood memory. Of course it would mean that she would have to die. He was not so sure if he wanted to kill the daughter of his old colleague just yet. Besides, he could have so much more fun with her while she was still alive.

He walked over to the rest of the company.

“Which one of your company shall we swear on then?” he asked.

He approached Golondred first, smiling when he saw the despicable look on the Centronian’s face.

“What?” he barked. “Great warlord of the seas. We were never afraid of ya. None of us.”

“Hmm,” was Shallemeign’s only response. Perhaps he would have chose Golondred, but then the centaur spoke words that shifted his attention.

“Evil men thrive on fear,” said Brontius. “It is the only way they know how to survive.

“Ah,” Shallemeign said, facing Maurelan with a smile. “I was having a hard time deciding on whom to ‘swear upon’ but the answer has just been made easy for me.” He surveyed Brontius’ massive frame. “You know, I always liked horses. Their spirit, their strength, their tenacity, and of course, their astonishin’ resistance to pain.

“King Akabremnar,” he addressed the sopping king of giants.

“Yes...lord Shallemeign?” he said, trying to look dignified before his men.

“What does that device do?” Shallemeign asked, pointing to the large metal contraption located near the corner of the chamber.

“It is a torture cell. We use it fa’ disciplinary reasons only. It’s a souvenir, just a gift from an ol’ friend a mine.”

“I would like to see how it works.”

“No!” screamed Maurelan as the chains suddenly snapped from the wrists and hoofs of Brontius.

The king commanded his wardens to ready the machine. Several of them sprang into action; setting up the restraints, testing to see if the gears worked properly, and finally removing the large tarp that covered the rest of the device. Brontius could finally see the rest of it. It was more like a cage, and there were spikes placed carefully around the outside of it, and there were grooves for the spikes to travel easily through the cage. On the inside there were bloodstains on the surface of the cage, around the bars, and on the tips of the spikes. It didn't take much imagination to see how it worked or how painful it must have been for anyone on the receiving end of those spikes.

The rest of Trulaine's company pleaded in protest, while Brontius himself bravely awaited whatever his captors had in store for him. He didn't even speak a word to try to get even a shred of mercy from Shallemeign because he knew that none would be given.

“I do not know what it is that the warlock is seeking from you Maurelan,” exclaimed the centaur. “But do not divulge it to him.”

He was suddenly wrenched from his constraints. With his newfound power, Shallemeign broke the shackles around his wrists and hooves with but a thought, and Brontius tensed up as he could feel the invisible cloud of force drench over him, surround him like a heavy blanket, preventing him from moving against his will. He could feel it begin to drag him away from the wall. He knew that whatever mystical forces Shallemeign was using had been much more powerful than his natural strength and therefore he did not fight it. With the help of Akabremnar's giants, Brontius was guided into the chamber, which had obviously been designed to torture giants because its large size. They had no trouble fitting Brontius into the thing, and with Shallemeign's added, magical influence it had proved to be an easy task.

Soon the gates to the cage had closed on him and all Brontius could do was stare out at Maurelan. She could feel his eyes penetrating her. From afar they

seemed to be asking her, what trouble have you gotten us into now? It tore at her guilt. And as much as she wanted to prevent Brontius from suffering over an affront that she had caused, she knew that if she unlocked the map now, then all of her calamities would be for nothing, and the guilt would be worse. But that was before the king's torture device began to crank.

It was an intriguing mechanism, one that bore the unmistakable Lidalian qualities of magical alchemy. At the top of the rack there was a tiny spark barely noticeable if not for its loud crack. Gears spun in the upper corners of the rack, and a large amount of energy had been stored up.

Maurelan could see the expression on Brontius' face as he cringed in fear. And in such maleficent contrast, she could see Shallemeign glaring at her with a smirk.

“The spell to open the map,” he said as he took the chain necklace with the small metal ball from his neck and dangled it tauntingly. “This is your last chance to tell me.”

When she gave no answer, Shallemeign looked over at the king's technicians, nodding his head.

“Keep it running until I say otherwise,” he said.

As the giants cranked the torture rack, there were a number of snaps fizzling into the air and suddenly Brontius contorted uncontrollably inside. He started off screaming, but when the electricity ripped all the way through him, he could no longer make a sound. Only a miserable croak was allowed to escape his lips.

Maurelan turned her head, hopeful that Shallemeign would give them the order to stop but he did not yield, and the torture prolonged farther than she could bear.

“Thrilantiel milante!” she shouted to Shallemeign as she finally gave in with tears streaming down her face. “You monster!”

Before the warlord could even give the order for them to turn the machine off, the small metal ball on the chain necklace unlocked right in the palm of his hand and a bright spectrum lit up the air in front of him.

“Oh,” he said with a pleasant surprise and a chuckle.

As the torture device powered down and Brontius fell limp with a long relieving moan, Shallemeign held the object in his hand high so he could see clearly what the spectrum of light was showing him. Saskia approached, aiding him uncovering the location of the next cradle.

“What are you doing, Maury?” Bernarsu snuck a whisper to her.

Maurelan could not look him in the eye. All she could do was lower her head in shame. She thought she could remain stubborn, thought she would not give in, but she did not, then there was no doubt in her mind that Shallemeign would have killed Brontius. She could not live with that on her conscious. She just couldn't.



The Woman in the Gray Gown

Trulaine had been revealed many disturbing things about WinDarrow and why the king was not to be trusted. Lord Thristol was in the process of going through their plan and what he intended to do with people after this crisis has finally abated. Now that they had finally established a sound plan for securing Angelinus - the savior, whom he was surprised to find out was actually the vessel of light - Thristol made sure that he was aware of certain things.

"You must listen to me carefully," he said. "The five psychics, we may not be the only psychics in the world. There are others, those who were not born with psychic abilities who have abused the magic they receive from the fountain of enchantment in the same way that the rogue provinces do. WinDarrow is on the verge of becoming one of those nations."

"What do you mean?"

"Akabremnar has someone inside the courts, bolstering his standing with the Leadership, allowing him to seize more and more wealth for himself. I'm sure you have noticed the splendor."

"Yes, but why? To what end?"

"If he were to divulge such secrets to me, then I am sure that I would be more than just a lowly lord. Instead, the pixie people are not even acknowledged as equal.

This was a curious confession. Ever since they had entered WinDarrow, Trulaine had spent most of his time in the company of Akabremnar, and the entire time the gargantuan king did not strike him as a tyrant. But if there was one thing

that he knew about tyrants it was the fact that they were easily able to exude courtesy if there was a diplomatic interest to be had. And in their case, this was the perfect scenario. The only reason Trulaine had trusted him so blindly was because Centronus had trusted him. He could now see that trust and alliances were rare these days, even in the most holy and longstanding allies.

There were many new issues now added to his mission, and of all the things to consider, it was his father's name that continued to linger in the back of his mind ever since lord Thristol mentioned him. It was obvious that Thristol knew things about his royal family that he did not. Throughout the years the pixie king had spoken with Valindolin, and in the name of the world's secrets, she had probably divulged things with him that about the realm of Centronus that Trulaine himself probably did not know about. Besides, he had always been left in the dark about some of the details surrounding his father. Everything from the way he died to some of the ways in which he lived had always been a mystery to him. Perhaps now he could get some perspective on the secrets his family had kept from him for so long.

"Lord Thristol," said Trulaine. "Earlier, you mentioned my father. Did Valindolin tell you about him?"

"Well not initially of course. How do you think I met her? I met her through your father."

"My father?" asked Trulaine, perplexed.

"Yes. Your father was a great architect. Not only in your province, but mine as well. He helped us design these halls, and gave us the knowledge and ingenuity to build great monuments despite our miniature size. His contributions have led to the reconstruction of these lands. Before that time, WinDarrow was nothing but a series of huts dedicated to the worship of our ancestors. Now, our entire province has thrived. So you see, Trulaine, your father is considered a great hero to our people."

Trulaine remained silent. Happiness was beginning to fill him. It was a happiness that he was not familiar with. He was glad he had come down to speak with lord Thristol, the pixie psychic. Then there was the plan they had discussed to se-

cure the savior. Even the mere thought of it was not advised, for those psychics and prying mind's eyes that could be invading Trulaine's psyche beneath his notice could have such information to their disposal. It was a plan not to be thought of or mentioned, but a brilliant plan it was. Just then there was a knock on the door; a heavy knock. One of Thristol's pixie helpers flew over to the door, and opened it. On the other end was the hulking Hesperus and several of other armor-clad giants standing behind him. They squeezed through the entrance and huddled in the room, which was small but surprisingly had enough space for them to walk through it.

"Trulaine of Centronus," said the large, muscular gargantuan. "You are summoned by the king for further negotiations. He seeks to grant you permission to take the savior after tomorrow night."

"Alright," said Trulaine, nodding his head in approval. "Then I shall gather my men and we will be on our way."

"He would like to see you first."

Hesperus looked glanced over to lord Thristol who carried himself in the air with the flight of his wings, always with a pleasant smile on his face.

"Your highness will be requiring her services once again, lord Thristol. Is she rested?"

"Angelinus is resting," said Thristol. "But I am not sure she is ready to work the infalio just yet."

"That will be for my king to decide."

Hesperus gave a command to one of his guards to retrieve the small cage that held Angelinus, fast asleep as usual.

"Take her to the king's chambers," Hesperus said to the guard, who then exited the temple with Angelinus still in the cage. Trulaine watched with unblinking eyes.

Before turning to follow Hesperus and his guards out of the chamber, he glanced back at Thristol who nodded his head in approval.

Soon they were outside again. Trulaine was surprised to see that in the distance the battle had begun to ravage the outskirts of WinDarrow once more, and it became apparent to Trulaine why they needed Angelinus back now. It was so soon considering the fact that she did not rest long enough before her next encounter with the infalio.

He could see the sky parlor looming in the distance, and so he knew that was where they were headed. That was where he would meet up with his company and leave this place as soon as possible. It was hard to focus on escaping however, because Hesperus and his guards were making him feel very uncomfortable at the moment.

Hesperus led them, walking in front of Trulaine, while three other giants walked behind him, and he was beginning to wonder why the others had to come along in the first place. Then all of a sudden he got this cold feeling in his stomach. The kind of feeling one gets when things don't seem right. But truthfully, if this was a double cross, and it was a fight they were looking for, he welcomed the challenge.

"You are in luck Centronian," Hesperus called over his shoulder at Trulaine who walked behind him. "The king is feeling generous."

"I'm sure you are paid well when he is generous," said Trulaine and the king's personal guard stopped in his tracks.

He stopped, turned slowly, and snorting with his oversized frame standing confidently; it was as if Hesperus did not like the remark. Although things felt like they were about to get serious really quickly, Trulaine couldn't help but wonder if he had angered Hesperus. It would be kind of humorous how easily giants took offense. Trulaine had no choice but to stop and the other two giants behind him as well. He was certainly not trying to pick a fight with the king's personal guard, but it seemed as if maybe Hesperus was not a friendly giant at all, and a fight - for whatever reason - was close at hand.

They were standing in a residential portion of WinDarrow, where civilian giants and their offspring peeked out of windows and huddled near buildings to get a view.

“You know,” said Hesperus. “I’ve heard about you.”

“Have you?”

“Oh yes, we all have,” Hesperus chuckled, approaching Trulaine slowly.

