

Valentina Massano

ELANTION

The Scion, the Vagabond and the Rebel



Book One



Valentina Massano

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Elantion – The Scion, the Vagabond and the Rebel:

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Аннотация

The world of Elantion is once again invaded by ancient, otherworldly enemies. After two years of warfare, the Draelia Monarchy is the most devastated among the lands. Cities and villages lie in ruins; there are no longer any humans, elves, or dwarves—there are only the Tulvar. The thousands of surviving humans have fled, finding refuge in the elven realm of Elelreel, which is protected by both mountain ranges and powerful elven magic. Meanwhile, the dwarves have erected a wall to defend their Plateau, and with the spread of the tragic news, the Southern Principalities have also constructed formidable defenses.

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the tragic news, the Southern Principalities have also constructed formidable defenses. The story begins when Kaj, a human refugee in Elelreel, meets Clarice, a wandering elf, and Oloice, a dwarf from Tetirstad. Kaj's life takes yet another radical turn, as together they will set off on a journey that will see them rediscover past events, and force them to face their fears and prejudices. Led by their adventures to the territories devastated by the enemy, they will learn that not everything is as lost as it seems, and that the invaders can still be defeated.

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**Original title: Elantion: il
Discendente, l'Errante e la Ribelle**

Translated by: Giuseppe di Martino

Elantion – The Scion, the Vagabond, and the Rebel
Book One

Text and illustrations

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This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, and events are products of the author's imagination. Any reference to real people or events is purely coincidental.

Dedicated to my husband Riccardo, for being the first to believe in this project, and to Monica, for her sincere

friendship, and for all the invaluable advice and help she has so graciously provided me.

MAP OF DRAELIA

THE FROSTLANDS



FOREWORD

The story you are about to read was born by chance, inspired by my great passion for video games and the fantasy genre

This adventure has been long, exhilarating, and satisfying, but also difficult and often disheartening. I had fun drawing the map of this world, imagining the paths my characters would tread, and I enjoyed sketching their faces on a simple notepad to make them more “real.”

As the story evolved, and my ideas really started to take shape, it all became easier from there. I was always accompanied by my old iPod, and by the amazing music of Wardruna, which were the only things that allowed me to focus during the drafting and creation of this “universe” of mine.

Since this is the first in a series of books, I decided to indulge in a long prologue that will explain some of the various quirks of this new world.

I am open to your criticisms and advice, and I hope you enjoy reading my work.

—Valentina

CHARACTERS

HUMANS

Kaj Holden: the Scion, the descendant of Aidan III.

Efren Melvin: illusionist mage of Olennon.

Byron Gardrick “the Inexhaustible” or “Five Fingers”:

Captain of the Army of the King of Draelia, Osman IV, until his forces were defeated.

Arvid Brownbear: Chieftain of the Brownbear Clan and of Rimetooth, and Hormarg’s father.

Hormarg Brownbear: Arvid’s son.

Gerd: Arvid’s maid.

Corald II “the Castigator”: King of Draelia from 287 to 308 F.R., known for his Purge of Olennon.

Osman IV “the White-Haired”: Last King of Draelia, reigning from 308 to 324 F.R., and often called “the White-Haired” due to the hair color he possessed from a young age.

Gwen I “the Wise”: Queen from 126 to 144 F.R., when she abdicated. The last sovereign of the realm to be remembered as a descendant of Aidan III.

Eirik II “the Incompetent”: Gwen’s brother, and King from 144 to 148 F.R.

Aidan III “the Peacemaker”: King of many virtues, chiefly remembered for the Great Reconciliation.

Kendrick: mage of the Fellowship of the Veil.

Vernon Davey: Lord of the Snowbay.

Jorgen: a capable warrior, and Vernon’s right hand.

Ellen: the last living Archmage of Olennon.

ELVES

Clarice “the Vagabond”: a travel companion of Kaj’s.

Cilna: Kaj’s friend, and a young lady elf.

Yenven Hushblade: King of the Elves, and the latest in a long dynasty.

Ireid “of the Furrowed Brow”: Counselor to the King of the Elves.

Fanyr Alatin: General of the Elven Army, and a trusted friend of the King’s.

Atraed Talril: Captain of the Nidath City Guard.

Gihnaan Taleln: nobleman of Nidath, and the scion of the Taleln family, an eternal rival of the Hushblades.

Radris Taleln: Gihnaan’s uncle.

Sandeir: keeper of the Esyrel tavern.

Tilwen “the Learned”: Supreme Druidess of the Sacred Druidic Circle.

Fyar and Nelieth: High Druids of the Sacred Druidic Circle.

Dolost: High Druid during the era of the Second Tulvaren

Invasion, and creator of the Key.

DWARVES

The Boldaxe Clan

Oloice Calrek “the Braggart”: youngest in his family, a brave warrior, and a good friend of Clarice’s.

Dreyn Calrek “the Irascible”: Oloice’s older brother.

Odrig “Goldfinger” Skàg: sole heir of the Skàg Family, and the man who administers the Clan’s income.

Kalborg Bator: second-born of the Bator Family, and the man who oversees the Clan’s political matters.

Oran Bator: firstborn, and Kalborg’s brother. He serves on the Council as an old member, and he is a connoisseur of dwarven traditions.

The Goldhammer Clan

Rargon “Ironfist” Tasild: King of Tetirstad.

Aglas Tasild: the King’s sister, and current Regent of the throne.

Rahla Tachros: representative of one of Tetirstad’s most prominent families, and known for her leadership skills and rebellious nature.

The Ironmaul Clan

Baslic “the Turncoat” Jokun: head of the Jokun Family and of the Ironmaul Clan.

Hisel Jokun: Baslic’s wife, and manager of the Clan’s affairs.

Hrig “the Spineless” Jokun: Baslic and Hisel’s sole son, known for his lack of importance.

The Slums

Daryk: disowned by his family, he is now the leader of the criminals in the Slums.

Big Ear: the name everyone knows him by. One of the most cunning and treacherous dwarves in the district.

Culun: one of the dwarves in Daryk’s gang.

TULVARS

The House of Khelun

Athal Khelun: King of the Tulvars, Conqueror of Elantion, Commander of the Royal Guard, and head of House Khelun.

Zund Khelun: firstborn, Crown Prince, and General of the Draelian Campaign, as well as Commander of the Black Guard.

Sheera Khelun: second-born, and Commander of the Violet Archers.

Ziglan Khelun: third-born, and Commander of the Ragers.

Auril Khelun: fourth-born, and priestess of the goddess Th'ta.

Ramil Khelun: fifth and last of the royal progeny, and Commander of the Heavy Cavalry.

The House of Urgal-Khun

Yvalee Urgal-Khun: High Priestess, the King's wife, and mother of the royal progeny, as well as an outstanding representative of House Urgal-Khun, the perpetual right hand of the Khelun.

Kyon Urgal-Khun: head of the House, and Yvalee's cousin. Commander of the infantry legions.

Enetor Urgal-Khun: Kyon's brother and Yvalee's cousin; on the surface, he deals with the thorniest issues in support of the King, but he is capitalizing on his vast spy network.

The House of Irbhun

Lokle Irbhun: head of the House, Commander of the army's heavy forces, and loyal follower of Zund.

Rerik Irbhun: Lokle's brother, and an excellent trader.

Deelnat Irbhun: Lokle's daughter and Rerik's niece.

Belal Irbhun: King of the Tulvares who led the army tulvaren during the Second Tulvaren Invasion of Elantion.

The House of Naled

Darno Naled: head of the House, and Zler's father.

Zler Naled: Darno's son, and Commander of the army's archer regiment.

The House of Turag-Khalin

Terke Turag-Khalin: head of the House, and Commander of the cavalry regiments.

Datnu Turag-Khalin: Terke's niece, killed by Enetor to safeguard the rise of the rebellion.

Others

Lyrus: Supreme Necromancer, and the oldest of all.

Snort: an uggar working for Lyrus.

Radash: a resva that has climbed up the ranks, becoming Captain of a group of soldiers loyal to Enetor.

Rodvar: a resva chosen by Zund to captain the Black Guard.

THE OLD AND NEW CALENDARS

“...The Battle of the Brushwood Plains signaled the end of the Invasion, but all the Monarchs witnessed, upon returning to their

realms, were death and ruin. The Great Reconciliation marked a crucial moment in history—most especially the tragic point in time during which it was signed. The document was prepared with expertise, and endorsed by all of the Monarchs of Elantion. That happening, so pivotal and without precedent across the millennia, was to be the turning point, and so the beginning of a new calendar was declared. The following year would not be called 1062, but rather Year Zero ‘F.R.’ (“Following the Reconciliation”). All of the prior years were now labeled ‘B.R.’ (“Before the Reconciliation”).”

Excerpted from the tuecan manuscript, “Chronicles of an Invasion,” written by Master Xuapan.

The Old Calendar

611 B.R.: the First Tulvaren Invasion.

1056 B.R.: Aidan III’s coronation as King of Draelia.

1059 B.R.: the Second Tulvaren Invasion.

1061 B.R.: the Great Reconciliation between humans, elves, and dwarves.

The New Calendar

Anno 1 F.R.: the Order of Masters splits into the High Order of Magic and Alchemy, and the Symeris Order of Arcane Scholars.

51 F.R.: Aidan III's death.

126 F.R.: Gwen I the Wise's ascension to the throne.

304 F.R.: the Year of Penance against the mages of Olennon,
courtesy of King Corald II of Draelia.

The summer of 324 F.R.: the Third Tolvaren Invasion.

PROLOGUE

1

Nemnairil

As the Peoples believed, Nemnairil was the abyss in which the worlds of Elantion, Tesgaran, Lysirdor and Alceas floated. It was a dark dimension, stretching infinitely in all directions, and was shaped by the First Goddess, Tak'Rah, at the genesis of time.

These worlds had been shaped over many eras by the Six Titans, spawn of the First Goddess—Isevir, Nobar, Selfe, Kedal, Elatenn, and Odnir, each dominated by primordial forces. Upon them, the pantheon and their offspring gave shape to the progenitors of each of the Peoples. The dwarves derived from Tesgaran, the elves from Elantion, and the humans from Lysirdor.

And above it all, hidden from view by the Plane of Judgment where the souls of the dead were appraised, Oldenheim was given shape. This was where the pantheon settled after leaving the Peoples to their own devices. In Oldenheim, the passage of time lost all meaning, and it was to Oldenheim that the souls of

the meritorious earned access. Below it all, the Great Void was formed, where those damned and excluded by the Realm of the Gods were cast for eternity.

2

Tesgaran, Lysirdor, and Elantion

Tesgaran, (which meant “Realm of Rock” in Old Dwarvish), was the home of the dwarves and the trolls. It was a cold and rocky world, constantly covered by clouds and swept by blizzards. Its mountains towered high into the skies, interspersed by deep canyons.

The dwarves, stocky and muscular from the outset, were skilled miners, and unmatched when it came to identifying precious metals and gems. They dug tunnels, cities, and mines in the depths of Tesgaran. The fires of the grand forges allowed them to craft any weapon or object.

The trolls, who were much taller than the dwarves, sported long arms, huge hands, and grey stone-hue skin. They dwelt upon the surface of Tesgaran, and they discovered that in some areas, the heat generated by the dwarves’ underground forges had melted the perennial ice, enabling flora and fauna to proliferate. So they decided to found their villages there, giving rise to a tribal

civilization.

The two Peoples soon realized they needed each other's skills to survive. While the trolls ensured the dwarves access to food, skins, fabrics, furnishings, and medicinal herbs, the dwarves could offer them weapons, armor, work tools, gold and silver artifacts, and jewels and gems of any shape and shade.

Lysirdor simply meant "Lands of the Humans." A world with a mild, sunny climate, covered with vegetation and populated by animals of all shapes and sizes, humans thrived by building cities everywhere, dividing into disparate cultures. The Seafarer Humans inhabited the islands and coasts, their skin turning darker and their stature shorter with the passing of generations. They were traders of pottery, as well as fish and other fruits of the seas. Near their cities bordering the plains, weavers prospered. They were excellent shipwrights, and expert navigators.

The Plainswalker Humans settled in the large and vast grasslands of *Lysirdor*. Their temperate climate allowed the Plainswalkers to be skilled farmers, and breeders of some renown. They made a living selling the yields of the land, and soon garnered fame for their high-quality milk- and meat-derived products, such as cheeses and hams.

The Humans of the North settled in the frigid climate amidst mountains, fjords, and forests. They were hunters and shepherds. (They were also growers, albeit with little to show for their efforts.) Their main wares were leather, objects fashioned from

bones and horns, and gold and silver artifacts of exquisite make. They became experts in the forging of weapons and in the production of woolen fabrics.

These diverse cultures did not always live in complete harmony, and many a battle was sparked over the years. Their gods took a liking to their desire to assert themselves and fight, so they decided to ascend, and let them live by their own power. However, the gods also loved all manner of vice, and before long they took to lying with men and women, siring demigods who engendered bloodlines endowed with magical powers.

Elantion, which meant “Abode of the Elves” in Ancient Elvish, was unsurprisingly the home of the elves.

According to legend, this world was the first to be created, just as the elves were the first of the sons of the divine. The Elantion of today was the result of a whirlwind chain of events unfolding over the millennia that compelled the elves to learn to live with humans and dwarves from the time of the Great Exodus onward.

The vast and bountiful territory of this world was divided into two massive continents, Vestur in west and Austur in the east, permitting the elves—originally a single sizeable People—to split into three different groups. The nalnirs remained the same as the First Elves, and inhabited the forests of Draelia and of Sahelica in Vestur. Their rosy skin could take on green hues when they were deep in the verdure, and their yellow eyes allowed them to ascertain everything, even within the thick undergrowth. There

were also the essenirs, the ice-elves, who lived in Austur's coldest regions. Their skin turned quite pale indeed, much like their hair, and their eyes were blue or purple. Finally, there were the denennirs, the desert-elves, who populated the most arid areas of Vestur, called the Desolate Sands. Their skin darkened with the passing of generations, along with their eyes and hair. They were always the most insular and narrow-minded, and they tended not to distance themselves from their desert home.

The sheer expanse of the territories of Elantion and the powerful elven magic that permeated the ancient world allowed other races to grow and prosper as well. In the canyon adjacent to the Desolate Sands settled the fashratas, a reserved and timorous population of anthropomorphic foxes, while in the high impassable mountains of Darish south of Vestur dwelt the mysterious tuecas, anthropomorphic falcons with astonishing abilities. In Austur's far southeast corner lay the vast land of Eborian, (whose name meant "the Dragon Plateau" in Draconic), where these legendary creatures resided since time immemorial.