“Heard about how many you have slain in battle. Oh yes, the stories have traveled this far. They say you have the strength of twenty men. I’ve been wonderin’ if I would ever get a chance to put that theory to the test. And seein’ as how the savior will be used to repel the werewolves...looks like we got time.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” Hesperus said with smile. “You see, our king does not want to see the savior in anyone else’s hands, especially a Centronian dog like you.”

“You seem to be the brightest of the king’s guard, Hesperus,” said Trulaine. “Surely you can see that your king is leading you to folly. He pays you that well, huh?”

Trulaine backed up, only to find himself getting closer to the three giants behind him. Now that he realized that this was indeed a trap, and he was going to have to draw his sword against four opponent who were each nearly three times his size, he could finally see how threatening they really were. Just their sheer size alone had him wondering if he could take even one of them in a fight, let alone four. A big fight feeling came over him, and he braced himself.

He felt the oversized hand of one of the guards behind him grab his shoulder and instantly he went into an offense. He reached around, grabbing the guard by the armor on his breastplate, and when he got a good enough grip, he yanked with all of his superhuman strength, hurling the giant over his shoulder. The guard nearly crashed into Hesperus.

“I want his head,” commanded Hesperus, and the other two giants sprung into action, the third, still making his way to his feet near Hesperus.

The first giant ran up to Trulaine, bounding on him like a great big monster, but he was sliced across the chest with a swift, long, blade that glimmered with a whistle. The two of the drew the swords; he could them swords, except for the fact

that they were over five feet long, not shaped angular like the common swords of the human mortals. These were flat, thick slabs of steel; nothing more than massive iron paddles honed and sharp around the edges. As they attacked, Trulaine flipped out of harms way hitting his back against the wall of a building. The giant closest to him took one clean swipe in an attempt to lop off Trulaine's head, but the Centronian moved again, and the giant's sword severed clear through the pillar behind him.

Trulaine was amazed, not only by how strong the giants were, but also by how proficient their weaponry was.

All right, Trulaine, he said to himself. You're going to have to dig deep if you want to survive this one. There was no denying it...he would have to let loose and once again become that which he still did not understand, but had become emblazoned within his psyche more and more with every battle. With a flush of adrenaline, he charged them head forward.

The first guard swung a great punch, but, Trulaine evaded it, and stabbing him through the gut. The second guard managed to punch Trulaine in the face, but the Centronian evade the swung of his sword as well, following with a swift kick between the giant's legs, and a quick stab to the gut (not one deep enough to kill him but deep enough to yield completely). The third guard tried to attack Trulaine and ended up on the ground before he could even tell what had happened. He began to gag, holding his breath, as he slowly crashed to the ground, writhing in pain.

Hesperus looked at the three guards and smiled.

"Not bad," he said to Trulaine.

There was a stale moment between them. The snow fell lightly - Trulaine was realizing that this was the first time he had seen snow since the Centronian winters several years ago. A big fight feeling was brewing within him, and he knew by the look in Hesperus' eyes that the gargantuan had been surprised, perhaps even shocked by how easily he had taken down his other three soldiers, even though he managed to muster a cocky smile.

"So it is true," mused the giant. "You do have some skill. Let's see how you fare against WinDarrow's finest, son of Trumandius."

Trulaine squinted. Ever since he had stepped foot in the Southern Reach - a place he had very little knowledge about - he had been surprised to see how many people had known about him. It was as if there was some part of his own life that the rest of world seemed to know about and he had been apparently left in the dark. But now, after his meeting with Thristol, he finally got some answers, had finally gathered a huge piece that was the puzzle to his life, a life that he once thought was simple enough - fight for the lives of his people and staying true to his family heritage - but now he saw that it was just as complex as his mission which proved to be one mystery after another. He had uncovered a piece of the mystery that was his life. The rumors he had heard about his father were true. He was not only an architect who had helped design and build the Centronian palace - as well as other provinces - but he had been a warrior, just like Trulaine was groomed from birth to be. Of course it had only presented him with more questions than it answered, but right now, the fact that his father was a warrior had given him new focus, because he was a warrior as well. Now he could feel the warrior spirit of his father channeling through to give him more strength than he already had, for Hesperus would not be easy to defeat. If he really was the best combatant in the Akabremnar's army then, Trulaine was in for a fight indeed. If he knew king Akabremnar, then he would expect for his most valued, personal guard to have the best combat skills in all of WinDarrow, and due to the brute force he had already felt from the other three, Trulaine knew that he was in for a fight indeed.

Trulaine rushed Hesperus, and the two of them collided. Immediately, Hesperus dropped his guard, interlocking fingers with Trulaine, planning on crushing him with brute force early in the fight. For the first couple seconds of their exchange, Trulaine was beginning to wonder just how strong he really was, but that question was answered a few seconds later when he felt his own knuckles buckling in his hands. In a sudden, desperate attempt to escape the monstrous clutch, he shifted his weight, and with all his might, heaved Hesperus over his shoulders. The giant landed on his feet deftly for his size.

"Not as strong as I had hoped, but it will have to do."

Trulaine tightened his fists, both trying to ease the excruciating pain in his hands, and concealing the fact that he was hurt. Hesperus was indeed stronger than he was; much stronger. Although Trulaine's own strength had nearly equaled that of the other three giants, it was obvious that Hesperus was stronger simply because he had made himself stronger throughout the years, simply by establishing an extensive workout - one far more extensive than the average gargantuan workout, he was sure. Another second and Hesperus would have grinded his hands into mangled flesh and bone dust.

"Looks like I will have to kill you easier than I thought I would," Hesperus gloated. "Maybe I'll continue to go easy on you, then at least I would have some sport."

"Wouldn't want to..." Trulaine grunted in agony. "...disappoint you."

"Oh don't worry. I'll manage."

Hesperus charged him again, but Trulaine relied on his stealth this time; it seemed to be the only edge he had against Akabremnar's finest warrior. He would have to use all of his skill and most of his strength just to keep from getting pummeled.

The first time he tried to grab Trulaine, the Centronian dodged and sliced a huge gash on his right thigh, and yelled in agony. The second time, he rushed angrily only to be knocked several times in the face by Trulaine's fists which he was surprised to see hurt much more than he had suspected. The third time, he lunged with an astonishing burst of speed, easily grabbing Trulaine by his head, squeezing hard. Trulaine could hear his skull beginning to crack. The pain was so agonizing that his body went limp and he dropped his sword.

"I've got you now, little man," said Hesperus. "I would crush your head completely, but then the king would not be to identify you." He gave a twisted laugh. "Instead, I will only crush it halfway."

Thinking fast before his brains ended up splattered everywhere, he moved his legs outward and heaving his feet into Hesperus' chest, knocking the wind out of him. The great giant dropped and stumbled back into one of the buildings, gasp-

ing for air. Immediately, Trulaine picked up his sword and dashed toward Hesperus, rounding on him so quickly, he was bound to finish him, but just then, the giant pulled out a small device from his armor and blinded Trulaine with a devastating light. It had completely taken him off guard.

“Ha!” he laughed again.

Trulaine could feel the intensity of the light hitting him. It was so powerful that it was beginning to burn his skin, and he had no choice but to take cover behind one of the pillars that led around the corner. By now, civilian giants were evacuating their homes, trying not to get caught up in such a brawl. It was only when Trulaine had the chance to avoid the light’s heat was able to realize an incredible fact. The light resembled the same light produced by the infalium and magnified by Angelinus.

Bastard, Trulaine thought. He is using the savior’s magical energy to empower his men. No wonder he doesn’t want to give her up.

“Interesting isn’t it,” Hesperus called, moving around the building in pursuit of Trulaine, who could not be found no matter how hard he searched for him. “Our king is a great king. With alchemist technology he was able to create more versions of the infalium and give them to us. You didn’t really think our army would be foolish enough to go toe to toe with the werewolves without some form of magic to protect us, did you. Although I admit,” he said with a chuckle. “It does work much better on the werewolves than it does on you. They must truly be creatures of the darkness huh, the way they squeal under the light.”

Hesperus looked around frantically now, getting angrier, bursting into the homes and scaring the civilians who all ran out when he entered (since they had heard the scuffle earlier).

“Where are you?” he shouted. “Face me!”

“Your king is foolish,” said Trulaine. He stood about thirty feet behind Hesperus, who turned around to see him. “Instead of offering you salvation, he would rather condemn you to die.”

“Not by your hands, I assure you.”

“Not by mine, no. By the werewolves.”

“Is that so? Now that we have the savior, the werewolves will be on the run, and soon, we will slaughter them all. As for you...your time is up.”

He pointed to the miniature infalio and him again, and the light burst out, but Trulaine managed to avoid being caught in its spectrum. Several times Hesperus tried to hit him with it, and each time, Trulaine dodged behind another corner, going into another building, coming out of another alley, learning his environment quickly in an attempt to evade and outsmart Hesperus. Eventually he was able to sneak up on the giant, sweeping him, and snatching the device from the snowy ground once he dropped it.

“You!” Hesperus bellowed angrily.

He went head up with Trulaine, swinging with fists almost as quick as his, but much larger, so the distance he could cover made it seem as if he were actually faster. But Trulaine knew how to make much better use of his counters, and with one perfectly time moved after another, he dipped low, and then jumped up, delivering a mighty knee to Hesperus’ chin, rattling his brain. On the way back to the ground and with extraordinary momentum, Trulaine slammed the crystal-tipped hilt of his sword straight down on the giant’s forehead. The blow had knocked his foe out cold, and Hesperus crashed to the ground, causing a heap of snow to fly up in the air.

Trulaine stood there with a bloody nose and a scared face, waiting to see if Hesperus would stir, but he did not. Trulaine had defeated him. Hmm, he thought, glaring down at the crystal at the end of his sword. I should use this as a weapon more often.

He picked up the small device Hesperus had used against him. It was a strange thing, how they were able to harness the power of Angelinus in much the same way that magic was harnessed from the enchanted fountain. Ideas like this is what caused this whole mess in the first place. Once again, magic had caused the suffering of others, reminding him of why he had never favored it.

Now he had to save his company...at all costs. One of Hesperus' guards had taken the pixie in the cage. He was heading for the palace, and that was exactly where Trulaine would go. That would be where he would find either the king or his company. It was likely that he would find both, and he would put an end to this newfound conspiracy that the king was obviously apart of. If he had given his servants the command to kill him, than either he would be too late, or just in time.

Trulaine's company, the five of them stood silently in shackles. They were now in the presence of the warlord of the seas.

Maurelan had a strong suspicion that the king's actions were somehow tied into the same thing that they were fighting for, which was survival itself. His idea of survival however did not include them leaving with the whereabouts of the vessel of light. It was an indication that either the king chose not to believe that the end of the world was nigh, or he was simply an idiot for believing anything that Shallemeign had told him about the prophecy, or his place in the new world to come. As for Shallemeign himself...she could see him eyeing the alchemist map greedily. He tested it a few times, closing and opening it manually to make sure that he could do so whenever he wanted to. He had accomplished exactly what he had come here for, and all they could do now was ponder what his next insidious scheme would be.

There was a tumultuous ruckus on the other side of the entrance door. Before Akabremnar could summon his guards to inspect the situation, the door burst open, shattering the hinges into a hundred pieces, littering the stairway. Hesperus came crashing down the stairs, along with a thousand splinters of wood, colliding to the floor. He was completely unconscious. Trulaine stood in the entryway, sword held firmly in hand. He was wild eyed and breathing hard. His hair was disheveled, his wool cape had been torn through the side, and his was bruised from

the massive punches he had withstood at the hands of Hesperus. He hardly looked human, but more like some wild animal crashing through the doors.