Tesgaran, Lysirdor, and Elantion coexisted in peace and prosperity for many years. Dwarves, humans, and elves lived out their daily lives alongside the gods in their respective worlds, and all was well. The giantess Th'ta, unknown even to the gods and born of Odnir on the forgotten and far-off world of Alceas (which was peopled by a lineage that was also unknown),

unleashed the ire of her children on the three worlds that blocked her entry. And the titans' attack spawned utter chaos.

Karak the Shrill shook the depths of Tesgaran with her voice, triggering the collapse of the dwarven cities and tunnels. Atasin the Souleater enveloped Lysirdor with his death aura, sucking the life force out of his victims. Vidan the Wicked released plagues upon Elantion, killing countless scores of elves in the throes of atrocious suffering.

Lysirdor and Tesgaran were devastated by the titans' overwhelming might, and humans, dwarves, and trolls were permitted to leave their abodes and share the world of Elantion with the native elves. Following the Great Exodus, the new Peoples kept spreading out, and the progressive abandonment of some areas by the elves made their magic inexorably weaken in those territories. Human communities flourished, but were soon marked by strife and civil war.

The trolls traveled to Elantion's far north, and disappeared into the immense and barren Frostlands, causing Elantion to forget about their presence for many an age. The dwarves took possession of the Celestial Summits, rich as they were in minerals and precious stones. In so doing, they flouted the elves' imposition to go further north, which only made the balance established between their two Peoples all the more precarious.

Alceas

Alceas was the last world of Nemnairil, forever isolated on the edge of the abyss, and unremembered by all. It originally became the home of the titan Odnir, after he was driven away by the First Goddess on account of the schemes and tricks he perpetrated at the expense of the gods and the other titans. Tak'Rah, the First Goddess, wrapped Alceas in a veil so that it remained isolated from the other worlds.

Odnir, a titan of elemental shadow, and one dominated by primordial darkness, created a companion for himself by the name of Th'ta. She was the utmost shadow, infinitely evil and bereft of scruples. The two titans gave birth to Atasin, Karak, and Vidan, each as dark and as ruthless as them.

The tulvars lived on Alceas, and they were the only race who recalled their creation (at Th'ta's hands). Different from humans, dwarves, and elves, they were fashioned to be superior. Their civilization hinged on the worship of Th'ta, who turned from a titan to their sole deity. The chronicles of these millennia were written and preserved in the Th'ta Temple, located on the Goddess's Isle, where she died. It consisted of a mound of black

earth bordered by three large teeth of rock. The High Priestess and the Minor Priestesses lived inside the Temple, which was also where female tulvaren nobles spent their days serving the Goddess and learned to interpret the messages in the shadows Th'ta sent them.

As the tulvars were a warrior race, their whole society was pervaded by a militaristic culture centered on discipline and rigor. The populace was guided by a king who dealt with matters military and material. All the sons of the noble Houses were enrolled at age six and sent to the camps. Upon their thirteenth year, they were categorized by skill and sent to complete their training as infantry, archers, or knights. Those who developed magical abilities left the fields to join the Sorcerer Caste and become necromancers or seers. The former could summon spirits and bend life and death to their will. The latter took on an important task through their power of Sight, enabling them to plot the course of events. Their duty was to check on the Veil and inform the priestesses of any alterations.

As for the daughters of nobility, they were obligated to serve as priestesses, although they did have the right to flex their will and go down the martial path. It was exceedingly rare for a young female noble to choose the harsh life in the training camps as opposed to the comforts of the Temple, and when it did come to pass, the female in question had a much tougher path ahead of her, as no one would teach her how to harness her powers, instead leaving her to learn by herself. These tulvaren women

were dubbed Ivetis, and forced to live isolated and forgotten until they proved able to wield their power, thereby demonstrating that they had already developed some measure of military prowess. Only then could they access the training camps for archers, warriors, or knights.

After the King of Alceas and the High Priestess came the Supreme Necromancer, the Archons of the various Houses, and other nobles who were the Commanders of the Legions. The rest of the population was made up of resvas, or the commoners. They were the peasants, the craftspeople, and the merchants, and they, too, were trained in special military camps, forming the backbone of the army. The lowest caste constituted the uggars, or the slaves, which were tulvars quite different from the others. As this was a very rigid society, all those who showed unique characteristics at birth were locked up in what were called ranches. They were short in stature, puny with pinkish-pale skin; the normally red eyes of their race were rounder than usual, and completely black. Moreover, their foreheads were characterized by wrinkles. They were compelled to shave their hair and wear collars that underscored their condition. Raised as slaves, and indoctrinated into complete subjugation, they were given all the hardest tasks, and repaid only with scarce portions of food served in a large common dish on which they all threw themselves to snatch as much as possible. Obviously, mating between uggars was encouraged—their frequent deaths

due to accidents, malnutrition and disease necessitated ever higher numbers of slaves.

The world the tulvars inhabited was arid and gloomy, and always under cloud cover. The few points of elevation had been eroded by the heavy sand-laden winds that, over thousands of years, shaped the mountains into spurs. The tulvars learned to live with the extreme climate of their world by building massive stone cities capable of withstanding sudden sandstorms, as well as the torrential rains, which washed over Alceas once per year for a whole week. They learned, too, how to take advantage of these rains by collecting the water in large tanks and using it in small doses to irrigate the fields. As the generations passed, they grew weary of needing to hunt for fresh meat, and managed to breed some animals suited for this purpose. Some of them, such as minor and major hedgots, also became valuable heavy forces in their army. Hedgots were a kind of lizard; the lesser ones were used for their leathery skin (which was a fundamental ingredient of excellent armor), and they also were employed as assault beasts during conflicts. The largest hedgots, much bigger and rarer, acted as mounts for the Commanders. Another species that was very significant was the harpy. Harpies were animals with four legs, similar to those of hawks—clawed, and as hairless as their heads. Their wings were equipped with sturdy feathers and their skeletally gaunt bodies were covered with bristly hair. Their beaks, reminiscent of eagles', were curved, pointed, and hefty,

and they were lined with small teeth. After the First Invasion, they also spread across Elantion. The prairie harpies were small in size, about as tall as a dwarf, while the mountain harpies were as big as horses and mounted as steeds, but they were later abandoned in favor of the hedgots because of their wild and untamable disposition.

The already considerable might of the tulvars was rendered even more formidable by the use of the crystals that they discovered in the subsoil Alceas, and watched over in countless mines. They came to know that if each of them carried a fragment with them, they could both bolster their physical capabilities and greatly enhance their magic. The mine tunnels were teeming with uggars that mined and transported heavy crates, always watched by strict guards armed with whips and rods.

The Priestesses were determined to find out how much power the crystals concealed. Soon, with their accumulation in the Temple on the Goddess's Isle, the High Priestess noticed strange flashes that appeared on Th'ta's grave and connected the three prongs of rock that marked its boundaries. She began to visit the place assiduously, and her Sight observed a luminous fissure floating in midair at the Grave's exact center. Over time, more crystals were brought to the Temple, and the fissure expanded. When one of the seers apprised the High Priestess that the Veil had never been weaker, she once again took notice of the fissure, seeing a green plain on the other side, belonging to another

world. The portal would allow them to avenge Th'ta's death by conquering and pillaging. Thus began the preparations that led to the First Tulvaren Invasion of Elantion. Fortunately for the inhabitants of Elantion, elven magic was still so strong that the invaders were sent back to their world within a few hours. Th'ta's wrath was irrepressible, and she conferred even more power upon her priestesses before she returned to her slumber.

A long time passed, during which the tulvars became increasingly powerful and resistant to elven magic. The Second Invasion's impact on Elantion was devastating; the power of the High Priestess and the knowledge of the Necromancers opened secondary portals, one in the south of Vestur and two in Austur, which forced the elves, humans, and dwarves of all Elantion to unite against the invaders. They did unite, and after they neutralized the portals, only the cunning of the Monarchs of the time managed to close the main portal and defeat the invaders by means of a spell, driving the whole army back to Alceas. After the Second Invasion ended in yet another defeat, the Goddess chose a new High Priestess, consecrated via a spectacular and terrible ritual that made her much stronger than all her predecessors. Below is an excerpt from a manuscript which recounted the solemnity of the moment:

“...When the fissure closed, the Goddess's Grave began to tremble. Never-before-seen symbols shone bright and red upon the three rocks, and the High Priestess came forward. When she

crossed the edge of the grave, a spiral of black earth lifted her into the air, suspending her at the center of the three rocks amidst flashes of light all around. The Priestess passed out, and a violent wave of shadows came out of the Grave, entering her body. The priestess woke up, and her red eyes throbbed with a bright light, turning white and opaque. The same three symbols as on the rocks appeared on her back, enclosed in a cartouche. Her veins turned black. Her mind now swirled with the knowledge of all of Nemnairil. She gained untold power; no longer did she interpret the will of the Goddess. Instead, she was part Goddess herself, and represented her in all respects.”

From that point on, tulvaren society was transformed. The High Priestess crowned new Kings, and it was she who possessed the power to preside over all matters magical and spiritual.

I

Spur Valley, Draelia, in the summer of 324 F.R.

Summer was at hand, bringing with it clear skies and the heat that had been yearned for all throughout the lengthy winter. The warm winds carried a thousand floral fragrances to every corner of Draelia, while the orchards of the Savorfruit Plains offered bountiful cherries and plums prime for the picking. The fields were plowed to be sown, and the wheat was growing hearty and strong, to reach full maturity at summer's end, when it would be harvested.

The cattle were freed in their pastures, and in their daily lives; following a strangely cold spring, they were grazing with a vengeance. The woods and forests were filled with the cheerful chirping of birds, along with an abundance of rodents and other small creatures. In the highlands, ibexes and roe deer climbed up onto unbelievably precarious rocky walls in search of the tastiest sprout. Winter's all too ample snowfall continued to adorn the tallest peaks, whipped by the winds that blew through the mountain valleys. These gales were still quite cold, owing precisely to that mantle of pure white.

Spur Valley, a mountain valley characteristic of the Rugged Range, was crossed by a stream, and by the road that followed the stream's course. The spruce woods made the area a favorite

destination of the lumberjacks residing in the villages scattered throughout the valley, as well as of those who hailed from nearby regions. The relatively light wood of those spruces dried easily, and released a great deal of heat when burned, making it ideal kindling for warming up houses.

At the bottom of the valley, the road that ran along the mountain wall forked, and that last tract led to a hidden plateau. On the way down, one could lay their eyes on a building covered by a large dome, which was an unusual sight for such a place. Its stone construction clashed with its surroundings, and a sinister atmosphere suffused it. It served as the refuge of a substantial group of mages who had broken away from Draelia's High Order of Magic and Alchemy, and proclaimed themselves the Fellowship of the Veil, several years after the Great Reconciliation.

More than two centuries had passed since the discovery of a mine full of peculiar never-before-seen green crystals. Disputes arose between the High Order of Magic and Alchemy, and the Symeris Order of Arcane Scholars, as both wanted to take credit for discovering their qualities. The crystals were carefully extracted in small quantities, and the mages devoted themselves to their study. Yet they soon encountered serious difficulties, and at a certain point, all of the mages who had busied themselves examining these crystalline formations began to exhibit madness and paranoia, prompting the High Order to suspend their investigations. The Archmages limited access

to the extraction chamber by casting an illusion spell, and by stationing a guardian golem that would take form from the rock and dust should anyone tread upon the magic glyphs.

That being said, some stubborn mages of noteworthy talent managed to avoid the glyphs and sneak into the mine, so as to continue extracting the crystals. They started gathering in secret to study the stones' bizarre properties. Many succumbed to madness and death, but through their sacrifices, the mages came to understand how the crystals worked. The Fellowship of the Veil was formed in that period, and remained hidden and forgotten for a long time. Not even the Archmages of Olennon remembered them.

The mages of the Fellowship discovered that the crystals had to be stabilized before they could be used, feeding each of them with a person's life essence. A large quantity of stabilized crystals, when gathered in the same place, would begin to form small temporal distortions. Before long, the mages realized that those small, floating rifts of light were slowly growing, and that strange whispers were coming from the other side. The voices became more and more substantial, and echoed in the minds of the mages, addicting and enslaving them to the whispers. They became unable to perform the simplest of tasks without receiving their instructions. The Priestesses, guided by the potent Sight of the seers and the High Priestess, directed those mages to commit heinous acts, including atrocious murders. They taught the mages the perfect ritual to feed the crystals, and helped them choose the

perfect victims. Quite often, these poor unfortunate souls ended up being children up to fifteen years old, as they were considered the purest fuel.

After more than a century, the ever-increasing number of crystals had transformed those rifts into a huge portal, beyond which Fellowship mages could view an arid, foggy world of grey.

At the same time, on Alceas (the other side of the portal), the tulvaren legions were ready to cross the threshold into Elantion for the third time. King Athal waited to receive the latest news from his Commanders, surrounded by all his stern and fearsome family members. As soon as everything was ready, Athal spurred his horse, and the horns sounded the advance. The immense column of soldiers generated a deafening din as they marched. It was a warm and clear June day on Elantion, very different from the smoky and gloomy Alceas. Athal passed through the portal, and his horse's hooves tread upon the stone-slab floor of the Fellowship temple. The Third Tulvaren Invasion of Elantion had commenced.

II

Deryel, Draelia, in the autumn of 326 F.R

An unexpectedly cold autumn had come to Draelia, on the heels of an oddly hot summer, as though the seasons themselves were affected by the tragic events that gripped the world. The sky grew more leaden with time, and frigid air lashed every corner. In some areas, the fog was thick, and in others, the rain gave no respite. But apart from the tulvaren army, there was no longer anyone beyond the boundaries of Elelreel—neither human, nor elf, nor dwarf. Two and a half years after the invasion was initiated, not much was left of the Monarchy of Draelia; all that remained were the few strongholds and cities that the tulvars rebuilt after destroying. The divine powers of King Athal, of his Commanders, and of the High Priestess had helped them stand victorious.

In those days, the tulvar Sheera Khelun, Commander of the Violet Archers and royal daughter, rode her dappled grey horse (a large and inexhaustible steed, and her companion on many journeys) toward the village of Deryel, situated at the mouth of the winding Spur Valley. The emblem of the House of Khelun, a black flame on a red background, which she had embroidered on her cloak and engraved on the leather of her armor, made

her immediately recognizable. Her helm, which sported a long black horsetail, was symbolic of her title as Commander, and the meticulous finishes on her armor affirmed her royal lineage. Sheera was tall, and regarded as very beautiful among the tulvars. Her long oval face was framed by black hair, long on one side and almost shaved on the other, which provided a contrast with her ashen grey skin. Her small, almond-shaped eyes, a characteristic of all tulvars, were a very intense red, and topped by thin black eyebrows. She had a long nose that was slightly pronounced, and her lips were wrinkly and not very full. On her left cheek, two ritual scars indicated her spiritual path. Uniquely, Sheera had a large purple iridescent spot that trailed from her left side all the way to her neck. In tulvaren culture, this was viewed with suspicion; in fact, it was said that whoever was born with the Abyssal Sigil could prove either a blessing or a curse upon the entire race.

She was ordered to journey to Deryel as quickly as possible by direct order of the High Priestess. Upon arriving, she got off her horse, left it at the pole, and approached the Governor. "I hope the load is ready... my patience is at its end," she said, her voice coarse, as she gave her fellow tulvar a letter.

"It's going to take time to prepare the crates," began the Governor, as he read it. "Besides, only the best crystals are selected for the High Priestess." He was hunchbacked from age, and much shorter than the Commander, his rumpled and frayed clothes dragging against the ground.

Sheera brought her hand to her sword and pulled it slightly from its scabbard. "Load. The. Crates."

The Governor stiffened. The reputation of the King's daughter preceded her, and none of the tales involved generosity or mercy.

Sheera and the heavy and noisy wagon left Deryel, and in a few days' time, they arrived at the Eyjanborg Temple, where the High Priestess Yvalee made her anger at the delay known. The secondary portals that had opened to the south, in the heart of Symeris and Austur, had now lost their power, and their threshold was impassable by the tulvaren soldiers who had to invade those lands. The crystals would have served Yvalee precisely to restore power to the portals, even if the ritual would have been slow and involved. Sheera greeted her mother and reassured her that her anger would vanish as soon as she laid eyes on the crystals.

The High Priestess opened a chest, and her eyes lit up as soon as she verified their purity. "Bring in the crates," ordered Yvalee. She then turned to Sheera. "When will you take the oath?"

"Never," she declared.

"Don't you think your rebellious phase has gone on a bit too long?"

"Even so, I will never become a priestess."

"You'll come to see your folly, sooner or later," said Yvalee, glaring.

The great Temple of Eyjanborg had just been finished, and the large round hall, covered by an enormous dome painted

in gold, accentuated the sacredness of the place. Sheera was momentarily entranced at the sight. She lost sight of her mother and saw her sister Auril emerge from a side room. Auril approached Sheera and gave her a nod, and nothing more. The younger of the sisters was shorter than Sheera, albeit slightly, and she too had black hair, though hers fell well below the lower back. Her long, spindly arms ended in bony hands and pointed fingers. Her face was very thin and devoid of scars, and her eyes were red, small, and distant, with fine eyebrows. Her nose was long and a tad pronounced, and her wrinkled lips were made dark using a lipstick composed of the juice of a particular berry mixed with fat. There were never two sisters as utterly different as Sheera and Auril; while one had accepted the traditional path of becoming a priestess without hesitation, the other had exercised the right granted to all tulvaren nobles to face military training instead, as she was reluctant to consecrate her whole life to the Goddess. Sheera observed Auril as she carried out one of her daily duties: bathing in the font adjacent to a side of the room. After immersing herself completely in the water, she came out with the very light dress she wore clinging to her body, and the light color of the wet fabric allowed her figure to be glimpsed despite the pallor of her skin, which attracted the gazes of the tulvars present. Bathing before turning to the Goddess was a purification rite that had been a daily practice for the Priestesses for centuries upon centuries. Auril passed in front of her sister with her typical air of superiority, and Sheera's eyes tracked her,

the rivalry between them written on her face. Ultimately, Sheera saw her disappear into the twilight.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she witnessed a young female hastily approaching. “Commander Sheera, the High Priestess awaits you.”

Sheera, who was accustomed to keeping her hand on her sword, squeezed the hilt and furrowed her brow in surprise. “Why?”

“Follow me,” replied the annoyed priestess, skirting the question. “She does not like to wait.”

With a chagrined grimace and an unenthused groan, the Commander followed the young female across the temple and past the priestly quarters. Looking around, she was amazed by the opulence of the furnishings, decorations, and clothes of the maidens. *So different from the original temple*, she mused. At the end of the corridor, the rooms of the High Priestess were windowless, and lit solely by a candelabra. In the center of her bedchambers, a heavy wrought-iron brazier housed the burning embers that kept the room warm. Sheera was watching them, and they pulsed with a strong red light that reminded her of the symbols engraved on the giant rocks which fueled the portal. Then she saw her mother.

“All this can still be yours, my dear...” she started.

Sheera rolled her eyes. “I’ve already made my decision.”

“With your abilities and powers, and with your Abyssal Sigil, you ought to serve the Goddess. And you could do so like none

before you. Prepare to take my place and stop wasting your life as a soldier . . .”

“As a *Commander*,” she corrected.

“The rank matters little. Again I tell you, it is insignificant compared to the role you would have here,” her mother continued.

She dropped the fine blue silk robe that was sourced from Symeris to prepare for the evening prayer at the Temple, together with all the Priestesses. Sheera spotted the symbols on her back, which appeared on the body of the High Priestess when she was selected by the Goddess—bleeding wounds that turned into showy black scars, which stood out against her grey skin. They were a source of pride for the High Priestess.

Yvalee was slightly taller than Sheera, with the angular physique typical of their kind, an elongated face characterized by her long but not so pronounced nose and the thin lips that Yvalee usually colored red. On her forehead and cheeks, she bore sacred *tulvaren* tattoos that read: “Flesh and blood for the Goddess.” In addition, the moment she was consecrated as High Priestess, her eyes became larger, as well as white and opaque (as opposed to red and shiny); they now seemed to contain the thick fog that hung over Alceas. Yvalee’s long, flowing hair was fragrant, thin, and black, often braided or bunched into elaborate hairstyles. She turned to face her daughter, holding a small, featureless wooden box.

“This is why I made you come here,” she told Sheera, offering

the box to her. “You may open it...”

Glancing at her mother briefly, Sheera opened the chest, within which she discovered a fragment of pure virk crystal, which was often used by tulvars of all stripes to enhance their power and resist elven magic. This fragment was different, though—it was large and drop-shaped, well cut and faceted (if not polished), and of a green hue so deep as to pass as liquid; Sheera found it shinier than normal. She took it out, and saw that it was the pendant of a necklace, watching as it swung in hand.

“Wear it. It’s yours,” said Yvalee.

“Mine?” Sheera replied, astonished. “But why? What have I done to deserve it?”

“Does a mother need a reason to give her daughter a gift?” she asked, though in reality, she figured the crystal might unleash her inner strength, thereby getting her to change her mind. She took the necklace off of Sheera’s hands, removed the meager fragment, and put it around her neck, regarding it with pride.

At first, Sheera sensed more strength in her, and then felt her magical might literally course through her entire body.

“It’s powerful,” she acknowledged.

The High Priestess smiled. “I knew you’d like it. It’s a taste of what would await you...” she said.

Those words made Sheera furrow her brow. “I should have guessed... This gift won’t make me change my decision!” she exclaimed.

Yvalee seemed resigned. “Do as you please, Sheera, but know

that we are much more alike than you might think..." she said firmly, adding fuel to the fire she could tell was flaring in Sheera's heart.

"I thank you for your largesse, High Priestess." Then, without waiting for her mother to reply, she made her way out of the private quarters of the Priestesses, determined to exit the Temple as soon as possible. She hoped she didn't need to return anytime soon.

In her room, Yvalee stood still while her handmaids prepared her for the great evening ritual: they began to douse her with warm water redolent of flowers, and sprinkled oils of intoxicating aromas upon her. She gave herself up to the massages, closing her eyes in a mixture of rage and exhilaration. Everything around her disappeared, as she dwelled on Sheera. She envied the strength and fire that drove her daughter, she hated her sneering attitude, she couldn't stand how uncontrollable she was, she was disgusted with the fact that her powers were null and void with her, she felt the will of the Goddess within, she craved Sheera's power, and she feared that if the young woman would not agree to be consecrated, many problems would arise.

*

In the city of Eyjanborg, atop one of the towers of the Royal Palace, King Athal was eagerly awaiting news from his children. Since they invaded Draelia two and a half years prior, his armies

had killed, conquered, and laid waste. Immediately after crossing the portal, his military's sheer might had devastated the cities and villages, and all the soldiers of King Osman IV could do in the fields of battle was get annihilated.

Triumphantly, Athal had entered Eyjanborg, the capital, at the end of the first year, and thanks to his children, the human territories of Draelia were completely subjugated by that time as well. The High Priestess had opened secondary portals, and the King's soldiers had crossed those magical thresholds, taking the Southern Principalities by surprise, bringing havoc and death to the essenir elves of Rekonian and to the humans of Vetlag. However, the secondary portals drew power exclusively from extremely pure virk crystals, and repeated delays in the delivery of the crates carrying the precious gems led to the depletion of their power. As such, the invasion of the other lands had suffered a setback. The King then pushed his legions southward and westward, clashing with the armies of the three Principalities, a battle that ended in a terrible defeat, second only to the defeat they suffered at the Iron Plateau at the hands of the dwarves of the Icemount. From that point, the campaign of conquest had reached a dead end—which was part of why the frictions between the Houses had resurfaced over the last few months.

The King of the Tulvars was getting on in years, and his appearance reflected his age. Once tall and with a sculpted physique, he was now skinny and wrinkled, his back slightly hunched. Nevertheless, his arms (though slender and bony) and

his long-fingered hands still had strength, and still yearned for combat. His hairs were grey, and his stern-faced visage was pallid and wrinkled, yet he inspired terror in all, save for his wife Yvalee. His shiny red eyes were also weathered with age, and his mouth (whose lips were nigh imperceptible) was always curved. The regal raiment he wore was sewn using the fine fabrics they'd become acquainted with in Elantion. He had on a soft tunic in black and green elven velvet that brushed against the floor, embellished with threads of gold and fragments of virk crystals. The royal tiara upon his head had been forged using the gold in the crown of King Osman IV of Draelia, who died two years earlier, run through by Athal's blade.

"Two years have passed, and I still don't know how to best them, but soon there will be elven meat for you, my rapacious friend," said the King pitilessly, stroking his vulture's soft feathers. The bird stirred slightly, and Athal handed it a piece of meat it wasted no time devouring. It flew away and perched itself on the back of the chair. Suddenly, the heavy door of the hall opened, revealing a member of the Royal Guard.

"What do you want?" asked Athal.

"A missive, Sire," he replied, handing his Sovereign a scroll.

Athal unfurled it, and his mouth curled into an evil smile. He dismissed the guard and headed for the desk. The quill danced across the parchment, its ink tracing strange and twisted glyphs. After signing his name, he slowly poured the sealing wax and imprinted his coat of arms on it. Then he summoned the vulture

and gave it the letter.

“Take this to Zund,” he whispered.

Meanwhile, Zund, heir to the throne and General of the army, was riding toward the western edge of the Whitetrunk Forest, where a patrol had reported seeing a human move among the trees before disappearing amidst the path leading to the Slumbering Peaks. Zund was a tall tulvar with a statuesque physique, and he was courted by all the daughters of the noble families. Zund never reciprocated their interest in him, as all he was attracted to was power. He sported long, exceedingly thin black hair, which was often tied behind his nape with a leather strip. His face was angular and square, his almond-shaped eyes an intensely dark red. His slightly pronounced nose had a bulge due to a fracture. His fair skin was covered with dozens of scars, the most striking of which was certainly the one that trailed from his forehead straight down to his right cheek, sustained by a sword blow inflicted on him at a wee age. The armor he wore was made of hedgot leather, imparting it with the marvelous attribute of fire-resistance. His breastplate was adorned with the emblem of the House Khelun—a black flame on a red background—and embellished with silver plaques. The edges of his thick black velvet cape were embroidered, and warm bear fur covered his shoulders.

“Where is it?” asked Zund, having arrived.

“It disappeared on the path to the pass, General,” said the

soldier, pointing at the road.

Zund gritted his teeth in anger. “Is it a slave? A refugee?”

“Definitely a refugee,” he replied.

“Send some orcs to search for him.” The General briefly looked at the Peaks again, intensely enough that he might have set them on fire. Then he headed toward his steed, a horse as black and heavy as the shroud of night, mounted its saddle, and trotted away. Eyeing the horizon, he saw a thin silhouette, which was becoming clearer as it approached—it was his father’s vulture. He pulled on the reins, and the bird perched on his arm, its talons clutching his leather armband. There was a message with the King’s wax seal tied to its neck. He took the scroll, bade the bird talk flight by lifting his arm, broke the seal, unrolled the scroll, and discovered that his father had an important task for him. He took some soldiers with him and headed south.

*

Several hours later, in the elven territory of Elelreel, Kaj’s wagon trundled down the road descending from Falcon’s Pass. The tulvaren patrols he’d spotted in the distance while he was at the Whitetrunk had convinced him to head back immediately, so as not to risk being seen. He reached the bottom of the valley. At the crossroads, he decided to take the high road that separated the swamp from the Malivon River. The area’s enveloping mist moistened Kaj’s woolen clothes, much to his annoyance. They

were no longer in any condition to protect him from the elements. He wore a linen shirt, a wool tunic, thick wool trousers, socks, and fur-lined leather boots, but the cold was as biting as ever. Kaj held tight to his thick, frayed-edged woolen cloak and ran a hand through his invariably disheveled dark brown hair to fix up the hairs that had fallen to his brow, all while panting and rolling his clear eyes. Kaj was a fairly tall man, well-built and muscular thanks to his many years working iron at his foster father's forge. His stern features belied his cheerful and friendly personality.

The surrounding atmosphere seemed to muffle most sound, but as soon as he crossed the intersection following the bridge over the Malivon, he heard the whistle of an arrow whishing by his right ear. He froze. Instinctively, he flicked the reins and scanned the area, but instead of sprinting, the mule stopped in its tracks, encircled by five imposing orcs.

Kaj didn't know what to do. Suddenly, one of their number collapsed to the ground with a grunt. Behind the fallen ogre stood a cloaked figure with a large hood, weapons in hand. The orcs attacked the figure, and Kaj jumped off the wagon brandishing his sword and dealing a few cutting blows. Then, he found himself with two daggers at the sides of his neck.

The elf withdrew her weapons. Kaj had time enough to observe her, and realized she was a nalnir. She was shorter than Kaj (albeit not by much), with an athletic physique; she wasn't frail at all, for an elf. Her wavy reddish hair was styled in a half-up ponytail that highlighted her pointed ears, as well as a

few small tresses ornamented with metal beads. She also had the classic nalnir tattoos on her forehead. Her face was delicate, her large, shiny yellow eyes (typical of forest elves) expressive and alert. Her groomed eyebrows formed part of a well-proportioned visage, though her slightly crooked nose was highlighted by a scar. Her lips were fairly full, though reddened and marred by the cold, and therefore standing in contrast against her pale complexion. Her clothes were of classic elven workmanship—her brown suede tunic was fastened by knotted leather laces, and her sleeves reached the middle of her forearms, from which part of her wool tunic poked out, covered by engraved leather armbands. Her hands were protected by wool gloves, apart from her bare distal phalanges, which were slim and slender. The bottom of the large dark grey woolen cloak (that reached around the midway point of her calves) was worn, and made warmer by a thick wolf-fur collar. Aside from the daggers, the nalnir also had a beautifully etched bow and a quiver full of arrows, in addition to a small satchel and a bag that she carried over her shoulder with various useful items inside.