He knew that he would find Akabremnar conspiring with his imperial guards and advisors. He knew that he would stumble upon their plot to continue using the savior as a weapon against the werewolves, but nothing prepared him for what he saw. His entire brigade had been captured and restrained. Brontius lay bleeding and gasping within the confines of a torture rack. His body had been contorted and stretched out in an awkward position. His centaur form did not fit well into such a contraption; his legs had been confined to a small space, and his head lay slung over the side of the table that secured him within the horrible, gated structure.

It was unbelievable that the once hospitable gargantuan king had made planned to torture them in such a grisly manner while he was still talking to Lord Thristol. It was unthinkable that a king of any tribe – especially one committed to the jurisdiction of the Leadership as Akabremnar was – would attempt to sabotage a holy mission to save the world. It was unfathomable. Whatever the case, Trulaine had suddenly been confronted with a new set of obstacles – escaping WinDarrow alive. The only thing his company could do now was watch and wonder how long he would be able to survive against Akabremnar's imperial guard. Even Golondred, a man who had known Trulaine better than any other member of the company had never seen his captain face such deadly odds in single combat, especially without the aid of his army to back him up. If Trulaine fell, what would happen next? Would the world be spared its fate by the arrival of a new hero? Or had the prophecy truly been designed for only one individual to secure? Even if there were others to take up the mission, would they even be allowed by the holy mandates that had been given to the Centronian royal family alone? If that were the case, then Trulaine was their only hope at this point.

The gargantuan king glanced over at Hesperus lying on the floor in shock.

“Get him!” roared the king, spit flinging from his oversized mouth.

Immediately, his entire royal guard sprang into action. A group of ten armor-clad giants stampeded across the chamber, jolting the floor as they ran.

Shallemeign watched in delight. It was the first time he had seen his old rival in nearly three decades. In all that time, he had never actually faced Trulaine in single combat - never once - but now he would get an up close idea of how well trained the so-called heir of Centronus really was.

Trulaine prepared himself for the charge, his energy waning, and his faith dwindling, but he was ready nonetheless. It was not until he noticed Shallemeign standing there in the center of the room surrounded by his minions that something changed within him. There would only be ten seconds before the giants crossed the great chamber to reach him, and in that moment, his mind had just enough time to register that the man who had murdered his former wife was standing just on the other side of that distance.

Shallemeign, he thought to himself. He was mesmerized by an insurmountable rage, this time it was fueled by hatred and vengeance. He channeled it toward his rushing opponents. He focused and intensified it, transforming it into something valuable, something useful. It was almost as if magic were influencing him as he embraced the moment with a tranquil clarity.

Like a mad man he ran down the steps, sword held high, not affording the giants the chance to reach him first. Instead of colliding with them head on however, he wisely ducked and slid between the legs of the first giant, slashing him in the upper thigh. The shield on his back provided extra slide as it caused a few sparks to flicker beneath him. Before the blood could hit the floor, before the giant could even let out a roar of agony, Trulaine was on his feet again. The other giants tried to hit him, stomp on him, or slash him with their huge swords, but the Centronian was too fast, too lithe, and too skilled to be touched by any of them. He moved and twisted, countering all of their attacks. He stabbed one of them through the gut, and drove his sword all the way out through the side of the giants' ribs. The gargantuan cried in agony, holding his guts as he fell to the ground, mortally wounded, and unable to stand again. Trulaine was quick, trying to sidestep between two giants, but a third one had struck him in the face. Blood sprayed from Trulaine's mouth as another giant tried to decapitate him. He barely had enough time to see it coming, narrowly avoid the blow. Another sword came out of nowhere, a huge downward strike slammed embedded the giants' sword

straight into the ground right where Trulaine had been standing just a second before. Pieces of the marble floor had been strewn all over the place, some of them flying up and hitting the shield on his back. He was caught again. This time with a sword slash that nearly took his head off, but instead it whizzed across his face, cutting him on the neck. Another monstrous blow to head followed, the force of which had knocked him clear off his feet.

He fell backwards onto the steps. The last blow had nearly knocked him unconscious, and he needed to gain some distance. His head pounded, his vision was blurred, and yet, by the grace of the gods he had actually been spared a moment. Eight remaining giants stood their ground, while the other two lay wounded; one of them limping from a gash on his leg while the other lay on the floor, slowly dying from his wounds. For whatever reason, they did not attack right away. Perhaps they had some amount of respect for Trulaine, knowing that he was the world's only hope; perhaps they wanted him to succeed despite their delusional king's wishes, or maybe they were afraid of Trulaine because of his physical prowess. Perhaps they had felt his strength. Being giants themselves, they looked at him strangely as if he were the true giant among them.

“Well?” Akabremnar's voice broke the silence once more. “What are you all waiting for?”

A devious smile streaked across Trulaine's face as he wiped his bloody lip and took out his shield, daring a continued confrontation with the giants. They appeared to be surprised by his persistence, but they charged at him regardless.

With dazzling agility, he leapt from the stairs, soaring over one of them, slicing him across the face. The giant bellowed in agony, holding a big gash over his cheek. Instead of landing on the floor, Trulaine put his feet together and pummeled the next giant with a double dropkick. He jumped off the guards' chest just in time to avoid the uncoordinated strike of another sword that came down, hacking the falling giant in the shoulder. Trulaine rebounded, shoving his shield to deflect yet another sword strike, and sparks flew all over the place. There were new attacks coming at him from all sides, and even though his hatred for Shallemeign had continued to fuel him, he could no longer fend off the giants. There were just

too many of them, and they were too strong. Each blow that he blocked with his shield was nearly strong enough to knock him off his feet, and that was the least of his difficulties. There were massive punches and viscous sword strikes coming at him from every angle, any one of them threatening to sever his limbs clean from his body. It was becoming more and more impossible to land a blow, and eventually he needed to gain some space once again. He could not win this battle simply going toe to toe with them. Soon desperation took over.

He gave the giants a flurry of wild attacks just so that he could have a second of space between them. In that second, he set his sights on Shallemeign. With dazzling accuracy and blinding speed, he ran up the length of a blade that had nearly hacked him in two, jumped off the head of the attacking giant, and soared high into the air, straight toward Shallemeign. He raised his sword high, shouting at the top of his lungs in a single death strike aimed at the warlock's head. He moved so fast, so calculated, that he was sure it would connect and split Shallemeign's skull, and he would have his vengeance, have his raging bloodlust satiated before being slain himself. But that was not the case. At the last moment, something grabbed him, seized him. It was an invisible force, something that he would have never anticipated.

“Ah, Trulaine,” said Shallemeign deviously. “Finally. I have always imagined what it would be like to have the son of Trumandius held high in the merciful palm of my hand. Now I have achieved just that.

“It's been a long time, has it not?” he humored.

Trulaine wanted to yell at him, scream at the top of his lungs, curse him for everything he had taken from him. He tried to speak but the words would not come out. The same mysterious force that was being used to hold him in the air was also suffocating him to the point where he could only squeal in agony. He did not know what kind of magic Shallemeign had come across, but it was painful indeed. The gravitational pressure increased even more, and Trulaine could feel the bones in his body begin to contort, causing a miserable croak to escape his lips.

The king's royal guard - all of which were lying on the ground, wounded - watched in awe as Shallemeign assumed control of the situation with a simple flick of his wrist.

“How remarkable,” Shallemeign said. He continued to gloat to Trulaine while looking around at all the carnage he had caused just a few moments ago. “You nearly killed ten armored giants and you hardly even broke a sweat. You truly do live up to the legends, don't you?”

With but a thought, he released his magical grip on Trulaine's vocal chords and a slew of profanity burst from Trulaine's lips as he cursed him in every foul word that he could think of. He watched as Shallemeign simply laughed, laughed hard as if he were a jester, laughed harder than he had laughed in years.

It was not until Trulaine was able to calm himself and gather his thoughts that he looked Shallemeign in the eye spoke slowly, the exact words that he had been saving to say to him if they had ever stood face to face. This was that moment, and if it were the last thing Trulaine would ever do in his life, it would be to speak the next words with clarity.

“Shallemeign, warlord of the seas...”

“Actually, it's warlock now,” Shallemeign added humorously.

“You pillaged my kingdom. You murdered my wife, and you have also taken the lives of many people in the Northern Reach. I have vowed ever since to seek my vengeance upon you. I will have my vengeance.”

“That would be the end to a very romantic tale indeed, but now that I have the powers of a god, my friend, you must realize that you will never be in the position to do so.”

“If you're going to kill me, do it now because once I am free I will not hesitate to strike you down.”

“I don't want to kill you, Trulaine,” he said with a chuckle and a surprised look of sarcasm. “I want to thank you. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to seize my destiny. You see if you and your Centronian brigade had not fought so

passionately and defeated me in the Centronian war all those years ago, then I might not have excelled through further ambition. I would not have the means to seize true power for my own, and I would not be able speak to you right now, face to face. Yes, you have done so much for me Trulaine. I feel that it is only necessary that I pass on the generosity. And what I have planned for you will rival all of the glorious things you have done for me in the past. I don't want you dead, no. I want you to join me so we can rule the world together.”

Trulaine could do nothing to show his contempt for such a request but somehow he managed to spit in Shallemeign's direction. The warlord ignored him. In fact, he found it amusing, smiling at Trulaine, proud of his work, surveying every inch of his helpless opponent looking for more ways to enjoy the moment. That was when he noticed the distinct shape of the hilt of Trulaine's sword. He wrenched it from his helpless grasp with the invisible power of the cradle. It drifted before him, the distinct red, ruby-tipped hilt reflecting off the corner of his eye exuberantly.

“Ah,” began Shallemeign. “The blade of Trumandius. This is your father's sword no doubt, is it not? This is the blade that took the lives of so many of my kin. I never forgot what it would mean to me if I ever got my hands on this sword. It would mean the end of your people, and the beginning of true order in the world of men. When I was just a young man, your father was still in power, infecting whatever lands he could sink his ideologies into. The king of the greatest nation...just a fad for the world biggest coward.”

“You're...wrong,” Trulaine struggled to speak. “My father...was no coward.”

“Your father was a coward. What kind of man would leave this world without securing his own family, passing his debts down to his flesh and blood? A coward, with a sword like this,” he chuckled. “His skill as an architect must have put him in high favor, or else the alchemists would not have forged such a weapon for him. Requested by the Leadership, created by the Lidalians, and granted to the former king of Centronus. It was granted to a coward and has been passed down to you, another coward, one so weak and helpless that he cannot defend himself against me.”

Using pure volitional will, Shallemeign manipulated the gravity around the sword to causing it to turn around, pointing it just an inch from Trulaine's neck.

"I could kill you with your father's sword, right here, right now. It would be a fitting death indeed, do you think?" Shallemeign paused to gloat. "No, but you see, Trulaine. I have something much better in mind for you...a very special gift. One that I have been saving years for you."

He motioned for Brog to exit. The ogre trudged, loudly out of the sky parlor, his large footsteps slowly dying away in the silence.