“Pretty dumb, traveling alone these days,” she began. “And with a slow mule and a dilapidated cart, at that.”

“I didn’t actually encounter many obstacles...”

She arched her eyebrows haughtily as she checked whether the orcs were all fully dead. “Are you fighting with the human resistance?”

Kaj was silent a moment. “Who, me? No, no, I’ve got my

hands full with the wounded arriving in Fenan...”

“That’s odd... you fight well,” she said with suspicion. “You’d make a fine recruit, in these times,” she continued, though without all that much conviction in her voice. “What have you got in that wagon?”

“Healing roots,” said Kaj.

The elf looked at him, then headed for the wagon and opened one of the bags. “Anruith!?” she exclaimed in Elvish.

“Yep, healing roots.”

The elf rolled her eyes. “These roots are also found in the environs of Herle. Leaving Elelreel and going past the Peaks for them is madness!”

Kaj looked chagrined. “I knew what I was going towards...”

“Then you’re twice as dumb,” she said tersely. “In any case, the name’s Clarice.”

“Kaj.” He extended a hand. “Wait, are you Clarice, the Vagabond?”

“Yes,” she replied dryly.

Suddenly, he heard a noise of unknown origin. “Did you hear that?”

Clarice was freeing the mule from the yaw. “Yes. Goblins. They must’ve heard us fight against the orcs. There’s nothing they’d want here; they won’t attack...” she said pensively. “Those orcs were definitely sent by tulvars.”

“I’d hoped they wouldn’t see me. Boy am I glad I got away quickly!” he cried, peering around. “We’d better clear out of

here...”

He made for the wagon, but Clarice smacked the mule, who promptly ran away.

“But why?” he asked, surprised.

“I’ve got no intention of letting all of Draelia know where we’re headed!” she shouted, throwing him an empty sack. “Take your roots.”

Kaj shook his head and started filling it. “You headed towards Fenan?”

“No, but Fenan happens to be on the way. I’ll accompany you there, and then proceed from there.”

They walked down the road that cut through the plains so as to take cover in the forest. They had been walking at a brisk pace for two hours, but the forest was still a ways away. The sunset came quickly, and by the time they started weaving through the trees, it was almost dark. Soon, they stumbled upon a clearing sufficiently shielded by bushes and rocks.

“We’ll set up camp here. Light the fire; I’ll be right back,” said Clarice.

“Where are you going?” Kaj felt his pockets in search of the fire striker. “Dammit, where’d I put the stupid thing!?”

When he looked up, she had already melted into the darkness.

He stretched out his arms in resignation. “I don’t have my fire striker on me...!” he shouted, hoping she’d overhear.

The moonlight helped Kaj gather some wood and dry moss.

He made a hole in the ground and carefully laid them in layers as he waited for Clarice. Suddenly, he heard a noise, and he saw her emerge from the undergrowth with her game in hand.

“A hare?”

“If I’m not mistaken, you had a fire to light,” she said, panting. She didn’t answer his question.

“You didn’t give me the time to...” he started, but the elf threw the hare at him before he could finish.

Clarice bent down, pulled a piece of flint from her pocket, and struck it against her dagger with a decisive motion. The dry moss began to crackle, turning into a nice fire. Kaj roasted the hare on the fire; the scent that emanated was mouth-watering. She was sitting on a small rock nearby, engrossed in cleaning her swords.

“I couldn’t help noticing the green streaks that appeared on your skin,” he said.

“I’m a nalnir,” she said tersely.

“Right, but you don’t see that often in Fenan elves... it’s weird.”

“Living in a village far from the forest, that’s normal. It’s even more evident within the Shadetrail,” she replied, a little annoyed.

“Where are you from?”

“I told you, I’m from Fenan...” he said, as he turned the spit.

“I mean, before the Invasion,” she clarified.

“Lochbis.”

“Is your family at the village?”

“No,” he said bluntly, lowering his head. “My family couldn’t

make it out of Lochbis, unfortunately. I was out of town when a pack of abominables led by a sorcerer attacked. I returned home, to find nothing left. There was a great big blast, and some people ran outside the walls. The remaining guards let me out; when we reached the mountains, we saw only smoke and flames rising from the city... I came back a few days later to look for my things.”

“I’m sorry that happened to your loved ones, though your story is similar to many others I’ve heard... I know the fangwyns or ‘abominables’ well. People transformed into monsters, and commanded by necromancers. Do you know how the transformation takes place?”

“I’m not sure I want to know...”

“After they’re killed, a ritual snatches their souls, and their bodies twist into husks filled only with hatred and brutality.”

“By Dag! I shudder to think those things were once people.”

Clarice put down her daggers and neared the fire. “Let’s eat the hare now; otherwise you’ll char it.”

Having enjoyed their meal, they retired for the night.

Just before the break of dawn, Kaj felt something brush against his shoulder, and woke with a start, only to realize it was her.

“Get up! We’ve got to leave!”

“Dammit, do you mean to scare me to death?”

“If I wanted to kill you, you wouldn’t have noticed.”

The nalnir's answer sent a chill down his spine. She didn't even spare him a glance, as she was intent on putting out the fire and hiding the traces so that any other orcs that might be in the area couldn't identify them. The cloak he habitually wore around his neck concealed most of his body, but he noticed she'd removed her gloves, and regarded her thin cold-beaten hands.

The fog was quite thick that day, but the deeper they ventured into the forest, the thinner the mists became, hanging high amidst the trees. The atmosphere was magnificent, if surreal. The Shadetrail Forest was still this green and lush (in complete contrast with the rest of the world) thanks to elven magic. By comparison, the Whitetrunk Forest was an expanse of bare and battered trees.

They moved forward at a brisk pace, and the forest seemed a samey blur to Kaj.

"Tell me, how do you elves recognize every tree in the forest? How do you always know where you are?"

Her response was not the one he wished to hear. "You humans don't observe, and you don't know how to listen to the forest. You'll never be able to get a grasp. You're too distracted," she pontificated.

"Oh c'mon! Would it kill you to answer without the usual elven arrogance!?"

"If you don't like my answers, then don't ask questions."

"Three centuries since the Reconciliation, and nothing's

changed,” he prodded her, annoyed. “I was just hoping to make the trip there more pleasant.”

“We have to walk, not talk. Fenan’s not far now. You can talk to whomever you like once we’re there.”

“You bet I will!”

They walked for a day and a half, most of the time in silence. During the afternoon of the second day, they arrived at the bridge to Fenan, a small and quiet elven village. It stood between two fierce streams, the White and Silver Creeks. Scads of refugees from beyond the Slumbering Peaks had found a home here. The streets (some cobblestone, others clay) were narrow, and the sticky mud of that time of year sullied boots, clothing and cloaks. The houses built by the refugees were mostly small, wooden, one-floor affairs with thatched rooves, while the older homes around the plaza were two stories tall and built using wood and stone. The tavern stood out from among them, along with the smithy’s furnace and forge and their attached residences. At the center of the square was situated a large well, near which stood a vegetable-laden table; a number of human women and female elves were cleaning the vegetables while chatting and having a laugh or two.

On one side of the square was located the building that housed the wounded and sick. It was a sanctuary dedicated to Luhreil, the god of water, and it was a circular structure built of wood and stone. The jutting roof was supported by slender columns, from whose sturdy iron rings sizeable lanterns were hanging.

The sanctuary's large door was made of solid wood, so old and run-down that it had lost its erstwhile shiny patina. Inside, the single nave housed beds and cots, and the handful of windows let in little light. The clouded panes of glass evoked a sense of isolation. Additionally, there were three small rooms and a nice stone fireplace that warmed the whole interior.

"Now go take care of your wounds," said the elf hastily. "I have something to do."

"The tavern's on the other side of the square, if you need a room."

But Kaj received no reply. He turned to face her, only to find she was gone.

When Kaj opened the sanctuary door, he found it fuller than ever before. There were many inside—too many. There had to have been some battle, with the wounded militiamen taking refuge here. He feared there might not be enough roots for everyone. He had to get to work. He went to the room that had been designated the kitchen and started making his healing brew.

Moments later, he heard the door slam. "So it's true! You are back!"

He spun on his heels, to see Cilna run toward him and throw her arms around his neck. She was a young elf of Fenan; her family had lived there for many generations, a fact of which she was proud. She was frail, and not very tall, with long always-braided blonde hair and big brown eyes. Her open, friendly, and curious nature had often gotten her in trouble for some ill-

spoken words, not to mention all the times she'd been *too* curious. Like everyone else in Fenan, she wore simple clothes, a linen tunic yellowed by time plus a blue woolen robe which the young woman protected by wearing a coverall.

“Cilna, be careful! These roots are precious!” The bowl had almost dropped from his grip.

“You found so many!” she exclaimed excitedly.

“Yes, and it wasn't easy. Now let me continue, if you would. You can help me when the medicine's ready to be distributed.”

Cilna nodded. “I'll be there when you need me.”

After entrusting Cilna with the hot infusion he'd just finished concocting, Kaj busied himself preparing compresses for the wounds.

Then the young woman called out for him in desperation. “KAJ!”

He rushed over to her. Five ailing and wounded hunters were beginning, one by one, to tremble and squirm. Before long, they were all dead. Their wounds had been infected by the teeth and claws of lalks, demonic wolves whose packs numbered many across all of Elelreel. Cilna was motionless beside Kaj, staring at the hunters' bodies.

“You didn't think to check the wounds?” asked Kaj, in time.

Petrified, she stammered incomprehensibly, and moreover, in the heat of the moment she had dropped what little of the potion had remained.

“By all that’s holy!” he shouted, picking up the cauldron and ladle. “How thoughtless can you be? I risked my life for those roots, and then you go and waste them like this! The brew was supposed to be enough for tomorrow morning, too!” he cried. “Get out of here.”

Cilna ran away crying, and the door closed with a dull thud.

III

Snow-bearing clouds were gathering in the north, over the peaks of the Icemount. The frigid winds accompanied Clarice, who had left the village many hours ago to meet with an old friend. Her quick and confident strides belied her confusion; she was beginning to entertain the notion that perhaps this journey had not been entirely in vain. Perhaps she had found what she was looking for. She had bet it all on that human, flouting strict rules in the process, and as such she felt the weight of responsibility on her shoulders more than ever. Nearing the slopes of the Hallowed Heights, she slowed down to try to and catch sight of her friend. Soon enough, she spotted her approaching wearily.

“I’m sorry I made you travel so far,” said Clarice.

They greeted each other by gripping each other’s wrists, and didn’t waste any time with useless small talk. They repasted, and just before dark, they said their goodbyes before Clarice retraced her steps back.

When the nalnir returned, she visited the sanctuary to find Kaj crouching on the floor, sad and disconsolate.

“So many have died, and so many more will die. Spilling tears over their bodies will do nothing for them,” she told him.

Kaj looked up at her; she was leaning against the doorjamb with her hands clasped. “None of this seems to worry you very much.”

She shook her head. “If you let this get you down, then you’re not fit to fight,” she replied, intending to spur him on.

“Maybe I don’t fight for that very reason,” retorted Kaj. “Well, I don’t fight, but that doesn’t mean I *can’t*. I do my part, and nobody else takes on the responsibilities I do...”

“The way I see it, you’re hiding from the problem,” opined Clarice. She turned to leave, and Kaj ran after her towards the entryway.

“Look after your wounded while you still can.”

“You’re not getting away this time,” he said, as he sensed she was hiding something from him. “You disappear, only to come back to judge me some more. Didn’t you say Fenan was on just ‘on the way’ for you?”

“It’s up to me how long I stay here.”

“I understand that full well. But over the past few days, you seemed reluctant to stay here.”

“There’s a reason I’m staying here in Fenan. I don’t know what your problem is, but whatever it is, I suggest you resolve it.”

Kaj frowned, speechless.

The nalnir took a bag from her belt and put it in his hand. “Put a pinch of this in a bowl of hot water for each of them. They won’t heal, but it’ll give them some relief.” Then she turned around and closed the door behind her.

Kaj was even more confused than before. He opened the bag and looked at the powder inside. Then, as if gripped by a sudden frenzy, he went to heat up some water.

The streets were deserted, and people were afraid to be milling about in the dark of the night, as it brought with it orcs and demonic beasts. That evening, Kaj left the sanctuary, pleased to be breathing in some fresh air and smelling the strong aroma of heki wood. Heki trees had a balsamic and resinous extract, similar to larches. They were widespread only in Draelia, and their wood was used for hearths. The days were getting shorter, the temperatures colder. As Kaj headed home, a cold wind made him hold faster to his cloak and increase his pace. He heard the laughter of the children in the nearby houses, and the lights of the lanterns and candles flickered behind their windows' curtains.

Near his house, he spotted a hooded Clarice wrapped in her cloak, leaning against a tree trunk.

"I thought you'd gone again."

"As you can see, that's not the case," she replied.

"Where will you spend the night? Do you already have a room at the tavern?"

"Don't worry about me. If all else fails, I have my pelt of fur."

"It's very cold out here, and it'll only get worse as the night deepens."

"I know. That won't be a problem."

Kaj shrugged. "Then I won't insist. But I'll leave the door open for you, just in case."

"Do you have anything strong to offer me?" she asked before Kaj crossed the threshold.

“I might,” he said, bidding her inside with a jerk of the head.

Kaj took off his cloak and hung it on a hook on the wall. Clarice lowered her hood and observed the house closely.

“Want to hand me your cloak?” asked Kaj.

“I’ll put it on the chair.”

The first thing she noticed was how cozy and welcoming the small house was, defying her expectations. There were bunches of many types of herbs hanging here and there, while others were carefully preserved in jars. The bottles placed in the cupboard stood out in particular, and a stone mortar sat next to them, along with a stack of bowls, some glasses, and a few spoons. A big knife was stuck in one corner of the cabinet, with some cheese and apples nearby. The two doors at the bottom of the cabinet surely concealed the rest of the supplies.

A very damaged wooden table lay at the center of the room, with two chairs next to it, and two stools near the wall. A pile of wood and two buckets of water sat adjacent to the hearth. A handful of candles, placed here and there (with pools of hardened wax beneath them), illuminated the room.

Clarice peered at Kaj for a moment. She’d been nursing some doubt about him ever since she’d found herself stealthily tailing the man and his cart on the flatland road up to Falcon’s Pass. Her meeting with her old friend had only intensified that doubt. Nevertheless, he was a human, and she knew it wouldn’t have been easy for him to carry out his plan.

Holding a bottle, Kaj placed two glasses on the table and poured them a liquid with a green sheen. She sat down, and Kaj handed her one of the glasses.

“Have a taste and tell me what you think.”

Clarice grabbed the glass and sniffed. The aroma impressed her a great deal. “This is no common spirit. How did you come by it?”

“I have my connections. I knew you’d like it,” he smiled.

The elf drained the glass, and her expression could hardly be more satisfied. “I haven’t had the stuff in some time. Offer me some more.”

Kaj obliged, pouring more into both glasses. They knocked it down in one fell swoop.

“You’d better go easy,” said Clarice. “You’re not an elf.”

“Wonder what it is!”

Typical human, thought Clarice.

“Can I ask you a question?” asked Kaj.

“Ha, like you haven’t been asking questions of me already!”

“Where are you from?”

The elf rested her arms on the table and poured herself a little more. This time, she savored it slowly, with a little sip to start. “You and your questions.” She paused. “. . . I haven’t had the opportunity to sit in a warm house and enjoy this tipples in a long while,” she said, smiling wistfully. “I lived in a village on the Red Rises near the Valwald River. My family traded maple juice for a living. I still remember the strong aroma that wafted from the

barrels during fermentation. The vibrant color of the leaves, the rushing river waters... it feels like centuries have passed since then." She finished drinking. "This damned hooch is making me talk too much," she said, vexed.

She got up from her chair and, with a broad motion, put her cloak back on her shoulders. "Take advantage of the tranquility of your home while you can. I have a feeling that times will worsen sooner rather than later," she said, distraught. She adjusted her hood and headed for the door.

Kaj was leaning against the back of the chair with his arms folded. "Do you really want to sleep outside?"

"I'd be getting some fresh air. It's hot in here."

"Blame the booze for that," he said, smiling. "If you want to come back in, make yourself home anywhere you like. I'm going to sleep!"

Clarice exited, and closed the door behind her.

The night was deep and silent in Fenan. The thick and clear clouds were gathering apace. The village streets were illuminated by scant lanterns, casting the hush that enveloped Draelia into greater relief. One could hear only the slight patter of footsteps that grew louder and more rhythmic before slowly dissipating. A door creaked slowly open, which was then closed gingerly. So it was that sudden, faint flashes of light gleamed from the sanctuary's windows, followed by more silence.

Clarice had ambled for a spell amidst the quiet of the night, before the cold forced her to take refuge in Kaj's abode. The elf settled herself down on the floor near the door, still wrapped in her cloak and furs. The warmth of the embers in the fireplace had her dozing in no time.

The next morning, the sun peeked out from behind the Slumbering Peaks, though its heat was meager, as winter was upon the lands. The nalnir woke up when a tiny ray of sunshine managed to infiltrate a hole in the window's wooden shutter, striking her straight in the eyes. She got up with a sleepy groan and lit the fireplace anew.

Cilna woke up early, with a fire inside her. She went to the sanctuary, and when she arrived before the door, she took a deep breath, steeling herself for another difficult day. What she witnessed left her breathless. Moments later, she was running at breakneck speed toward Kaj's house. When she arrived, she started knocking violently and without restraint.

"Kaj! KAJ! Open the door!" She was in no state to wait; she had to take him to the sanctuary immediately.

After a short wait, Clarice opened the door. "You must be Cilna..."

The young elf was annoyed. "Yes, I am! And I have to see Kaj right away!"

"He's sleeping. Wake him up if you must."

Without hesitation, Cilna ran towards him.

“Open your eyes, Kaj! C’mon, wake up!”

Kaj suddenly heard his name, and his body getting shaken. He realized that he was not, in fact, dancing with fawns in the woods.

Clarice was leaning against the door, thoroughly amused.

With difficulty, the man opened his eyes, to be greeted by Cilna bent over him trying to wake him up. The words that came out his mouth were not terribly friendly. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Something happened down in the village! You have to come and see!” she insisted.

“I’m guessing it’s nothing that can’t wait,” he lamented.

“You guessed it! C’mon, get dressed!” Cilna pulled off his covers.

A cold wind made him shiver. Laboriously, he got up. The water in the washbowl was freezing, but he screwed up his courage and dipped his hands in to rinse his face, so as to clear his mind.

“I’m ready,” said a shivering Kaj, tucking his shirt into his pants.

“Finally! C’mon, let’s go!” Cilna grabbed him by the hand and started pulling.

“Clarice, are you coming with us?” he asked, resisting Cilna’s tugging.

“You go on ahead. I know the way, if I’m needed,” she replied, in her usual detached manner.

As soon as the two turned the corner, the nalnir pulled something out of her pocket, and she wrote some words on a parchment. Then she departed the house, the door slamming behind her.

Cilna and Kaj reached the square, where a considerable crowd had gathered.

“What’s going on here?” asked Kaj in amazement.

“Come in! Come and see!”

As soon as they entered, they were greeted by everyone’s salutations and laughter. They sat there on their cots with relieved expressions, chatting amongst themselves. Kaj, standing at the center of the nave, saw smiling faces every which way he looked. But how was this possible?

“I hope you don’t think it’s thanks to your pigswill!” teased a soldier.

“I don’t! I didn’t do a thing!” he replied, incredulous. He made the rounds, to find no fevers or wounds in anyone. “How can this be? You’re all healed!”

An old woman replied: “Somebody was here last night. I saw her. A hooded figure, not very tall, with a white light ‘round the hands. Didn’t catch her face, though.”

“Are you sure?”

The woman looked none too pleased by this. “I may’ve been ill, but I wasn’t mad, deary!”

“I was here till the late evening,” said Cilna, “and I didn’t hear

a thing.”

“Did you notice anything else of note?” Kaj asked the woman.

“What does it matter!?” interrupted the young elf. “Everyone’s hale and healthy! It’s almost like you’re unhappy about that.”

“You don’t get it! Not just anybody could have done this. It’s just like the stories I’ve been told by the elders of Lochbis.”

The old elf woman was deep in thought. She looked up and said: “I think she had long hair. And she was definitely an elf. Her hands were so slender...” she smiled contentedly.

Kaj returned her smile. “Thanks for being such a talented observer.” He turned to Cilna: “Check on everyone again. Some of them are very worn out—they still need a day or two of rest. The others can go.”

“Sure thing. Wait, where are you going?”

“I need to have a chat with someone.”

At that moment, Clarice was putting distance between herself and Fenan. She had all of her stuff on her (which wasn’t much), and as always, her mind was swimming with thoughts.

Kaj came out on the path, and spotted her pacing away, about to leave the village.

“Clarice, wait!”

But she heeded not his words. He jogged up to her and grabbed her by the arm. Her death glare shocked his fingers loose, and she quickly withdrew her arm.

“Do NOT do that again!” she warned him.

“I’m not letting you run off! I want answers.”

“Oh, you want answers?” she asked in resolute tones.

Kaj goggled at her. “Of course! Is that so strange?” he said, the words coming out harsh.

Clarice was looking away. There was a strange glint in her eyes; she seemed almost resigned. “Before you can have your answers, I must have mine,” she explained. She turned around and started walking again, but when Kaj again tried to stop her, she pointed a dagger at his throat.

“Don’t you try following me!” She didn’t need to add anything else.

Though nothing was clear to him, Kaj raised his hands in surrender, and she continued on her way, sheathing the dagger.

*

Kaj was still busy at the sanctuary, as a group of men-at-arms had come to the village in search of food and information. By the afternoon he was exhausted, so he went home, wrote in his diary, and rested his feet on the table while rocking in his chair. He reflected on his days with the nalnir, from their meeting on the banks of the river to their arrival in Fenan. His memory went to that night’s events, and it was then that he spotted it. He rose to his feet quickly, almost tripping in his haste. On the stool beside the door lay a carefully folded parchment next to a leather bag.

He opened the letter:

Wear it, and don't show it to anyone. Soon you will understand.

—Clarice

Kaj opened the bag. Inside was a necklace with a medallion. The man took a close look at it. The stone was quite beautiful, a light purple color at the edges, and darker and deeper at the center—almost smoky, in fact. It was bright, multifaceted and rough, which probably meant it was a fragment collected who knows where, and embedded in gold as it stood. There was something magnetic about it. He let it dangle off his fingers for a moment before putting it on. Kaj looked at it, and it seemed to shine lightly. He held it a little longer in hand, then hid it under his shirt.

Meanwhile, on the path that ran alongside the White Creek, the evening's shadows were lengthening, and the clouds that had Clarice on her travels seemed to be making way for the last faint ray of sunshine. The hooded figure moved rapidly down the road, headed for the small stretch of woods at the foot of the Slumbering Peaks. She needed to reach the tunnel entrance to the Rainvale as quickly as possible. She had been journeying alone for many years, far and wide throughout Draelia and sometimes even beyond. This had honed her senses, and she had learned to survive in even the most extreme circumstances. That was why she was still alive. Her thoughts strayed to Kaj for a moment. She

absolutely had to look after his well-being, at least until she had dispelled all of her doubts.

Her train of thoughts was distracting her. She stopped, taking in the noises that surrounded her. She took a deep breath; there was something in the air. The trees were close now. She had to hurry and seek shelter for the night.

Clarice found an area at the foot of a steep hill. The place was sheltered by large trees and dense shrubbery, and the ground around was slippery, making it impossible to risk advancing further. She made a hole for the fire, thereby concealing the light of the flames. She curled up next to it, wrapped in her cloak, and slept for a few hours.

She was startled awake by a host of strange noises. Perfectly still, she listened. Some soil fell upon her, and she understood from the croaking that it was a pack of anurians, a species of froglike amphibians that wandered from one land to another in nomadic groupings, collecting what they found on both continents. They were rarely seen in that area; since the Invasion, they had been pushed to as far as Elelreel due to the devastation in Draelia. They were a gawky lot, with slimy and spotted skin, short legs and long arms. They could be on the fat side, and their colors could be vivid—the distinguishing characteristics of wiser, older anurians. These creatures were venomous and quite swift, which made them difficult to deal with groups of them.

While Clarice was deciding what to do, a small flame went out from among the embers, and a thin plume of smoke rose up.

The elf's eyes followed it, cursing its existence.

The anurian at the head of the pack caught a whiff of the scent, and spotted the smoke. Then it ordered the pack to halt. Before they could stick their heads out over the hill, Clarice dashed like lightning behind a large tree trunk.

The anurian leapt down to Clarice's altitude, but with its poor sense of smell, it could not distinguish between Clarice's odor and the overpowering smoke. It rummaged through the embers with its spear, and then, with a guttural cry, jumped onto the path, the caravan setting off once again.

The elf waited for them to go away, and watched to make sure none were straggling behind.

By Efabi! Danger averted, she thought.

Dawn was breaking, so she decided to resume pace. The last stretch in the woods was propitious. She found some bushes that still bore berries for the plundering. She popped some in her mouth intermittently as she continued forward. Her strides were light and fleet of foot, and she always tried to leave as few traces as possible by avoiding mud and overly soft ground. The sun had risen by the time she left the woods and spotted the hills that would lead her to Herle.

She arrived outside the village on the afternoon of the fourth day. She crossed the Murkwaters and followed them to the passage toward the Rainvale. She hadn't the time to walk the entire path and reach the hidden entrance—she could already hear the group that was waiting for her arguing heatedly. She

stopped and shook her head, mustering all of her patience before proceeding onwards. She wouldn't stop by for long—just for long enough to exchange information. Then she would walk right back to Fenan.

Ten days passed. The sun had almost dipped behind the mountains. Kaj was returning home, convinced he would never see the nalnir again. He looked up, and in the distance he saw a limping figure. Curiosity spurred him to get a better look, and he realized it was Clarice. Kaj dashed to help her, and she fell into his arms.

“What happened to you, Clarice?” he asked worriedly.

“Now's not the time. Take me to your house.”

Clarice let herself be guided by Kaj, who helped her lie upon the bed. The elf took off her cloak and began to unfasten the leather protector on her injured left thigh, taking off that leg of her trousers as well.

In the meantime, Kaj was preparing her some water and clean cloth, which he brought over. Her thigh was deeply lacerated.

“It was lalks, wasn't it?”

“Yes. I've never seen a pack of lalks that organized,” she said, her voice trembling slightly. She was very pale-faced, and worn out, as she had lost a lot of blood.

“Now stay still; I'll try not to hurt you too much.”

She nodded slightly, laying her head on the pillow. Kaj dipped a piece of cloth in the washbowl and set about washing away the

blood, cleaning the wounds thoroughly. With each touch, he felt the elf's muscles contract in pain.

"I'm almost finished," he informed her. "I just have to go get some herbs from the hospital."

"There's no need. Just put some bandages on it. It'll heal."

"I'm the wound expert here."

"Listen to me, Kaj," she replied harshly.

"Okay, if you say it'll heal... you should've put some galium leaves on it as soon as possible, you can find them all over the place here."

"I was busy running away. I was being unwary, and now look at me..." she said, her words tinged with disappointment.

"But you're alive!" he cried.

"So it'd seem..." she replied, without much enthusiasm.

Kaj finished wrapping her wound, and whipped up an infusion with a mixture of invigorating herbs. When he returned to the room, he saw she'd fallen asleep.

Good, he thought. She'll at least regain her strength.

It was now evening. Kaj looked out the window, but the stars were not there. The white clouds shone, covering the whole sky from horizon to horizon. A gust of freezing air enveloped Kaj, who watched the first snowflakes of the season. He went outside, spread out his arms, and turned to face the sky. The snow's caress felt nice, but a snowflake made it way past his cloak onto his neck, causing him to shiver. He quickly returned inside, and saw

that Clarice was awake, leaning against the headboard.

“What’s so fascinating out there? You rushed out the door...” she asked, curious.

The man opened the shutters of the bedroom window. As soon as she saw the snow, Clarice swore in Elvish (which Kaj did not understand). She started rising out of bed, pushing herself onto her feet using her arms, and staggering a little. Kaj stepped in to support her.

“I’m fine!” she insisted firmly.

“Okay. I just wanted to help.”

The nalnir limped to the window. “I hoped it’d take at least a few more days. I didn’t need this,” she admitted, destroying Kaj’s glee completely.

She drank a sip of water and laid herself in bed again, dozing off forthwith. Kaj looked at her for a moment. Most in Clarice’s place would have already developed a high fever, accompanied by delirious dreams. It seemed very strange to him. He found himself handling the medallion she’d given him; it seemed to help him reflect. With his mind full of thoughts, he stretched out on a carpet, and before he realized it, he’d fallen asleep.

Outside the village, the nocturnal quiet was punctuated by the howls of lalks. That night, however, they could be heard barking in pain. A short figure packing metal was striding toward Fenan. His loud and heavy footsteps were accompanied by labored breathing. When the sun began to rise, he finally saw the outline

of the houses in the distance. He stopped to catch his breath, and took the opportunity to drink some mead.