All Trulaine could focus on while he was being held in the air against his will, was the face of Shallemeign staring back at him, gloating. And it was no dream he was seeing this time. This was the face of his true hatred. Trulaine wanted to say to Shallemeign just how much he despised him, but he was too filled with rage to express himself. THUMP THUMP THUMP. Besides, what would be the point anyway? This was the man who had taken everything from him and now he was powerless to stop him. There was no use in words. All Trulaine could think about was breaking free and getting his hands on Shallemeign. THUMP THUMP THUMP. The footsteps were faint, and he had barely noticed them the first time but now they were getting louder. They were undoubtedly the footsteps of Brog trudging back into the chamber. THUMP THUMP THUMP. At the moment however, nothing mattered to Trulaine and he would get his revenge, even if it were the last thing he ever did. It would be the sweetest thing and he couldn't wait to...

His jaw dropped. There were no words for the eerie feeling that had just crept into his heart the moment he saw Brog step through the entrance with what Trulaine could only register in his mind as a ghost. There she was, standing in a plain gray gown, drenched in rain, and barefoot with pupils as pale as the snow. Trulaine's vision had become a bit blurry from the circulation being cut off from his throat, but he could see fine. Still, he couldn't believe his eyes. The woman standing before him could not be who he thought it was.

Shallemeign saw the look in Trulaine's eyes change, and he released his grip on the Centronian who came crashing to his hands and knees.

The pressure had been loosened from his throat, but still, Trulaine could not muster any words. He was shocked; suddenly hit with so much confusion that he had virtually forgotten about his rage in a matter of seconds. All he could do was stare at the woman who stood before him. He recognized her, but his mind would not fathom the thought that she could still be alive, for she had died long ago. This simply was not possible. She had to be a spirit come to haunt him, or a spell conjured to fool him. She could not be real. Unacceptable. Impossible. He could not...would not accept it as truth. He stared off into space, and when his eyes finally came back level, he could only mutter a single word.

“Ionna?”



Battle in the Sky Parlor

rShe was not quite the way Trulaine had remembered her all these years. Her hair was gray. Although she would not have been as old as she looked by now after so many years, the effects of whatever lifestyle she had been forced to live had definitely taken its hold on her. She was a withered reflection of beauty, her skin was pale, but her eyes revealed no soul, only pale cloudy pupils and an essence. Her body was frail, beneath her thin, gray gown, and her scarce movements presented no thrill to life. She was a zombie-like expression. She looked very much like a ghost.

Trulaine had no doubt in his mind that this was his first wife, and if it was her body then the same soul no longer dwelled there. It shocked him, mystified him, shook him to the depths of his deepest fears. Suddenly it had all made sense to him, but at the same time opened up more questions. How did she survive? How did she end up in the hands of Shallemeign? And most importantly, what happened to the Ionna that he knew?

She was truly a sight to behold: the image that had cursed his nightmares for so long.

“Ionna?” his voice trembled as he spoke her name again.

“Yes,” said Shallemeign, gloating at Trulaine. “It really is her, in the flesh.”

“I-I do not understand. How?”

“Well, after our little war was when I found her. She was wounded when she came to me. Lost, confused, even her memory had faded. I couldn’t leave her to die of course.”

“No, you’re far too compassionate for that,” Trulaine snapped, sarcastically.

“I took her in for you Trulaine, because I knew that this moment would come. I had to be prepared. I had to bring you back to what was so righteously yours. And now, we are here...all of us, reunited on this day. Lovely, is not it? You see, all your sorrow and bickering...it’s for nothing Trulaine. Here is your true love, alive and well, and still just as beautiful as ever, don’t you think?”

Shallemeign walked up to the woman, touching her pale cheek.

“Monster!” shouted Trulaine.

He rushed Shallemeign with every ounce of rage still dwelling within him. At blinding speed, he drove his sword straight for Shallemeign’s heart but the warlord caught him again, snatching him effortlessly, holding him against his will with the power of his gravitational cradle.

“Is that any way to speak to the man who reunited you with your bride to be?” Shallemeign smiled, proud of his work; the triumph of struggling for years to slay his greatest rival only to find out that his demise would be such an effortless thing to achieve, thrilled the warlock, and the fact that he would get to do it in such a fashion filled him with joy. “I suppose not. You would rather embrace death, I see.”

With his hand raised, he began to torture Trulaine again, this time wrenching his insides with the powerful source of gravitation that he wielded so passionately. Trulaine could feel its power being exerted over him. Now he could not even see. It felt as though the force swelling within him would soon cause his head to explode, and he could barely make out Shallemeign’s gloating words. All he could do was shout miserably.

“Leave him alone!” shouted Maurelan.

“Shut your mouth, little lady,” said Shallemeign. “Or you will be next.”

Maurelan’s eyes were filled with tears, and she could not bear watching another second. Shallemeign pulled and twisted on Trulaine’s limbs with a force that resembled magical telekinesis in many ways, but this was something else. This was

far more powerful than telekinesis. If he were using telekinesis, the amount of pressure he had been exerting on Trulaine would have given Shallemeign a concussion, and would have probably damaged his brain. But on the contrary, she observed how he seemed to be using an effortless amount of force, comparable to that of a human holding an ant between their fingers. He had only used a little effort, not because he wanted to be lenient with Trulaine, but because he was wielding a power that could have easily disintegrated him into a thousand pieces. It was an extremely powerful form of magic, and Trulaine was now suffering through it, because of her.

She looked up in despair, praying for the gods to spare them. That was when she saw it. A shadow was moving outside on the glass dome above them. She could hardly believe what she was seeing, had nearly forgotten that Philistian had hidden himself in the streets of WinDarrow, until she saw his face peering in at her. She nearly gasped, but settled for a smile instead as he motioned for her to stay quiet. It was invigorating to know that the pathfinder, the lowly prisoner from the Culprit's Inn who swore hatred to the Centronians had come back after all. And although it was no guarantee that he would succeed, it filled her heart with hope. They hadn't run out of luck just yet. He was watching from above, waiting for the right moment. It was now or never.

Drawing his swords in the rainy night, he braced himself, and crashed through the huge glass dome of the sky parlor.

Trulaine felt as if he were half dead. By now, Shallemeign had inflicted enough pain on Trulaine to be satisfied with just killing him now. And perhaps he would have, but during all the blindness and blurred sounds, something happened. Shallemeign released him. He could not see yet because his vision was too blurry, but someone else had entered the chamber. He could see a new shadow near the corner of the chamber. It was Philistian. Trulaine could hardly believe his eyes as his vision slowly came back and he could see for sure that the pathfinder himself now stood near the torture rack, already springing Brontius' release with bright, red

bouts of smoldering magic. The rest would have been a blur had he not pulled himself together in that moment.

“Philistian!” responded Akabremnar, staring at him as if he had seen a ghost. “The great Lidalian assassin! But...you were to be executed! What are you doing here?”

“That is none of your concern, gargantuan,” said Philistian with a smirk.

“How did he get in here?” Akabremnar shouted at his royal guard for an explanation that no one could provide. The remainder of the giants – or at least the few of them that were still able to respond – looked just as clueless as he was.

“Kill him!” the gargantuan king bellowed when he realized that there would be no logical answer provided for him. “Kill that wretched piece of filth, now!”

What was left of Akabremnar's wounded guards - those who had the time to pull themselves together while Shallemeign was still gloating - rushed Philistian sluggishly, giving him enough time to destroy the lock on the Brontius' torture rack, and the cage popped open. As the centaur quickly struggled to free himself, Philistian rendered himself invisible, and the rushing guards suddenly stopped and looked around, dumbfounded.

Suddenly, several powerful bouts of bright red magic exploded through the hall, knocking the oncoming guards to the floor. Another flash of magic energy burst upon the inner cage of Brontius' restraints and the centaur was now able to free himself completely. And without hesitation, Philistian rendered himself invisible.

“No!” shouted king Akabremnar, grieving over the damage of one of his many prized possessions.

“Kill him!” Shallemeign yelled. He was becoming enraged as he realized how quickly things were slipping out of control. “Find him! And kill that blasted centaur before he escapes!”

Immediately, Brontius attacked all five guards with a furious rage, angered at how his captors had tortured him.

Philistian dashed through, doing his best to avoid the giants who remained blind to his presence. But deep beneath the veil of vision, he was under the watchful eye of a vampress, one that could not see him, but sense his movements very well, and being faster than anyone at dashing, Saskia made her move swiftly. She turned into a mystifying blur, zipping and zigzagging through the room until one powerful strike sent Philistian sailing across the chamber, crashing into the wall beside Maurelan who immediately felt the impact near her and looked over to the side. The impact caused him to break hold over his spell, and he appeared in full view once more. Groaning in pain, he managed to cast a sly smirk at Maurelan.

“Look’s like I’m right on time,” he joked.

“Philistian,” she said. “I cannot phase through the shackles. I think they may have been enchanted.”

“Brace yourself,” his voice came out through the air.

Maurelan closed her eyes and clenched. Her shackles were blasted off and she was set free. It did not come without price however. Her wrists and ankles rang with pain, causing her to scream. It was an intense burn, and although she was sure that the pain was enough to leave a scar in the morning, but she did not even have the time to check it. There were a million other split second decisions for her to make if they were still planning on making it out of WinDarrow alive.

“Help Trulaine,” she said. “I will free the others.”

Immediately, Philistian darted off, working his way through the guards had now seen him and were moving in to attack.

Maurelan would have made a swift effort to free Bernarsu, who was the closest to her at the time. Perhaps there was a lever nearby that she could use to free all of them, but she would not find it in time. Clear ahead, she could see Saskia preparing to dash straight towards her. She would only have a second to react before the vampress was upon her, and that was all the time she needed.

Maurelan, now holding her whip, gave it a sharp crack through the air as she approached Saskia who had made it to her feet with a coy smile.

“Are you sure you want to do this love?” said the vampress calmly. “...Contend with one of the dead?”

“You won’t be dead, witch,” Maurelan spoke with fervor. “Not until I finish you myself.”

Before she could even react however, Saskia struck her so fast that the vampress appeared to be composed of wind. Saskia was toying with her.

“Daddy’s little girl,” she hissed. “It would be fitting for you to suffer the same fate as your father, but I find the blood of your people to be quite bland.”

With a surge of anger and a pinch of skill, Maurelan sent her whip swirling through the air where it sailed and cracked Saskia in the mouth. The vampress stumbled back, holding her mouth that trickled blood.

She may be fast, and she may be strong, Maurelan thought. But she bleeds just fine.

Saskia struck her several times with blinding speed. They were increasingly stronger blows, and soon Maurelan had no choice but to cringe, her attacker too strong and too fast for her to see. She couldn’t give in to the vampire witch. She would not.

While huddled close to the ground, now surrounded by a blur of attacks, she focused on her energy; the energy that quickly swirled inside of her and boiled to its greatest point before being released. As the electricity flowed through her fingertips, she felt it convert into spiritual energy. Now it was ready. A wind poured out from within her, and her hair began to swirl majestically (not because of the wind Saskia had produced around her), her eyes flushed white, and her very appearance itself became an intimidating one, for the power of the gods flowed within her for a moment in time.

“Gloominus Zidiki!” she yelled, conjuring her most impressive gloominus charge yet.

An uncanny explosion ripped forth from her hands, bursting, and hurtling Saskia clear across the chamber where she collided with the ground. There was

too much going on to be sure of her condition, but the vampress did not move at all.

Through the corner of her eye she had caught a glimpse of the king scurrying through the chamber.