Kaj's awakening was a rude one. He heard shouting in the streets. The speakers were very riled up, so he got up hastily and opened the door. Despite his cloak, he was struck by the cold air. A little further on, a dozen or so villagers were gathered to rail against something. He decided to try and figure out what was going on. Making his way through the crowd, he saw a dwarf brandishing an axe at the crowd with a menacing look. Insult them as they might, none had the courage to attack him.

"Please, stop this!" said Kaj.

"Oh!" exclaimed the dwarf. "Someone with a little common sense!"

"He threatens us with an axe and you *defend* him?" shouted a nalnir.

"Looks to me you're threatening him with your dagger!" he shot back.

The elf in question sheathed the weapon and took a few steps back. The dwarf stared at him, and with a satisfied smirk, he swiftly put the axe on his shoulders, hand dangling over its handle. With a proud air, he approached Kaj.

"A friend of mine told me to come here," he explained. "Oloice Calrek, at your service." He held out his hand, and Kaj shook it firmly.

"Kaj."

“Excellent! You’re the one I was looking for!”

Kaj nodded, smiling.

“Clarice is at my place.” He motioned for him to proceed. Before Kaj could even open the door for him, the dwarf was already by Clarice’s side.

“Oloice! That was quick!” said Clarice in amazement (and a touch of humor).

“Ha! You left me with a nice big drove of the beasties! I had to crack a surplus of the damn things’ heads! I see you’ve recovered. I’m glad.”

The elf nodded and turned to Kaj: “I have Oloice to thank for being here. Fortunately, he decided to accompany me...”

“Then you ought to keep an eye on her often, Master Oloice,” said Kaj, winking.

“Easier said than done!” he exclaimed.

The dwarf’s voice was very coarse and deep, reflecting his squat and heavysset figure. His leather armor was battered by time and battles. The metal plaques on his shoulders, arms, knees, and shins were beat up, and the woolen clothes that were visible were dirty and old. He wore a cloak with frayed hems, proof of some bad brushes with branches in the forest. He didn’t hesitate to let the cloak fall to the floor the second he entered the house.

“I have a feeling you won’t turn your nose up at some good elven booze,” said Kaj, knowing how he’d answer.

“By Tetir’s beard! A dwarf never turns down a drink!”

Oloice and Clarice took advantage of Kaj's momentary absence to whisper something, stopping the moment Kaj returned. As the pair drank, the man regarded Oloice's face. His ruddy beard caught Kaj's eyes, as it was clearly tinged with turnip juice, bushy and scruffy, with a very well-fashioned braid at the center. He had many wrinkles and a few scars. His eyebrows were as thick and messy as his hair, and the same shade of light brown.

After a brief sniff, he downed his glass in one go. "Of course, a nice mug would've been better!" said the dwarf, slightly grouchy.

"Take it easy, Oloice; this stuff can put even a dwarf to bed!" said Clarice, amused.

"Alcohol's the one thing that can best a dwarf! I'm sure you know that by now!" he replied proudly.

"Kaj, take a seat. Oloice and I have a lot to tell you."

He did so, taking a stool and sitting at the foot of the bed. "Consider me all ears."

"I'll start telling you what Oloice told me yesterday," began Clarice. "To make a long story short—after two years, the forced coexistence of the Clans in Tetirstad is becoming unsustainable, because of the other dwarven cities under the mountains still invaded by 'narguts,' as they're called by dwarves. The internal struggles and reprisals have already begun. Moreover, it's impossible to reach Vetmark; the mountain passes are blocked by snow, so we can't contact the dwarves of the Summits until spring. They can't help us. If we want to form an army, it remains of the essence to come to an agreement with Tetirstad."

“Makes sense,” said Kaj. “Care to explain what a nargut is?”

“Narguts are creatures that pop up in many a dwarven legend,” said Oloice, happy to explain. “They’re said to have been feeble little things, originally. They had soft white skin that could burn up in the sunlight, and pupil-less yellow eyes that glowed in the dark. They inhabited the darkest depths of the dwarves’ lost world, the mythical Tesgaran, and were taken on the great divine chariot that transported the dwarves to Elantion after Tesgaran’s destruction. As was their nature, they crept ever deeper, and the elven magic of Elantion transformed them. Their skin became stone-like, and tough as leather, while their bodies turned crooked and their backs hunched. Once peaceful and timid, they became aggressive and devious.”

“Oloice’s brother is conducting excavations in the Rainvale to bring to light the entrance to one of the abandoned cities, which was buried under a large landslide. I met Oloice and some other dwarves at the entrance of an old tunnel used by miners that leads into the vale, so as to obtain information on the excavations and whatever else is happening in Tetirstad. Not only did I run into some anurians on the way there, I got attacked by lalks on the way back... and you know the rest.”

“I see,” said Kaj, nodding.

“I left in a hurry,” Clarice continued, “because I had to let Oloice know about encountering you, as I hope it’ll help us solve some of our problems.”

“Wait a sec, what do I have to do with anything?”

“I don’t know yet; I’m searching for the answer to that myself. What do you know about your family? Your parents?” asked Clarice.

“I was raised by the blacksmith of Lochbis. He adopted me when I was little more than a baby—”

“That explains a lot,” Clarice interrupted.

“It does?”

“It does,” said Clarice.

“Wait, does the medallion you left me have anything to do with it?” he asked, showing it to the two.

“By the gods!” she exclaimed in amazement, upon seeing the medallion’s faint glow.

“What?” said Kaj.

Oloice jumped onto his chair. “Then you really did find it!” he marveled at Clarice.

“Yes...” she said, incredulous.

“Anyone want to fill me in?” asked Kaj, annoyed.

“That medallion tells us I’m right. That the intel was correct,” replied the nalnir excitedly, pointing. “Your true family lineage has its origins elsewhere, but I don’t know much more...”

Kaj looked at the shining medallion at his neck, and then eyed her incredulously. “What are you talking about? You mean to say you might know my real family?”

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know!” she replied. “You need to keep it hidden until we’re someplace else. You’ll have to come with me to Nidath. Period.”

“Why should I? I could just take it off and toss it away!” said Kaj, confused.

“Because if you really want to know about your family, you have to trust me!” said Clarice.

Oloice got his words in: “Kaj, we’re both here for you at this point. I understand why you’d be confused—”

“And angry...!” said Kaj.

“And angry,” said the dwarf.

Kaj turned to Clarice: “What about your leg? How can it already be almost healed? Not to mention the people at the sanctuary. I’m sure it was you.”

“I have healing abilities, but I can’t use them on myself, as they have no effect on me. I treated them because I wanted to... happy?”

Kaj nodded. He needed some fresh air, so he headed for the door. “Give me some time. I need to think.”

IV

Two days later, Clarice had fully recovered. She and Oloice had settled into the sanctuary, which was completely empty. The skies were grey and covered in heavy clouds, and it snowed for most of the day. Kaj decided to peek out the window, but he never caught sight of either of the two, and the snow and chill that had conquered the outside were not exactly a welcome vista. Then, suddenly, he saw a cloaked figure advancing rapidly in the storm. It was Clarice.

The elf knocked on the door, which Kaj promptly opened.

“You’ll let me in, right?” she asked, trembling.

“Of course! Warm yourself by the fire,” he said, surprised.

“Good grief, it’s a tempest out there!” she said, rubbing her hands.

“And not knowing where else to go, you ventured here,” he said dryly.

“Just as it appears.” The elf looked at him and smiled, then concentrated again on warming her hands by the fire, taking off her cloak and placing it on the chair, before putting her gloves on the table.

“Did you come to tell me about the big bad storm outside?” asked Kaj, still a bit bitter.

“I came here to give you this.” She pulled out a crumpled letter. “It’s been in my pocket for too long, so it’s a bit worse for

wear. When I found the medallion, I went back to Nidath to look into matters...”

Kaj took the parchment, and when he opened it, he realized it was a letter from the elven king, Yenven Hushblade. Skimming, he reached the point where Yenven wished Clarice success in her search for the medallion’s rightful owner (even if he didn’t approve of her sheer fixation). Kaj looked up at her, and the nalnir stared at him, waiting for some sign. Kaj handed her back the letter, after which a disappointed expression dawned on her face.

“That’s it? That’s your reaction? How about a little curiosity? I don’t know why you’re so hostile, but I won’t let you destroy the dreams of everyone who wants to go home, and who’s fighting to realize that dream,” said Clarice. For a moment, she seemed not to know what to do, but then she put on her gloves and cloak back on, and pulled up her hood. “Your journey to the Whitetrunk made an impression on me, but apparently I’d deluded myself...”

“What does that mean?”

“You demonstrated excellent battle skills, but you seem to lack everything else.”

“You don’t know the first thing about me, Clarice,” he protested. “You have no right to judge me.”

The elf’s expression turned resigned. “The medallion you wear around your neck is why I’m here. It’s the answer to everything,” she explained. “You have a day to decide, after which I’ll be leaving.”

With that, she opened the door and set forth back into the snowstorm. Rage burned inside her—she had risked her life and had had to give assurances to a man she didn't even know at the time to continue her research, and now she had to fight again, mustering all her strength not to abandon the village and return to her travels. She was almost starting to curse the day she'd found that mysterious medallion.

She headed for the tavern, as she knew she'd find Oloice there. The dwarf was sitting at a table by the sidelines, enjoying a plate of hot soup and a nice mug of ale. From time to time, he looked up to regard the distrusting elves from under his bushy eyebrows, without ever removing his head from the plate. When Clarice entered, the dwarf picked up from her expression that things had gone awry.

After the elf left, Kaj sat staring at the wall in front. He closed his eyes for a moment. He gripped the medallion tight in one hand; his curiosity was getting to him. *What if she's right?* he thought. Clarice's words had piqued his curiosity more than he wished to admit. He drank mead until he felt sufficiently drunk, then he got up staggering, laying himself to bed and drifting off to sleep in no time.

*

Far from Fenan, in the winding Spur Valley, the wagon of

Supreme Necromancer Lyrus trundled toward the fort that was constructed next to the temple erected by the Fellowship of the Veil, incorporating it. His bony and wrinkled hand pulled lightly at the heavy fabric that obscured the interior of the carriage, to work out how long the journey would last. All that was visible from inside the small opening was his probing, evil red eye, which scanned the landscape for a while before the curtain closed again. The slopes of the Rugged Range were barren and steep, expanses of grass interspersed with scree and large boulders that had rolled down due to winter avalanches and summer landslides. The vast spruce woods that had reigned undisturbed until two years prior had been razed to the ground due to the battlefields' rapacious demand for wood. The ancient path in Spur Valley had been enlarged and paved by tulvaren soldiers to allow for the constant and speedy passage of troops and wagons. The road's shape was reminiscent of a river, which at times flowed straight and at times meandered in fairly broad bights.

A few curves in the road ahead, the creaking of the heavy gate at the walls could be heard. The wagon, pulled by mighty horses, entered and proceeded quickly to the fort's central corps. The great hall was lit only by torches and candles, as sunlight reached the interior. Lyrus was finally able to exit the wagon. The tulvar was very old, and was rumored to have far surpassed the 150-year mark. He was also very tall, with a bony body that made him appear slender, white hair, and fiery red eyes that seemed all the brighter compared to his dark attire.

“Welcome back, Supreme Necromancer,” said one of the Fellowship mages, visibly nervous.

The old man waved his hand and everyone moved aside. Stepping slowly, and accompanied by his long cane and the tinkling of his heavy, crystal-studded silver belt, he headed toward the corridor that accessed the temple. Upon reaching the portal, a stooped and slender being approached him, covered by a light cotton garment that had been mended and stained several times. The collar at his neck was the symbol of his condition, and he limped on his bare feet. It was Snort, Lyrus’s personal uggar, to whom he entrusted the belt and cane.

“You know that dallying in this way is not good for you, my lord,” said the mage shrilly.

“Have you prepared everything?” asked Lyrus.

“Of course, as you commanded.”

The old man went to the portal and neared the circle of crystals that kept it stable. He folded up the sleeve of his tunic, exposing his arm and the crystals he had set into his flesh. Then he stretched out his hand, and lightning flashed toward it. The crystals began to shine, and as their light strengthened, the elderly necromancer regained his strength.

“Wretch!” Lyrus shouted. “Bring the sacrifice.”

The uggar appeared, tugging an elven corpse by the rope around its neck. Arriving at the necromancer, he tied the rope to an iron ring planted in the floor.

“I Snort,” said Snort, pointing to himself. He handed the

elderly tulvar a crystal chalice and oval metal plate containing an assortment of particular ingredients. Lyrus ignored that statement, regarding him contemptuously.

“The ceremonial dagger,” he ordered.

Snort obeyed, and handed him the dagger.

“Now get out of my sight,” said Lyrus.

Snort bowed precariously low before the necromancer, who, with a wave of his hand, judged the uggar’s presence superfluous. And so Snort dragged his feet out of the room.

Nobody could witness the ritual, and the tulvars outside the door, together with Snort, could only tremble and hope they would never end up in Lyrus’s hands. The ritual ended after a few hours, and the necromancer retired to his chambers, while the spy he had just created walked toward his destination—the city of Nidath.

*

Meanwhile, in Fenan, Kaj woke up late that same morning, feeling like his head was about to burst. He looked out a window and saw that it had stopped snowing. The sun timidly peeked out from behind the clouds, its bright rays blinding him for a second. He washed his face, and as he dried off, he found himself staring at his old trunk, which he hadn’t opened since he’d gotten back to Fenan. He needed to do it if he wanted to follow Clarice, as everything he needed was in there. He threw the towel on the

bed, bent down in front of the trunk, and slowly opened its lid. As soon as he saw its contents, his heart skipped a beat. They were mementoes of times past—and they were all he'd managed to recover from his prior home. The first thing he picked up was his old diary. His hands trembled, and he struggled to hold back tears. He remembered every single word. He opened it, and saw that period of his life flash before his eyes. A few pages in, he found the portrait. She was so beautiful. He'd drawn her while she was reading. *She'd loved to read*, he thought. He felt lost; the pain tore through his heart as he relived that terrible scene. Blood everywhere, as she lay pale on the ground. He found himself sitting on the floor with his diary in hand, and his shirt wet with tears. He wiped his eyes and pulled a bag out of the trunk. Inside it, there were still a few coins he'd kept for remembrance's sake, and a white scroll. His father taught him all the secrets a good blacksmith should know, like how to fight and how to forge swords. Kaj used to assist him in everything, and on the day of the assault on Lochbis, he had been bargaining for ore elsewhere. The last object in the trunk was his sword, which he had forged himself. It was his pride. Kaj grabbed the hilt and pulled it out of its sheath—it was perfectly oiled, clean, and shiny. He saw his reflection on the blade, and, locking eyes with himself, he realized that he wasn't the man he once was. He got up and started getting dressed. He picked up his old leather armor, leg protectors, bracelets, tunic, gloves, and boots. He was amazed that everything still fit him perfectly. He tucked the sheath into

his belt, and with another belt, he secured the sword in place. Then he slung the bag over his shoulder and took everything that could prove useful before finally fastening his cloak. In that moment, he felt invigorated.

The blanket of snow had rendered the village silent and deserted. Kaj arrived at the sanctuary and knocked on its door. He heard approaching footsteps, and sure enough, the door opened. It was Clarice.

With a nod, she let him in. “You’ll have to buy me a drink, Oloice,” she said, satisfied.

“I’ll be damned! I hate to admit it, but you were right,” said Oloice, to his chagrin.

“I’m always right!” she replied.

“I have to apologize to both of you. I wasn’t at my finest,” said Kaj.

“Then have your a nice mug of beer and let’s put all of the misunderstandings to rest,” proposed Oloice, as he approached to pat Kaj on the arm.

“Thank you, Oloice, but not now...” said Kaj, to a stupefied Oloice.

“You must be joking,” he replied.

“I already drank too much last night. Offer it to Clarice,” he suggested.

“Ha! If I indulged in drink every time Oloice offered, I’d be a wreck!”

“Why do you think I travel with an elf? More alcohol for me!” quipped the dwarf contentedly. “You’re such party poopers, the both of you!”

Clarice smiled, shaking her head. Then she turned serious: “We’re leaving tomorrow. I think you should go tell Cilna. She cares about you a great deal.”

Kaj nodded. “She’s like a sister to me. I owe her an explanation. I’ll pay her a visit tomorrow.”

Night descended upon the village, and with it, silence. Kaj was lying on his cot. The gloomy and rhythmic hooting of an owl marked the passage of time, and the man imagined that it was Vesid (or “Ebarul,” as the elves called her), the evanescent goddess of foresight and wisdom. Humans invoked Vesid in order to find their way again, and if the goddess deemed them worthy, she would light the way with her lantern.

Clarice was looking out the window, toward the west. The conversation she’d had with Oloice a few days back came to mind. The dwarf had expressed his doubts about Kaj, but instead of sowing doubt in her, he’d just convinced her that she’d done well to keep searching. She was the one who found the medallion and the glimmer it emitted; now that it was around Kaj’s neck, it had to mean he was a descendant of Aidan III’s lineage, just like in the manuscripts at Nidath she’d read. She was worried about the journey ahead—there was a lot of snow, and they would certainly have to make frequent stops in order to avoid freezing.

“Can I bother you?” said Kaj, giving her a start.

“It’s no bother,” said the elf, motioning for the man to come closer.

“Can’t sleep?”

“No. My mind’s racing,” she admitted.

“What are you thinking about?”

“A lot and nothing at the same time. Though I think you deserve to know something about me...” The elf stopped for a moment, waiting for his response.

“Do tell. I’m listening.”

“As I’ve told you, I come from the Red Rises, and my family used to produce and sell fermented juice. Until, one night, Djazrem slavers came to the region and looted the village. In all the turmoil, I lost sight of my parents, and so they captured me to sell me along with the other children...”

She stopped, alarmed by the odd noises coming from outside. She promptly hushed Kaj, who’d been about to comment on her story.

Kaj’s eyes asked her what was going on.

“Don’t you hear?” she said under her breath.

Kaj strained his ears, and suddenly, he heard quick and heavy footsteps on the wooden bridge. They leaned out the window, and saw the dancing flames of a number of torches. One look was all it took to have them gripping their own arms.

“Oloice! Wake up!” shouted Clarice, hitting the dwarf so hard she almost pushed him off the bed.

“What’s going on!?” he exclaimed, shocked.

“They’re attacking the village! Orcs!” Kaj yelled, at the door.

Oloice took up his axe and dashed out of the sanctuary. “Why here?”

The elf shook her head. “No idea!”

Both followed Oloice into the fray and traded blows with the orcs. There were around twenty in all; only rarely were orcs seen in such numbers beyond the Slumbering Peaks. Some were short, and some were tall, but all were brawny, with large swords, hefty spiked clubs and two-headed axes in hand. Their characteristic greenish skin was leathery, and they proudly sported ritual scars and war paints on their wrinkled snouts. Their clothes were smelly and dirty, made from parts of armor sewn together, combined with fur, wool, and chain mail. They wore trophies such as teeth, ears or fingers around their necks. The stench was unbearable.

The enemy had entered some houses, using torches to set fires. The furnishings of those homes burned, and the flames flared up, affecting the support beams of the rooves. The stones they were composed of split due to the contrast between the heat of the blaze and the icy air exterior. Kaj looked around and saw the tavern burning. The contents of the barrels of beer and mead fed the conflagration, and the bottles of booze burst. On the other hand, the thatched rooves were resisting the flames thanks to the melting snow dampening the beams.

The battle raged on. The orcs were formidable adversaries;

some had bypassed the defenses and set fire to the other side of Fenan as well. The village's inhabitants gathered in droves at the grand square, the monstrous beasts chasing them down and disemboweling anyone they could reach. The group of soldiers who'd left Fenan in previous days had tailed the monsters here. Arriving, they squared off against some of the orcs.

Meanwhile, Kaj helped some take shelter from both the orcs and the fires. The thick shroud of smoke had him coughing and his eyes burning. He took on some of the orcs, then glanced at Oloice, who was swinging his axe with fervor. He also saw Clarice a little further on; she had just made short work of a big and heavy one. While he was distracted, an orc rushed him, and Kaj managed by some miracle to fend off its sword, avoiding a lethal blow. He took advantage of the orc's sluggishness to injure it on the leg and back. The enemy gave Kaj a scratch on the arm, and the man groaned in sudden pain, though he managed to pierce its throat clean through in retaliation.

Cilna ran to see him, weeping. "Kaj, they're dead!" she cried out, devastated by the loss of her parents. "Help me! Please!"

Kaj's heart turned heavy, but she couldn't be with him, so he accompanied her to some others. "Stay with them, Cilna."

He then went to the bridge and, together with Clarice and the militiamen, killed the last remaining orcs.

"Get the survivors out of here!" ordered the Commander of the group, after the clash ended.

"Thank the gods you've arrived!" exclaimed the elf.

“We should’ve predicted they’d come here,” admitted the militiaman bitterly.

The village lay in ruins; few were the houses that had not been affected by the flames, and the safest structure was the sanctuary. Some militiamen moved the seriously injured to the building, while the others were assembled to be taken to a camp for survivors that was under development in the Heathermoor. Oloice and Kaj made sure that the orcs were all dead and that no one was trapped under wreckage. Cilna refused to leave Kaj, and screamed his name. She tried to make her way over to the man. One of the warriors held her back, but she managed to free herself from his grip and run off. After just a few steps, a house collapsed in front of her, frightening her; the road was now blocked by a burning beam. The young woman screamed at Kaj, who spotted her and ran to meet her.

“Go with them, Cilna; they’ll take you to safety,” he urged.

“But I want to go with you, Kaj!” she protested, crying.

The man shook his head. “You can’t. My journey will be a dangerous one,” he said. “You’ll be kept safe, and I’ll come back as soon as I can, I promise you.”

Clarice was behind him. “Don’t make promises,” she said harshly, holding out her things.

A militiaman grabbed Cilna, lifting her up and bringing her back with the group. Kaj felt distressed by what had happened, and shocked by that unexpected battle. Oloice joined him and Clarice, and handed his things to the elf. The two gripped each

other's wrists in greeting. Clarice raised her hand to her heart and bowed, while Oloice thumped his chest. Kaj thus gleaned how deep their friendship was.

Clarice and Kaj set off on their march. Dawn would break shortly, and the long and intricate paths through the thick of the Shadetrail were the only way forward.

*

Much further south, amidst the Shrouded Hills, tulvaren troops led by Zund arrived after two weeks of travel. Forging the Black River, they entered the territory of the Twin Liegedoms. The Shrouded Hills were part of Kelast County, administered by Jarl Hurley, the trusted bishop of King Osman IV, who had entrusted him with the task of protecting the Savorfruit Hillocks when the next invasion occurred. Hurley was an excellent leader, and had managed to defend the Kelast's Bastion much longer than expected.

Behind the County, the Twin Liegedoms, headed by the nobles Pugh and Alston, had surrendered to the invaders after witnessing the defeat of Jarl Hurley at the hands of King Athal, pledging to deliver two thirds of their annual fruit harvest to the tulvars.

That day, a messenger from the outpost on the Black River was riding fast toward the High Liegedom. He left the horse

at the entrance of the city and ran toward Pugh's Palace. Exhausted, he collapsed in front of the nobleman's desk, who (with some difficulty) rose from his armchair and stood before the messenger. His prominent belly, big arms and his impressive rump allowed him to inspire a not inconsiderable amount of awe, to say nothing of his face, marked as it was by his supreme passion for wine, sweets, and meats. Thick black eyebrows topped his beady brown eyes, and his outsize nose was pockmarked and glossy. Pugh wore clothes almost as old as he was, and he was well over sixty years old. The red woolen garment that reached his knees was discolored and stained. His belly's girth was further highlighted by a creased brown leather belt. The light-colored linen under-tunic poked out from the sleeves of his garment, and their ends had been mended several times over. His high leather boots were also shabby and discolored. His head was always covered by a white cap and a blue woolen beret. The only thing that made him recognizable as the Lord of the city was his thick and heavy gold necklace, attached to an equally heavy, emerald-studded medallion with the emblem of the Pughs.

"Why the haste?" asked Pugh, sipping from his chalice.

"General Zund is currently traveling down the road to your palace," he gasped.

Pugh's eyes widened, his wine going down the wrong pipe. "Why didn't you say that right away!?" he shouted, spitting up his drink. "I should have you thrown into the dungeons, and leave

you at the mercy of the beast!” By now he had turned purple.

The man, prostrate at his feet, was about to be seized by the tunic by the nobleman’s fat hand when the blare of the rampart horn echoed through the city. Pugh stiffened, and treaded with heavy steps toward the window. Zund was at the gates; he had no time to spare for the messenger. And so he left him alone in the library as coldly as he’d welcomed him, frantically exiting the building to receive his guest.

“Pugh...” said Zund, disgust written all over his face.

“Great General Zund,” began a panting Pugh adoringly. “What an immense honor! What can I do for you, as your humble servant?”

Zund’s red eyes leered at him. He loathed the deal his father had struck, and despised that useless stooge human even more. “The King was disappointed in the quality of the tribute last month: withered, sour-tasting fruit.”

Pugh paled, and searched for the right words. “Grand General... we... I... have looked for the best fruits...” The tulvar’s silence seemed endless to the man; he felt his eyes on him, and did not dare to raise his head.

“I ought to punish you, but unfortunately I’m here for another reason,” said Zund.

The man gulped loudly, unable to say a solitary word. He guided the General towards his palace, where he himself served bloody meats and fermented keb-brew, made from the juice of

kebs, pineapple-like fruits from Alceas that were so pungent that kebbrew was drinkable only by tulvars.

After the banquet, the nobleman really began to shake in his boots. It was never a good sign when Zund appeared. The man remained silent while the tulvar sipped the brew from his metal chalice.

“For some animals, you’d make for a great meal, with all the fat on you,” said Zund.

“Definitely, my General,” said Pugh, cowed.

Zund took the last sip and then, as if seized by a moment of madness, he rose quickly, for Pugh to find himself with the blade of a tulvaren sword pressed against his throat. The nobleman shivered, squinted his eyes, and held them shut until he felt the cold metal on his skin.

“Are you feeding the beast regularly?” asked the tulvar.

“Of course...” Pugh answered, trembling as he opened his eyes.

“Good.” The tulvar sat on the Lord’s throne. “That good-for-nothing Alston is later than usual. You had better make sure he’s coming,” he concluded with contempt.

“At once, General!” exclaimed Pugh, flustered and shaken.

In the meantime, Alston of the Low Liegedom had entered the city, and was preparing to appear at the palace. Pugh came out, and soon they were standing in each other’s company. Short in stature, and dressed in his usual blue velvet clothes, Alston wore

a ring-shaped hat, from which a flap of blue cloth descended down one side. Over his chest, he wore a large brooch with his family emblem. His curly, blonde hair covered his ears, framing his long, gaunt face. His hook nose and small mouth did nothing for his looks. The inhabitants of the Low Liededom often joked that his mother must have laid with a goblin.

“Well you took your sweet time!” snapped Pugh.

The nobleman looked at him, and with his usual monotone he said: “So where’s General Zund?”

Pugh started pushing his peer along. “You’d best present yourself to him immediately!”

Bored and listless, Alston entered the palace. “Grand General Zund! I can assure you that we didn’t expect you here in the Twin Liededoms...” he said, inspiring terror in all the humans present.

Zund walked up to Alston. “Your idiocy is unmatched!” he shouted angrily. He took the aristocrat by the clothes and forced him to the ground, pressing his face with his foot against the muddy boot tracks mixed with dung and piss. “You shall pay for your insolence by crawling to my throne.”

Alston crawled across the room, coming to Zund’s feet with his clothes soiled. Terrified and trembling, he was sweating profusely, and as soon as the General leaned over him, he burst into tears like a child, his stammering, incomprehensible gibberish punctuated by moans.

“Now beg!” shouted the tulvar.

“Mercy! Have mercy!” whined Alston. “I’ll do anything,

Supreme General... for you, and for our only King!”

“Get up, scum!” Zund nodded to one of his soldiers, who recalled about twenty tulvars into the palace, and they settled along the walls of the hall; at that point it was clear that they would not leave soon. The door opened, and in stepped Auril, Zund’s younger sister. On the orders of the General, Alston was chained and gagged by the soldiers while Pugh took the brunt of Auril’s magic. The priestess, with a quick swish of her hand, raised the man from the ground as he moaned fearfully. Auril’s invisible power wrapped around Pugh’s throat, and his feeble flesh was devoid of the strength with which to resist.

Zund approached the man, and motioned for his sister to ease her grip; Pugh’s toes barely touched the floor. “Tell me where the crypt is located,” ordered the tulvar.

“What crypt!?” choked Pugh. He yelped when he felt a sharp pain in the abdomen, as if a dagger had pierced him. Auril clenched her other hand into a fist, and he felt his guts squeeze.

“That’s enough,” Zund told his sister. “The ancient crypt, you useless chowhound! Tell me where it is!”

The man did not reply. The torture continued and Zund asked him the same question over and over.