Still caught in the clutches of Shallemeign's power, Trulaine could see over his shoulder as Philistian came out of nowhere, blasting the warlord in the face with another red flash, temporarily blinding him. Shallemeign released his gravitational hold on Trulaine, and the Centronian dropped to the floor. It was all Philistian could afford him before the giants rounded on him again.

Trulaine quickly made it to his feet. It would have taken a number of moments to shake off the concussion he had received from the prolonged cerebral pressure he had endured for the better part of ten minutes, but if he could not give Shallemeign any time to rebound. He quickly grabbed his sword off the ground and rushed Shallemeign for yet a third time, but he was knocked back by the power of the warlord's personal muscle, the big, dull, brute, Brog.

He lurched toward Trulaine with an awkward, wobbling strut and huge menacing hands stretched out ready to do damage. As the ogre reached in to grab him, Trulaine ducked, lifting Brog over his head with astonishing strength, tossing him into the shattered remnants of the torture rack.

Trulaine could see the look on Shallemeign's face. The warlord was captivated and astonished by the physical display he had shown. The two of them now stood face to face and Trulaine saw him open his palms again, which was exactly what he observed the warlord doing just before using the cradle, but this time he did not. Trulaine would call his bluff.

“You would do it,” he said. “But you know as well as I do, that you are unsure of the power it contains.”

“You’re right,” admitted Shallemeign. “It’s quite the rush. But you see it’s the uncertainty that makes me want to unleash it. To explore its’ potential. It is a thing beyond beauty, you see.”

“You are mad.”

“That’s what everyone says, but they have not towered over the world like I have.”

“I will have your head for all your decades of treachery among the free people of the world.”

“Your bravery is admirable Centronian,” Shallemeign protested with an arrogant chuckle. “But you are no match for one who controls gravity itself.”

With a mighty conjuring of gravity, Shallemeign pummeled Trulaine into the marble floor, attacking him with the source so much that he was beginning to learn how to use it more accurately and thoroughly, probing its subtleties. Still, the Centronian would not die, for his strength was too resilient, his will too stubborn. He trudged over piles of rubble beneath the floor where Shallemeign tried to bury him. His vision was blurred, and blood streamed from his nose, but consciousness streamed back into his head. The gravitational pummeling that he had received was so intense, he could not recall what had even happened to him...but he could see. Every person that was able to stand had been on there feet fighting.

“Shallemeign!” he called, still cringing in pain, barely even able to raise his voice. The warlord turned to look at him. “Let us finish this.”

“Fool!” said Shallemeign.

Perhaps Trulaine was a fool; a fool for not staying down, for rising to his feet after being pummeled halfway to death, for challenging a man who may have inherited the powers (or at least a portion of the powers) of a god. He did not know what came over him. Perhaps he was still stewing over the fact that Shallemeign had held his wife captive as a zombie for all these years, or perhaps it was the fact that he was willing to torture his compatriots for information. Maybe it was the fact that his head still rung, and his judgment had been temporarily skewed from

the pulverizing he had just suffered. Whatever the case, he was on his feet and somehow ready for a fight. Even if it meant he had to die in order to have one.

“We could have made this world a shining utopia,” said Shallemeign. But you prefer death I see.”

He focused the sacred, gravitational energy at Trulaine again with a concussive force, and this time it was powerful enough to kill.

Trulaine could see its essence filtering through the air, a force that would have been invisible if not for its intensity. He did not know what compelled him to do what he did next. Perhaps it was desperation, perhaps idiocy, or perhaps it was unknown intuition that he would later come to realize. Grabbing his shield, he dropped low, concealing himself protectively behind it. Expecting no more of a different outcome than he had received while getting blasted the previous times, he braced for impact, hoping that maybe the shield would somehow take the brunt of yet another one of Shallemeign’s tremendous magical attacks. But something else happened.

The shield absorbed nearly all of the energy, shimmering in Trulaine’s hands, and reducing the gravity force into nothing but a strong thrust that knocked him back maybe a foot or two. He was still able to stand even.

“What?” Shallemeign raved, trying to overcome the counter-enchancement. “Impossible!”

The force had recoiled, knocking Shallemeign clear across the room.

Trulaine was just as surprised as the warlord had been. He looked down at the shield in his hand like the thing was a ghost. He could not believe the power that he had been in possession of ever since he crossed the borders of the Southern Reach. He had never held a magical object, had never even considered the idea of being a magical practitioner, much less being the owner of something as miraculous as a magical shield, but it just so happened to be him now.

Gundomar, he thought. You slick bastard.

Of course the leader of the Order did not tell him the true nature of the shield, Trulaine would have undoubtedly refused to wield it then, but now, in this moment, he realized that it would surely protect him against more than just spear attacks.

Trulaine could see that the others were still busy fending off the king's guards. Trulaine took the opportunity to free the rest of his companions, Golondred, Bernarsu, and Alvantin. One by one, he snapped their shackles with his superhuman strength.

Golondred cracked his neck, quickly rushing over to the armory, retrieving the rest of their weapons, and ranting angrily about how many giants he would slay. Bernarsu himself smiled at the fact that he was free and finally able to properly hurt someone. They fought off the remaining guards who were now all cowering. Trulaine did not know where Shallemeign had crashed but it was likely that he had been knocked unconscious.

As they all joined forces again, Trulaine was beginning to see that they actually stood a chance of making it out of here alive. At least that was what he hoped for.

“Where is Maurelan?” Bernarsu asked.

“I do not know,” Trulaine responded. “She was just here, was she not?”

“I saw her,” said Alvantin. “She went after the king.”

“I am her guard,” said Bernarsu. “It is my mandate to make sure she is accounted for. I will find her.”

“No,” Philistian said, already heading off toward the edge of the parlor. “Stay here and aid Trulaine. I will find her.”

Maurelan had chased the king all the way to the second section of the palace. She found him all alone, trying to slip by unnoticed to make his escape. Immediately she crossed the distance between them, sneaking up quickly behind him.

With her whip, she struck him across his heavily robed back, an attack that he barely noticed.

He turned slowly, glancing at her with utter disdain, appalled that this young woman would dare strike him. He was easily three times her size, but she felt that she could move away faster than he could reach her. To her surprise the king was faster than she expected, and his long reach allowed him to grab hold of her. He picked her up by the waist, his hand so huge that it covered her entire mid section. He gave a squeeze and she shrieked. Then with his fist balled up, he punched her in the face, knocking her unconscious.

“That serves ya right!” he said snarling at her. He then threw her limp body on the floor.

Without giving her a second thought, Akabremnar continued to make his way across the chamber when the wall in front of him exploded violently, and a bright red flash of energy revealed Philistian beyond the smoke, standing with two swords in his hands.

“Akabremnar,” he said.

“Infidel,” was the king’s only response.

As he stepped closer, Philistian saw Maurelan lying on the ground. He rushed up to her, dropping low and cradling her head, checking for injuries. She did not respond. Philistian had intended to serve the king his last sloppy meal on the tip of his blade, but first he had to see how bad Maurelan’s injuries were. He tried to rouse her but she would not stir.

“I will have your head, gargantuan filth.”

“I think not,” said the ever-crafty Akabremnar. By simply nudging the side of the wall opened a secret trapdoor, which he escaped through and barred behind him so that Philistian could not follow him.

There was a jolt, and the parlor walls closed in around Philistian and Maurelan, reinforcing themselves with large metal plates. The very corner of the room itself had transformed, inclosing them in a space no more than ten five feet across.

They were now locked in; locked in a metal box in a crumbling palace with a horde of werewolves infiltrating the gargantuan province of WinDarrow. But this would not be his final resting place, not while Maurelan's fate now lied in his hands.

Trulaine and much of his company had made easy work of remaining giants; Golondred and Bernarsu charging right through them while Alvantin conjured a bout of shamanic fire to scatter them. Meanwhile, Saskia and Brog had left the fight to help Shallemeign make it back to his feet.

In the dying vestiges of battle, Trulaine spotted Ionna. She had been standing right in plain sight. She was the only person who had not been involved in a duel; the unflinching, unblinking, and ever emotionless Ionna who stood in the same spot she had been standing in the entire time. Trulaine was surprised that she had not been injured throughout the battle.

He had spent several minutes trying to rouse her.

“Ionna,” Trulaine called to her. He figured a slap on the cheek would shake her from whatever unholy spell she had been placed upon, but she did not respond at all.

By the gods, he thought. Does she even recognize me?

“You are a fool,” Shallemeign's voice called over his shoulder. Flanked by Saskia and Brog, he limped his way over toward Trulaine and Ionna with a smile. “The Ionna you knew is no more. She is but a slave now, a mere shadow of the soul that once dwelled therein.”

“Enslaved by a monster,” said Trulaine, turning his attention back to Shallemeign, his aggression resurfacing. “Now I see. Your only purpose was to reunite me with a corpse.”

“My purpose,” he groaned. “Was for you to join me. That has always been my goal, because you see Trulaine, I knew there was something special about you. And now that I have seen it, we can never part as enemies.”

“No, it is your head that shall part from your body. For what you have done to her, you deserve death ten times over.”

“Indeed, I do. But you won’t kill me Trulaine. The two of us are too powerful to leave this world to the Leadership, you know that.”

“None of that matters if we do not stop the fountain of enchantment from spreading its chaos among the world.”

“And what will you do when the Leadership takes the world back, and all that you have fought for sees no change at all?”

“Better than to see it in the hands of a madman.”

Shallemeign paused, trying to study him for a moment.

“Who are you, boy?” he snarled.

“You know my name, and you know my lineage.”

“Perhaps I should rephrase. What are you? You are not cursed, yet you not uncursed.” Shallemeign paused, shocked. And when Trulaine gave no response, he gave a delirious chuckle before continuing. “You must take me for a conjurer of cheap tricks, Centronian. This cradle of creation I have...not only does it allow me to control single streams of gravitational currents, but it is omnipotent!”

And then, Shallemeign did it. He dared. Deep down, he may have been reluctant, but his affinity for showing superior - no matter what the costs - had driven him to explore the possibilities of proving such a point. An intense, all-encompassing wave of energy towered through the parlor. It was a constant surge of power that knocked everyone off their feet and holding them to the walls. There was only Shallemeign and his ever-engrossing obsession with the source of gravitation. A mere foot in front of him however was the only other person in the chamber who was not only able to stand but had been slowly inching his way toward the maniacal warlord.

Trulaine.

To the naked eye, the Centronian was just a vibrating shell of light shrouded in the visible intensity of Shallemeign's power. Somehow, the shield he wielded allowed him to stand through the magical onslaught. But it was not enough. The shield was beginning to weaken, and soon great recoil blasted the energy between them as if a crack of thunder had struck the very palace itself. Trulaine and Shallemeign were both knocked to the ground as the build-up of energy rippled through the initial surge, causing the floor, ceiling, and the walls all around them to crack. The windows shattered as well, showering glass into the rainy night.

After a long pause everyone gathered their bearings, trying to make sense of what had just happened, especially Shallemeign who gazed, mesmerized by the twinkling ball of light that so calmly waltzed in front of him. But instead of striking fear in him, it only made him smile.

"Careful Shallemeign," Saskia's voice came from behind him. "We still do not know the extent of the source's power."

"I hope you did not come along with me thinking that I was in pursuit of a mere mage's trick, Saskia!" he said, snapping at the vampress while rising to his feet.

"No," said Saskia beneath her breath. "Actually, I had no choice."

Trulaine lay on the ground, unmoving, but conscious. Shallemeign looked at him as if making a decision to use the source once more against him, but suddenly there was a giant crack that echoed throughout the chamber. It was a quick, deafening surge of roaring concrete that gave the sky parlor a tumultuous jolt, and in seconds, the entire ceiling came crashing down on them.

King Akabremnar had searched the lower levels of his palace in search of his two personal guards whose sole purpose was to guard entry of any building he had ever personally moved to, but they were nowhere to be found. He had tried

calling for reinforcements a long time ago, but it was not until the entire building had begun to sway that they rushed back up the stairs to report to him. This time however, they brought his top field general up with them. General Gruntanis was a hefty and brave, armored tactician. A brute of a gargantuan, even taller than Hesperus, approached the king barely able to stand. His face was streaked in blood. His appearance shocked the king. The encounter was not meant to send reinforcements into the king's aid, something that the king both expected and desperately needed which was something he not only desperately needed, but also expected. They were not there to escort him to safety either. It was to inform him of the unthinkable.

“Where have you been?” shouted the king. “We have a goddamn revolt on our hands I need reinforcements in my own chamber...”

“The werewolves!” Gruntanis cut him off, a crazed look in his eyes. “They’ve broken through all defenses!”

“What?” said the king, a sudden streak of panic ripping through him. “How?”

“I do not know. They’ve somehow amassed another army.”

“But...”

“You assured me I would not have to sacrifice any more of my soldiers, and now there are barely any left to spare! Soon there will be barely any of us left to fight for the safety of our families. After this is over...if when survive...when the courts intervene, you will have to pay for this!”

“We tried to tell you earlier, my lord,” said one of the other guards more afraid of what Gruntanis might do to him for failing to convince the king of the apparent urgency, rather than the king himself.

“Yes, I-I know,” said Akabremnar, feeling guilty and idiotic.

“Damn you, Akabremnar,” Gruntanis continued to scold the king. “While you sit here in your palace you think you are safe as well, but only there are soldiers to fight for you.”

“What?” Akabremnar asked, surprised that Gruntanis had turned against him as well. “Who do you think you’re talkin’ to, Gruntanis? I could have you executed by tomorrow ya’ know.”

“If only you had executioners to spare. They have all fallen. See for yourself.”

Gruntanis pointed through one of the shattered windows, and when Akabremnar took a closer look out at the misty field, he panicked. There were hundreds of werewolves overpowering what remained of his army and thousands more appearing from above the hills behind them, barely visible in the moonlight.

“Put the savior into the infalion now Akabremnar, or see your kingdom fall this night.”

“But the savior does not yet have the energy,” said the king, heading into the safe room where they had placed Angelinus until there was need of her. “She’s not even awake. She has had not the time to charge her powers since the last attack.”

“She must wake now’ or we are all doomed!”

“Dammit, Gruntanis. Couldn’t you have held them off a little longer?”

Akabremnar opened the cover.

To their surprise, the savior was awake. There she was, perched in her cage just as tiny as ever; large, glossy eyes squinty from the sudden shift from darkness to light, head moving from left to right as she gazed upon them confusedly.

The king grabbed her cage, and together with Hesperus and the other two guards, he stormed his way down the great staircase that gave the sky parlor its illustrious, larger than life appearance. They headed down the rear hallway onto the outside balcony, in the wet rain.

“By the gods,” he paused, struck by utter fear when he saw the view just ahead. Most of his soldiers -hundreds of them who, just moments ago still stood a fair fight against the werewolves, but who had become greatly overwhelmed - were now dead. Corpses littered the battlefield, and the starving, wild, and desperate werewolves who were driven by pure instinct had eaten many of them. They were absent of fear, a trait that had allowed them to continue coming back in a series of

relentless attacks. How they had gathered so many more of their brethren however was beyond Akabremnar. He had no clue how such a feat was possible. All of his men had begun to fall back. The smart ones had already passed the king in an attempt to retreat back into the city palace to retrieve their loved ones. Before he had even stepped out onto the balcony that formed a perimeter around his great citadel, he realized that soon the palace itself would be overrun.

“Quick!” Akabremnar shouted. To his surprise, Gruntanis and the other two guards had deserted him. Only Hesperus, his ever-faithful personal bodyguard remained. The thought that he once owned an entire kingdom, and now there was not a single soul to aid him. But he cared not. He would use the infalion, put an end to the werewolves, and then persecute all of his surviving generals who had fled with their families.

There was the device, the organic energy projector, his prized Infalion, the gift he had received so many years ago when the Lidaliens - lords of alchemy - reached their height of power before their inglorious fall. It sat there on far end of the balcony, just waiting to be used. He would place the savior inside of it, regardless of whether or not she was spiritually and mentality well enough to do it. He would force it out of her. He opened the cage and grabbed her, glancing over his shoulder every second as he watch the horde of werewolves get closer and closer. This would repel them. Since they had charged his palace walls and had gotten closer to the actual palace then ever before, then perhaps the energy projected the Angelinus would completely fry them. And he would enslave the survivors. Yes, of course. After this night no werewolf in the entire known world would dare cross the paths of WinDarrow ever again. It would be considered sacred ground after Akabremnar, king of the giants got through with them. Very mention of the word WinDarrow and the name Akabremnar would forever inspire fear in the heart of any werewolf to ever hear or speak them after he was through with them. Angelinus was his final hope in achieving that.

“What are you doing?” she shouted as he shoved her into the device.

He juggled back and forth between revving up the Infalion, adjusting its settings, and looking over his shoulder. By this time, he was the only living gargan-

tuan in sight. All the others were either or had long since retreated by now. He could hear the device crackle and spark to life. It would be an agonizing start for Angelinus if her body were not ready for the amount of energy that was about to surge through her. Unfortunately for her, her screams would mean his success. But something was wrong. She didn't scream. In fact, she showed no reaction to the machine at all. But it shouldn't matter if she were not well rested or fully awake. The Infalion would work on her.

“What?” he screamed, terrified when nothing happened. “Why is it not workin’?”

He searched all over the device. Perhaps there was a switch that he had forgotten in the rush to put her into it. But there was nothing wrong with it. It worked perfectly. Then, he noticed it.

It was a subtle, subtle, thing; a very small detail that even a smaller, human eye may have overlooked. He squinted a few times to be sure of it, but still he could not believe his eyes. He did not even have the time to be completely sure about what he was seeing because the werewolves were almost upon him. Perhaps it was the oversized anatomy of gargantuan eyes that allowed the smallest details to go past them completely unnoticed. He gasped when he realized it. His hands trembling from shock as the balcony began to rattle due to how many werewolves were now storming the grounds. He opened the cage, gazing in.

He could not believe his eyes. This was not Angelinus. This pixie was smaller, and her garb was blue, not green like he remembered it.

He reached, and unlocked her straps, grabbing to get a closer look. And if were that last thing he ever did with all his royalty and power, it would be to tear the wings off of this puny creature and torture her. But something prevented him from doing it. He felt momentarily euphoric and docile. It took him a few seconds before realizing that she had created flutter of pixie dust from above him. As soon as he released her, she flew away into the night.

“Damn you, blasted pixies!” were his last words.

King Akabremnar, leader over the gargantuans of WinDarrow had been eaten alive by the first wave of werewolves that ever made it inside of the WinDarrowan stronghold. What followed would be a massacre unlike anything any race of giants had ever suffered.



Escaping WinDarrow

Much of the sky parlor had fallen on top of them. Only Shallemeign and Ionna stood as he gravitationally blasted the rubble that had fallen around them. Concrete catapulted outwardly in all directions and Shallemeign rose from the debris. He glanced around. The only people he saw was Alvantin, laying on the ground, and Bernarsu who had managed to drag himself to the center of what was left of the parlor. He did not see anyone else, just a single hand poking through the rubble. He could also see some movement in the corner of the chamber. Someone was alive under there.

On the other side of the chamber, Saskia had risen, struggling to remove a massive chunk of the ceiling that had fallen onto her. With the power of the source he moved it away from her, carefully. She was surprised at how, even though he had caused the sky parlor to crumble and nearly lost control of the cradle, Shallemeign still appeared to possess control over it. In fact, seeing as how steadily he had removed the debris away from her, it seemed as if the explosive act had garnered him more control over the cradle than he had before.

“You are still in tune with it?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Even better than before,” he said with a smirk. He looked out of one of the shattered windows just barely catching a glimpse of the last wave of werewolves to infiltrate the palace grounds. Beneath the sound of the building’s brief rumbles, he could also hear the werewolves ravaging through their way through the city, even the very building that they were in. “Come. We are leaving.”

“What about Brog?” asked the vampress. “Where is he?”

Just then, the big brute pushed a series of massive stones and stood, apparently okay. As he gained his already clumsy composure, Shallemeign looked around frantically.

“Shallemeign,” urged Saskia. “We must go.”

“Where is the girl?”

“It does not matter. We now know the spell to open the alchemist map. For what do we need her? We must leave now unless we plan to forsake our own lives.”

“I suppose you are right.”

The building gave another horrible shudder as they crossed what was left of the once elegant sky parlor, exiting through the back entrance. When they stepped out onto the stairway, they could see that the werewolves were in the hall, hundreds of them. Some of them had even started making their way up the banister.

“No!” shouted Saskia in fear.

“Not to worry,” said Shallemeign. “They cannot touch us.”

Manipulating the gravity around them, Shallemeign levitated Saskia, Ionna, Brog, and himself effortlessly over the banister, slowly descending to the ground level inside the main hall. All of the werewolves stopped to look at them, and the ones that had ascended the banister now came back down to attack.

It had been the first time Saskia had ever seen them. She had thought dactyls were vile before but they were nothing like werewolves. They were wild savages who behaved as if their adrenaline in their very blood was on fire. Hundreds of them quickly began to close in on them from all directions.

“Shallemeign,” she said, wondering if she should be frightened yet.

With the power of the cradle, all of the werewolves were thrown back far, some of them kept sailing into the night, others colliding against the walls. Even those farther away that were not immediately affected had still remained, pausing. They were smart enough to fear whatever invisible force their brethren had been struck with. They were all devastated. And as Shallemeign and Saskia made their escape further outside, those werewolves that were not close enough to see the devastation

inside the palace tried to rush them and they were shot by a much more intense thrust of gravity. It was so intense that some of the werewolves that had made it the closest to Shallemeign were completely ripped into pieces. Others had been killed simply due to the concussive force that ripped through them. The blast was so devastating that the remainder of the sky parlor had blasted nearly in half. It gave one last roaring shift and then crumbled to the ground.

“Good bye, Trulaine,” said Shallemeign, looking over his shoulder at the huge cascade of rubble. “Son of Trumandius.”

The sky parlor was composed of seven stories - each one of them nearly fifty feet tall - and they had crashed onto the sixth floor, falling fifty feet with the crene-lated ceiling crashing down with them.

Trulaine had survived the collapse of the sky parlor. He was not so sure about the others. Having a superhuman physique lent him great attributes, but there was only blackness to be seen. Heaving large stones that had fallen on top of him, he dug his way through the rubble, which was now far and wide. Everything from the parlor to the other rooms therein, and the balcony had toppled in a trap of concrete and glass.

He could scarcely hear them. The werewolves. They were all whimpering out outside, perhaps injured by the collapse or by Shallemeign’s gravitational escape, he was sure of it. Whatever the case, he knew that something had slowed them down or else he would not have even had the time to find the members of his company. The werewolves were outside indeed, but as he felt the sullen rain hit his face, he realized that he was outside. Panic settled in and he quickly realized he had to find the others and get away as soon as possible. He heaved his way through the rubble faster than a dozen normal men could, and soon he found them. Luckily they were not dead.

Alvantin had managed to conceal himself and Golondred in a protective shield made of solidified magic. It sparkled before dissipating and the shaman used the

remainder of its energy to thrust what was left of the parlor's ceiling away from them. Brontius raised to his hoofs immediately, his superhuman strength assisting him. He brushed a heap of dirt from his entire body, a process that took longer than the others.

“Where is Maurelan?” asked Trulaine.

“We don't know,” said Golondred. “The pathfinder went after her.”

The sound of the werewolves' whimpering had now subsided, but they still appeared to sound closer than usual. They had stormed the palace grounds, and by now they must have heard Trulaine and his men rumbling around through the upper floors. Faintly they could be heard, coming closer and closer.

“They're coming,” said Trulaine.

With the whip of his hands, Alvantin created a spell that allowed him to see through the rubble. There, in the corner of the building, he could see Bernarsu lying unconscious under a pile of concrete. With the same spell he used to create force fields, he was able to thrust the debris off of them. They all stood over him waiting for some kind of response, but there was none.

“I could not find the others,” said Alvantin.

Trulaine looked down at Bernarsu for a moment.

“Brontius,” he said to the centaur. “Are you strong enough to carry him?”

Without reply, Brontius lifted Bernarsu, while Alvantin and Bernarsu helped sling him across his back.

They could have spent more time looking for Maurelan and Philistian in a prayer that they would still be alive, but there was no time. The werewolves would be upon them any moment now. Besides, he trusted Alvantin's call. If he did not see them with a transparency spell then perhaps they had fallen onto another floor beneath them. It was possible seeing as how half of the sixth floor had been busted through. Trulaine glanced down the hole in the floor and only saw werewolves, and this time, they saw him. No longer confused about where they would

find their next victims, the savages all began to rush up the stairwell, heading for the sixth floor.

Just then Ninsul zipped into the chamber from below, her tiny face riddled with concern.

“We have to get out of here!” she said, her tiny face riddled with concern. “Now!”

“Can you lead us?” Trulaine asked. Without saying a word, she zipped forward, leading them through the hall.

Directly ahead was an exit; the only exit they could escape from. It was one of the hall doors that led to the giant’s bakery. As soon as they rushed in, the smell of fresh bread was in the air. Herbs and spices littered the tables, and cold biscuits littered the large cutting boards.

“Hmm,” said Golondred. “What I would give for just a piece of a good meal.”

“We have no time,” said Brontius, stating the obvious as he passed.

Out of the bakery they ran, through a pantry, through several smoke rooms that displayed massive tubs, through all the myriad of nameless rooms that each held significance for gargantuan royalty. Finally, they made it outside. The fresh night air and the soft pounding of the rain were the only indicators that they had made it outside, for the fear and panic of what was chasing them had only allowed them to heed their surrounding but so much. Trulaine could see the path in front of them, leading off into the forest beyond, marked with cobblestones and carefully placed shrubbery. Before they could head down the path however, their escape had now become completely blocked off. Werewolves had come out of the palace, from the sides, all around them, even from the path in front of them. It was as if Trulaine and his men had run directly into a perfectly timed trap, one that had been set for them long before they had tried to make their escape. They found themselves completely blocked off from going anywhere but through their new enemy, one that had easily outnumbered them.

“Oh no!” cried Ninsul.

“Trulaine,” Golondred called behind him. “If you’ve got a bright idea, now would be a good time.”

“I hate to disappoint you this time Golondred old friend,” said Trulaine. “But I don’t.”

Trulaine glanced over his shoulder at Golondred who stood poised ready for a fight, but the confidence was lacking in the face of his comrade. He didn’t know why he waited until such an outlandish time to notice this, but it seemed as if his old friend had lost a few pounds, a feat no doubt achieved through the rigors of their quest up until this point.

“If we get out of this Trulaine...” Golondred began, half terrified of being eaten alive, and half content with dying with his old friend. “...you owe me more than fifty gold pieces.”

“So I lose either way.”

“If we die, then we both lose.”

“I have no intention of dying today,” said Trulaine. “We’ve come much too far for that.”

There was a moment of silence, and all that could be heard was the savages breathing of the werewolves, the falling rain, and the faint sound of Ninsul’s wings beating together as she carried herself through the air.

The werewolves attacked, and immediately Trulaine heaved himself headstrong into the fray, determined to put up a fight, just as wild and unhinged as the werewolves were. The rigors of all that had happened transformed him into a new warrior, one that Golondred barely recognized as the man he had left Centronus with.

The six of them fought hard. Even Ninsul attacked with concentrated blasts of poisoned pixie dust - a form of protective magic that all pixies had been naturally endowed with - causing each werewolf she struck to pause and whimper, shaking off effects that Trulaine and his men had no concept of. Golondred did the best he could, but knew that he would be overwhelmed soon. Trulaine had to desert his

battle in order to save him a couple times, for the carnage had quickly escalated. Alvantin used a shamanic earth spell, and vines hidden beneath the earth came alive to attack and grab a hold the werewolves' lower limbs, ensnaring them in natural traps. The vines were many and thick like tree trunks, grappling the savages, trying to hold them back. Somehow Brontius had managed to stand his ground, even while Bernarsu was laid across his back, unmoving but somehow still not sliding off. It was a testament to the centaur's unbelievable sense of balance. He was also able to cut down the ones who had been trapped by the vines, making sure there were fresh kills to help even the odds, but there was no evening the odds. There were simply too many werewolves; too many.

Trulaine felt like he were back in the Memradonian fields, but instead of having an entire brigade of armed men at his disposal, he only had a company of four, and instead of a group of shamans being there at his disposal, he only had one. The battle - or the short amount of time they were expected to survive through it - was now waning on them. For the second time since he had fought in those fields, the darkness he had been so fond of forgetting began to come over him as the possibility of certain death settled among them all. The same dark eeriness was ever present, looming over them. And then, something else familiar that he did not expect to happen happened.

There was a shrill and dominating howl that filled the air, and suddenly, they all stopped.

Expecting death to be introduced in the next second, Trulaine realized that the opposite had occurred. They were still alive and most shocking was that they were no longer being attacked. Trulaine found himself with his bloody sword raised and his attackers now backing off.

He looked around. They all looked around, speechless. It was as if he entire world stood still just for the sole purpose of letting them know that they were not dead yet.

“Oooh, look at this,” Golondred whispered lightly in his ear as if another ounce of volume added to his voice would have caused the attack to begin all over

again. “They are backing off again. Just like they did in the Memradonian fields. Looks familiar doesn’t it?”

“It does,” said Trulaine, hardly able to believe his own eyes. “But I have slain no chieftain.”

The silence crept in deeper, the air fermented all around, and the very breath from their lungs seemed to be stolen from them as their dumbfounded stupor increased with tenfold with each passing second. Even the werewolves appeared to be on edge, still growling and snapping at them, waiting for a second opportunity to tear them apart. The suspense was beyond chilling.

Eventually one of the werewolves stepped forth from the back of the throng, shoving aside a crowd of hundreds. Minor scuffles broke out between them as some of the younger, restless, and starving of the savage brethren dared contend with the mighty chief who approached what was left of Trulaine’s company.

A very familiar feeling was beginning to come over Trulaine, and he had been apart of the werewolves’ customs of warfare, and this was unlike his encounter with the Memradonians. But this was a different horde completely and so, perhaps their rules of engagement were different in terms of warfare. He had no idea what to expect, no idea was going on, no idea what to do. All he knew from past experience was that, werewolves typically did not stop a battle unless their chief was willing to challenge their opponent’s leader to a one on one duel. If that were the case - regardless of the fact that Trulaine was now so tired he could barely lift his shield or his sword - then he welcomed the notion. Fighting a single werewolf - even though this particular was one was the biggest he had ever seen - was better than being eaten alive without a hope in the world of surviving this ill-prepared and unexpected encounter.

After being tortured by the power of the cradle, Trulaine was in no condition to continue. Of course the others did not know that. To them, he had always appeared to be able to fight on and on through an entire army, unaided even. That was the perspective he had tried to brand in the minds of his men for too long. But what use was all his great strength if he could barely raise a sword now? At this point, he did not care if his company saw him weak. Perhaps it was a good re-

minder to his men that he could fall...that they could lose at any time. Trulaine was no immortal, and he was not invincible. He could die at any time from wounds that were too extensive. It was good that his company were finally realizing that.

He just stood there, holding an arm that had already been wounded; a deep gash opened his flesh at the shoulder. His leg had also been wounded, and he was not sure if he could even walk properly without limping and showing an abundance of weakness to his domineering opponent.

Their massive chieftain stepped into full view in front of him. This one was taller than the first chief he had slain, and had a jet black fur which was already matted with the blood of giants, with claws and teeth sharper and more jagged than those of any Memradonian he had seen before.

By the gods! Trulaine thought. He is bigger than the last one!

There was a grueling pause as the chief considered him. Trulaine had nothing left, but he means to stare down the chief in bewildered disapproval. That was when he noticed that the chief carried something. His fur was so dark that he barely noticed the brown banner he held in hands that seemed too long to hold banners at all. It was actually more like a long stick with something attached to it; a flag of some sort. It was a torn piece of clothing, and attached to it was something that, to Trulaine's surprise and utter disbelief, looked quite familiar.

It can't be, he thought.

It was his old Centronian emblem, the one he had lost. The last time he had remembered seeing it, the last Memradonian chief had torn it from his shoulder. Now, on another random battlefield so far from the Northern Reaches, it had somehow found itself right back in his presence, in the hands of yet another werewolf chief. But seeing as how it was the same emblem, Trulaine could not help but think that these werewolves - despite being slightly different in appearance, mannerisms, and location - were Memradonian themselves. But perhaps they were not Memradonian. Perhaps they had defeated the Memradonians in battle, taken the emblem, and had raised it for their own flag.

Whatever the case was, the emblem itself must have played a major role in the werewolves sparing their lives, because the new chief glared into Trulaine's eyes intently and then eyed the badge sewn into his shoulder that was identical to the one he carried on the banner. The great chief ripped the emblem from the banner, and shoved into Trulaine's chest right over his new one. If fear hadn't knocked the common sense out of him, Trulaine would have immediately realized what was happening. But it took him a few seconds for it to compute in his mind. It seemed as if they were being pardoned, pardoned because of an emblem. It was proof that he had indeed slain the last Memradonian chief, and this was a great sign of respect to the new one. So great in fact, that the chief showed human courtesy and bowed to Trulaine. It was almost enough to suggest that he had learned proper etiquette from Centronian royalty. The werewolf leader then howled, ear piercingly, and the others followed his lead, howling as well. The cacophony was an eerie mixture that echoed high into the night. And just like that, they were pardoned.

The chief gave him one last glance before turning and darting off into the crowd. The rest of the werewolves followed, and just as quickly as the chase had escalated, all was quiet. Having immediate silence after such chaos was an unsettling concept for Trulaine and his company to digest, but it sunk in quickly. All they intended to do was gain information from the gargantuan king and a few hours later, all of WinDarrow lay in flames and rubble. The sounds of giants - undoubtedly, civilian members of WinDarrow - could still be heard as they scurried through the city, looking for alternate exit routes. A part of Trulaine felt sorry for the giants who had lost everything due to the delusional ambitions of a greedy king, but there was nothing he could do about it. As for the pixies who still dwelled in the underground combs and hives, he did not worry about them.

After meeting their incredibly wise leader, Thristol, Trulaine was confident that they would survive this. Besides, the fairies were too small and far too clever to let this incident affect their citizens. Even still, glancing at the distressed Ninsul fluttering before him, he was concerned.

“Ninsul,” said Trulaine. “Will your people be safe?”

Little Ninsul paused, eyes wide, still shook to the core by what she had just witnessed. No fairy had ever been so close to a werewolf, and she had two such encounters with them in just the past ten minutes. The first was when she acted as a decoy for Angelinus. The second encounter, she had just survived.

“T-they...” she began, speechless, but soon got herself together. “They will be fine. But m-my sister...where...”

“Ninsul!” called a shrill voice, identical to hers.

Her twin sister Ninette zipped up behind them, and immediately, the two inseparable pixies hugged each other.

“Where is lord Thristol?” asked Ninsul.

“I stayed behind to help him gather our people to safety,” said Ninette. “The werewolves cannot harm them in the catacombs.”

“That is good. I’m glad you are safe, sis.”

They all made their way up to the top of the hill, where a spectacular view of the remnants of Windarrow - no matter how much it was already starting to look like a ghost town in ruins - could be seen. Far down near the eastern section of the city, Trulaine had finally caught a glimpse of the great water reserve that had caused the battle in the first place. It was a crystalline oasis, visible and shimmering even under a full moon shrouded in clouds. It was a massive lake - obviously, being the main source of water for an entire province of giants - and deep in the valley where it rested, surrounded by a giant waterfall and many neighboring buildings undoubtedly designed for harvesting water, the werewolves took their delight, hydrating themselves by the gallons and making themselves at home. It was an unfortunate outcome for the once great gargantuan palace, but saving it was not apart of Trulaine’s mandate. Besides, there were much more pressing issues on his mind and many things to discuss with his men. How and where to proceed after this harrowing night, he had no idea. But there was one thing he did know for sure. He had had enough of WinDarrow to last a lifetime.



Epilogue

Trulaine's company retreated into the forested hills, taking refuge in a ditch large enough for all of them to just sit down and try to get some perspective on the situation.

Bernarsu was still knocked out from the collapse of the sky parlor. It wasn't until Brontius laid him in the dirt that he woke up in a rage, swinging wildly, his mind obviously still coming to grips with the fact that they were no longer in the crumbling, WinDarrowan palace.

"Wha-" he began. "What happened?"

"WinDarrow fell," confessed Trulaine.

"Maurelan," Bernarsu called out desperately as he realized that she was not there. "Where is Maurelan?"

"We could not find her, my friend," said Brontius offering a comforting hand for Philistian's shoulder. Sorrow and anguish were clearly visible on the face of Maurelan's bodyguard, but he was a disciplined man, and held his tears at bay.

Bernarsu had known Maurelan since her birth, and Trulaine could not imagine what he had been going through. Losing Maurelan and Philistian were both devastating losses, but they had to keep moving. Trulaine would give them a few minutes, then they had to leave this place far behind.

They all sat in the ditch for a while, completely silent.

"Have ya got it out of ya, lad?" asked Golondred.

Bernarsu said nothing. Nearly ten minutes passed, and no one said a word. Nothing could be said. Although much had happened, everyone's thoughts were still on Maurelan and Philistian. How could they possibly go on without at least knowing for sure if the two of them were dead? If Maurelan truly did perish in WinDarrow, then Bernarsu would surely need proof, and Trulaine already knew he would not continue on without it. It was a tragedy indeed, and the prolonged silence continued to serve as a reminder of just that. The mood among them was so gloom that they barely noticed the shadow approaching their ditch from behind.

"I'm a pathfinder, not a psychic," said Philistian walking up the hill. "You didn't leave much of a trail for us to follow."

He stood there in the moonlight, holding Maurelan in his arms. She was alive, still unconscious, but alive. Bernarsu was the first to approach her as Philistian laid her on the ground. Her childhood companion hugged her, tears streaming down his face.

"Is she..." began Bernarsu, unable to finish his sentence. He checked her body for wounds.

"She will be fine," said Philistian with a solemn look on his face. "She was hit pretty hard, but she will be fine."

Trulaine was more than pleased to see now that they had all made it out alive. He had gained a new respect for Philistian. Despite all the trouble he had put them through, the pathfinder had saved their company, had saved Maurelan, and was still willing to aid them in the perilous quest to come.

"Glad you finally decided to join us," said Trulaine.

"Well, if I let you amateurs run off on your own without me, then who will be there to make sure you don't get yourselves killed?" Philistian smirked sarcastically.

The ditch became their home for the next twenty minutes – although they did not want to stay long in fear of another confrontation with the werewolves. They started a fire but kept it low. They needed to discuss what had just happened before they could move on, and how they would cover their tracks.

“So what was he after, lass?” inquired Golondred. “That chain you been carryin’?”

Maurelan only shook her head solemnly.

“And you opened it. Great job, lass.”

“She had no choice,” said Bernarsu. “He would have killed Brontius.”

“But I don’t understand,” Alvantin perked up. “He already had it in his possession.”

“He couldn’t open it,” said Maurelan, and an awkward silence followed.

“I reckon,” said Golondred. “That’s why he captured us in the first place.”

“It was a spell,” said Trulaine. “One that only she knew. Shallemeign wasn’t after the vessel at all. He just wants to find the cradles of creation, that is his aim. And once he has done that, he will be far more powerful than he already is.”

“Infinitely more powerful,” said Alvantin.

“Possibly on a cosmic scale.”

“Well he has to be stopped of course,” demanded Golondred.

“He will, but we have bigger things to worry about.”

“Bigger? What could be bigger?”

“The very thing that we came out here for. We have to find the other sourcekeys.”

“Well how many of them are there, damned it?”

“I do not know...but we are getting closer to achieving our goal.”

“So,” said Brontius. “Now that we are out here, did we accomplish anything?”

“Yes,” Alvantin inquired. “What about the vessel? Was lord Thristol able to tell you something useful?”

“Yeah?” blared Golondred, staring at Trulaine with an angry expression. “Ya’ve nearly gotten me killed twelve goddamn times!” He now rose up and got close to Trulaine. “You nearly got all of us killed!”

“It was not Trulaine fault,” said Brontius in Trulaine’s defense. “No one knew that king would betray us, or that the warlord would arrive, or that the ceiling would collapse.”

“Shut up centaur,” Golondred snapped, then turned back to Trulaine. “You’ve endangered us all.”

“Endangerment was a risk you all agreed to take,” said Trulaine, defending his plight against the last person he expected to defend it against. “I did what I could. We all did. But we are still here. And it is up to us to see this through.”

“And how is that?” asked Alvantin. “We don’t even have the vessel.”

“Ah,” Ninette interrupted. “That’s where you’re wrong.”

The purple-clad pixie flew over towards Trulaine.

“We do have the vessel,” said Trulaine.

He reached for the small, round object on his hip, attached to his belt.

“Hey,” said Golondred. “I remember seein’ you with that on the way out. That can’t be the vessel, can it? I thought it would be somethin’ much bigger than that.”

He ruffled his shoulders, giving Trulaine a look as if deep down he had immediately forgiven him. He dropped his jaw in shock, and glanced over at Brontius.

“My apologies, Brontius,” he said quickly. “I’m a little rattled is all, and I’ve had my fill of damned werewolves.”

“You are not the only one,” said Brontius.

“So what is it?” Alvantin inquired. “It looks like a sea shell of some sort.”

“It is much more than a sea shell,” said Trulaine.

With a slight twist, he released a small lock on the inside of the object and it opened up. Inside was a small person with wings; a pixie with wings. She was slightly bigger than the twins, Ninsul and Ninette, and lay comfortably, sleeping soundly.

“The sleeping savior?” said Brontius in awe.

“Angelinus,” said Trulaine.

“She is the vessel of light?” marveled Alvantin.

Trulaine nodded his head in approval.

“I thought it might be the Infalion,” he said, looking down in his hands at the tiny casing in which Angelinus dozed peacefully.

“Well this is becoming more and more bizarre by the minute!” yelled Golondred.

Trulaine shushed him.

“So she’s one of the keys? One of the sources?”

“Yes,” said Trulaine. “And I know where to find the next one.”

“Where?”

“The underworld of Lez A Goria.”

There were gasps among all of them. Even Philistian glanced up at mention of the place.

“You will die there,” said the pathfinder with the most serious face he could express with. “No man who has traveled there has ever made it out. You thought retrieving the vessel from the gargantuan stronghold was a difficult task?”

He laughed. The sudden shift from his once solemn behavior was disturbing, but Trulaine ignored it.

The rest of them marveled at the small pixie inside the casing. So it was a member of the pixie races after all that been the savior of the world. The legends were

actually true; legends that they all figured were just made up visions of elders who had left this earth long ago.

The sleeping savior. She continued resting, unaware of them, not a stir in sight.

Trulaine closed the case and strapped it back to his hip.

“Come,” he said. “We now must find the underworld.

With that he headed off through the brush as the first shreds of morning sunlight could barely be seen moving into the view along the sky. They followed behind him. He looked over his shoulder and could see that Philistian was the last to move on, still glancing in the direction of WinDarrow.

As they headed farther into the vast unknown, questions ran wildly through Trulaine’s mind. If Shallemeign were able to locate all of the cradles, just how powerful of a threat would he be? Then there was the fountain of enchantment. It was undoubtedly the sum of all his fears, mingling in the back of his mind. How much time did they have to right a million wrongs? Would they travel to the ends of the earth just to come back and watch it collapse upon itself? Would he be doomed to spend his last moments watching a world that he could have saved be ripped apart? Would he even find the underworld? If it was as dangerous as Philistian said it was then they would not even make it back to immobilize the fountain of enchantment even if they did find the next source.

Then there was the vessel of light; a mortal being whom Trulaine had attached to his waist. Never in a million years would he imagine that one of the sourcekeys would be a living person. Her life in fact was proof of the prophecy, and if that prophecy really were true, alive and breathing as he now traveled with her, then what were the possibilities of the influence that the divine truly had on mankind? Angelinus was perhaps the greatest marvel the world had ever seen since the fountain of enchantment itself, and she alone held the true mysteries of magic, humanity, and the spirit world all locked up inside of her. Trulaine knew that he was dealing with magic beyond his understanding, but to have it explained to him made him truly realize the magnitude of it.

His final and perhaps most perplexing question – deep in the back of his mind - shifted toward the woman in the gray dress. It was as if she had never existed at all; just a ghost created to haunt Trulaine’s mind until the end of time. Perhaps she was. Now, the thought of her had brought up far more questions than it had answered. Was the woman really Ionna? How did she survive all those years ago when he watched her die? How was her time in captivity spent? And how did she end up in Shallemeign’s possession, mindless and soulless with a zombie’s stare? There were so many things tormenting his mind, and all he had to lean on was a harrowing mission that continued to get worse by the day.

He wished he were back home with his beloved Deneaden. But he could not go back, because they were already out here and if there was a way to retrieve the next source then he was willing to continue. He just prayed to the gods that the worst was behind them. With all his heart, he prayed.