At her brother’s behest, the Priestess threw him against a wall, prompting the man to shriek anew. She crept into Pugh’s head in search of his deepest fears, and when she found what she was looking for, she smirked. The man saw the being he feared appear before his eyes. He began scampering every which

way across the hall, gripped by a profound terror. He wanted to escape, but Auril's grip forced him to the wall, and when the being approached him, he screeched.

"Leave him," Zund ordered his sister.

She obeyed, and Pugh started running with the animal chasing him, eventually curling up in a corner and covering his eyes, waiting for the horrid beast to disappear.

"That's enough! Make that hen disappear!" cried the man, worn out and whimpering. "I don't know of any accursed crypt! There have never been crypts here!"

Auril dispelled the hen, and the man remained curled up in the corner.

Zund came up to him and whispered, "I'm choosing to believe you for now..."

Alston began fidgeting, making it clear that he wanted to speak; the tulvars took his gag off. "There are no crypts here, only orchards and poor peasant villages!" stressed the nobleman, trying to convince him as best he could.

"How can we be so sure?" asked Auril.

"They'll talk," said her brother.

Zund ordered his soldiers to retrieve two cages in town, to be hung from the ceiling with the two men locked inside. Having seized the palace, he deployed troops in the two cities of the Twin Liedoms. Finding traces of the ancient artifact would take longer than expected.

The dungeons of the Palace of the High Liegedom were dead silent. Auril had made her way down into these dark corridors. She brandished no torch or brazier; only the virk crystal at her neck illuminated her path. The beast being kept in one of those rooms was a jorfang—a woman who lived in the woods, and who transformed into a wolf, appearing during times of hardship. Legends painted the she-beasts as protectors, defending any children, injured people, and the otherwise troubled who had found themselves in the woods by taking them to safe havens, pouncing on any who would do them harm. Being the personifications of the wolf of the goddess Sesta, jorfangs were considered a boon, but whenever they were torn from their mission, they became unable to turn back into women, and the beasts were beset by an uncontrollable bloodlust. With her magic, the priestess was one of the few able to control a jorfang. Having reached the beginning of the corridor that housed its prison at the other end, she could already hear its heavy breathing. She heard it groan when, now at the heavy wood-and-iron door, the light emanating from the crystal aroused the beast from its torpor. A swift lunge, and the creature was at the door; Auril felt its warm and smelly breath through the small grate. The priestess opened the door without hesitation and entered. Auril's red eyes shining, the beast sensed her power, and stepped back, quietening down and growling lightly.

“I see it hasn't been long since you've fed,” said Auril, satisfied. She knew that the more prey the jorfang received, the

more ferocious and voracious it became. The stench of what remained of its meal was unbearable, the dried blood staining the beast's fangs and mouth as well as its claws. The Priestess heard the door to the dungeons open, and saw the jorfang was getting worked up at the sight of the approaching torches and the odor of the guards. Auril left the cell and closed the heavy door behind her. The two men, terrified, hid a little girl. The priestess approached her, studying her. The little human, about seven years old, was undernourished, with blonde shoulder-length hair, blue eyes, and a pale pink complexion. She wore peasant clothes and hailed from a family of drifters.

“There’s nothing fearsome about *you*,” she said in disgust.

The girl did not answer, instead going toward the cell. She opened the door, and the jorfang remained crouched in a corner, its yellow eyes observing the little girl without ever losing sight of the slightest move on the part of the guards, who dragged the remains of its meal out. The little girl’s eyes wandered aimlessly in the dark in which she was always wrapped; she was blind from birth, and had been chosen for this dubious honor for that very reason.

Two floors above, Zund was organizing three patrols to comb through the territory of the Twin Liegedoms and find the crypt. After a spot of torture, Pugh and Alston had let spill a local legend that spoke of an ancient elven sanctuary dating back to before the Great Exodus, when elves dominated the entirety of

Elantion. The two men, hanging inside the cages suspended from the large ceiling beam, lay motionless, moaning occasionally due to the wounds that had gotten infected after a few days.

The patrols were already out of town, headed for the orchards. Upon their arrival at the place they had been pointed toward, they found a large, doubtlessly millennium-old apple tree. The village that was situated a little further on was deserted; everyone had barricaded themselves inside their houses, but when the Captain of the battalion threatened to set the entire village on fire if they did not leave posthaste, doors swung reluctantly open, and the tulvaren soldiers fettered the inhabitants, forcing them to dig.

In the meantime, a tulvaren messenger arrived at the Palace of the High Liegdom with an order from the King, calling Auril and the General to Eyjanborg.

“At long last!” exclaimed the priestess, happy to be able to leave the city. “Have you chosen their punishment?”

“Release them,” ordered Zund.

The soldiers let the cages down, and when the cages touched the ground, the soldiers dragged the two dying nobles out of them.

“Sort them out quickly; I can’t stand to stay here any longer,” urged Auril impatiently. “Or you can leave them to me,” she said, hinting at a spell to attack the two of them.

“No, Sister!” he admonished her. “Bring the beast!”

The little girl led the jorfang to the palace hall, where the two men awaited their end. Zund, seated on Pugh’s throne, motioned

for the girl to be taken away, and for the beast to be allowed to go wild. "I'd like to savor the throes of their agony," he said, his tone harsh and base.

The jorfang stood upright, in all its grandeur: slightly taller than Zund, massive, and muscular. Its arms, shoulders, head and back were covered in black, bristly hair, and its long hands sported sharp claws. Its greyish skin had many scars; in Zund's eyes, it was at once monstrous and magnificent.

With a leap, it set upon Pugh, crouching to sniff at him; the man felt its breath and the bristly hairs on its face, and saw the yellowed fangs that dripped their slobber on him. The she-beast's hands pressed him, its claws piercing clothes and flesh alike. The nobleman screamed in pain, his gaze terrified, and his endurance pushed to its limit. His eyes rolled upwards, and he lost consciousness. The jorfang bit him on the head, its jaws cracking the man's skull. Blood spurted everywhere. Driven by bestial instinct, it reared up and vigorously shook the body of the liege who was now a tattered rag doll. Zund watched with satisfaction, sipping his keb-brew. Alston, not far from the lake of blood, tried to move, to run away. The beast pounced on him, and he flailed, crying and moaning, every part of his body aching from the torture. It jumped on his back, and the bones of his spine and neck were summarily broken. Alston was dead. The jorfang sniffed it, tearing at his back with one paw and turning over the corpse. It opened his belly and tried to partake, but found the man's entrails unappetizing. Satiated, it squatted down in a

corner of the room, sniffed the floor, and lay down.

Zund was satisfied, and rose from the throne.

“What ought we to do with the beast?” asked a tulvar.

The General glanced at the servants of the Palace, who had been forced to silently observe from the open gallery. He signaled, and the soldiers made the servants come down and stand before the General. Zund observed them all in turn, analyzing them. He brushed against them with his slender hand, lingering on a well-built young man. Though Zund’s gaze was chilling, the human stared right back, an act of audacity that surprised him. “He will remain here. Chain the others and send them to excavate,” he commanded, his eyes still on the human. “Enjoy the comforts of the Palace, and survive if you can.”

“You’ll be defeated one day! Mark my words!” the man shouted defiantly.

“We shall see,” said Zund, leaving the Palace. “Block all of the exits.”

V

Clarice and Kaj proceeded swiftly through the thick of the Shadetrail Forest toward Nidath. Five days had passed since Fenan, and when they arrived near a crossing, Clarice motioned for him to stoop down. After a moment, he could make out some chittering in the distance. Kaj leaned out of the bushes a little, and saw a gang of about ten goblins dragging a dead and partially eaten horse with ropes. The noisy and scatterbrained nature of goblins made them easy to identify, especially for those who, like Clarice, had traveled extensively. The barefoot, olive-skinned things were small and skeletal, with long arms and large hands. Their elongated heads were sprinkled with a few bristly hairs, and their hirsuteness varied. Their prominent eyes were large and yellow, their noses wide and flattened, and their mouths wide with thin lips that hid sharp teeth, perfect for biting and tearing. They wore only light shirts, often full of holes, and trousers in leather or wool, frayed and dirty. They did not suffer from the cold, having always lived in harsh climates. Armed with daggers, they were very fast and sneaky. They could jump on the shoulders of an unfortunate soul and start biting until their prey breathed its last.

“Come here, Kaj!” she scolded him softly. “We don’t need them spotting us. We’ll take them by surprise.”

He squinted, thinking. “It can be done...”

“At my nod, we attack. Wait here.”

The Vagabond waited for the last goblin to pass their hiding place, strung her bow, and killed two in rapid succession. The creatures, alarmed, threw themselves at Kaj, who had emerged from the bushes in the meantime. He stabbed the first one that stood before him, and narrowly dodged another’s blade, lunging to the side and wounding that goblin, which collapsed. The elf struck them with arrows as Kaj engaged them. By the end, only one was left, and it was in the throes of death; Clarice strode toward it with an arrow in her hand, and stuck said arrow in its throat. With a pained grimace, the goblin was killed outright.

Cold and deadly, Kaj thought.

“Nice work,” nodded the elf.

“I haven’t held this sword in such a long time! I had forgotten how well-balanced it is,” he exclaimed, slicing the air with it some. Kaj’s eyes glimmered with a young boy’s enthusiasm.

“That’s good to hear. You’ll be forced to use it often,” said the nalnir.

“Yes, though I’ll have to practice. I’m a bit rusty...”

They began to collect whatever might come in handy, and they found themselves staring at the dead horse with a certain craving. One shared glance, and they knew what needed to be done.

Late that night, the fire was still burning merrily before their eyes. The bits of horse had made for the perfect dinner; the meat cooked over the fire had become tender and juicy, and they

ate it all up in in next to no time. Kaj, leaning against a rock and wrapped in a bear's fur, was enjoying the heat of the fire; Clarice was lying down a little further on, covered by her cloak and sleeping soundly. Kaj felt snowflakes on his face.

“Clarice.”

“What is it?” she asked, immediately alert.

“Sorry to wake you up, but we have a problem.”

She looked up, and understood. “Snow. Just what we needed. I was hoping it at least wouldn't snow tonight. We'd better get moving.”

“I can hear lalks in the distance,” Kaj said, concerned.

“I hear them, too...” she said, sharing his worry.

They gathered their belongings, donned their furs, and continued down the path, each wielding a torch. Traversing the forest was going to prove much more difficult than expected.

The light snowfall soon took a turn for the stormy. The freezing winds, and the snowflakes, which had become little pellets of ice, made the path slippery and their footing uncertain. More and more, they could feel the cold creeping through the leather of the boots. The hours before the dawn seemed to stretch on for an eternity. Eventually, they were forced to leave the path to seek shelter. Not far away, they found a rocky ledge that formed a kind of roof. With some not-too-damp brushwood that they found in the clefts of the rocks, they created a beautiful fire, somewhat brightening the otherwise sad dawn that awaited them. The sky was gloomy, the clouds low and full. In the distance, they

could still hear the chilling howls of the lalks that were stalking them relentlessly.

“You haven’t slept a single wink,” said the elf. “We have a few hours; try to rest. I’ll stand guard.” Clarice’s tone revealed her concern. She placed a hand on the man’s shoulder, and motioned for him to lie down. Kaj thanked her, and as soon as he lay down, he felt all his muscles relax. The heat of the fire and the fur were invigorating, and before he knew it, he was asleep.

He woke up to a gloomy morning, but at least the forest was less scary. The snow was abating, and when he got up, he saw that Clarice was not there. He stirred, turning around to look for her. She came out from behind a tree.

She stood in front of him, staring. “Take it.” She tossed him some bread and cheese from the bag, and then started stoking the fire.

Kaj looked at her. “Thank you.”

It was too wet out, and Clarice’s efforts to light the fire were in vain.

“Ugh! Damn snow!” she exclaimed, chucking a piece of wood into the distance. “Let’s get going. We should take advantage of the distance between us and the lalks. The closer we get to Nidath, the safer we ought to be.” She looked around, carefully inspecting their forest environs.

The snows turned heavier and heavier as the storms raged. The trees looked like skeletons, their bare branches unable to

beat back the snow's invasion of the forest floor. On the contrary, the pines and firs bore branches full of snow, which, by falling, threatened to bury Clarice and Kaj a couple of times. The air was cold, and felt like a hundred blades nicking their faces. The bitter chill exhausted them to the bone. Kaj turned his gaze to Clarice from time to time, and noticed that she kept bringing a hand to the thigh which had been injured by the lalks, pressing and rubbing it.

A few days passed. The winds were domineering, icy, and incredibly strong, penetrating even the smallest crevices of their clothes. They skirted along a rock face in the hopes of finding a cave or other ledge that could help them get through the night. "It looks like we're not going to have as much luck this time," said Kaj, utterly worn out and breathing heavily.

"But I remember there being a cave around here." Clarice examined the rock. "Maybe we're there already. Aha! Here it is!"

Kaj heaved a sigh of relief, happy to finally escape the elements. They gathered as much wood as possible, hoping to be able to light a fire.

"Hurry up," said the elf. "There are lalks..."

"Where?" Kaj asked worriedly.

"Hidden among the trees. We're talking at least a dozen." Clarice was not okay. Her hands were trembling. Her last misadventure with lalks was fresh in her mind. As she tried to light the fire, she looked around non-stop, nervous and frightened. It was the first time Kaj had seen her this way.

“Let me do it.” The man enclosed the nalnir’s hands in his, trying to calm her down. He looked her in the eyes. They were deep, magnetic. For a moment, he stayed like that, enchanted. “We’ll face them if have to. We’ll make it.”

The elf withdrew her hands, leaving the flint in Kaj’s. The man gave a sharp blow with the dagger, and the spark set the tinder on fire. Clarice stood brandishing a torch, lighting two fires at the threshold of the cave to create a safe perimeter. In front of the second fire, a lalk’s eyes shone. They were terribly close, much more than usual.

Clarice put down her torch and walked slowly away, without turning her back on it. “Looks like the fire isn’t scaring them this time...”

“That’s just great,” said Kaj, worried. “Do you have a real plan?”

Clarice’s response was not what he was expecting. “Not really, but they’ll soon get tired of waiting... we ought to wait for them to make the first move.”

Several hours passed. The Vagabond’s prediction hadn’t been very accurate, and the wait was unnerving. Kaj was crouched by the fire. He wanted to keep the movements of those beasts under control; they were in position all around, watching. The man saw the sheen of their fur under the moonlight, and heard their wound-up nervous panting. Suddenly, they both heard a noise from very close by. Kaj saw one of the lalks advancing, and

Clarice quickly took up the bow.

“Scare it with the torch!” she screamed.

“It doesn’t seem to work!” he retorted.

“Move that damned torch!” the elf repeated again, this time with more conviction.

Kaj waved the torch vigorously, but the beast did not retreat. In fact, it had now crossed over into their perimeter. Clarice walked over to Kaj and set the arrowhead on fire. Other lalks approached from the center—they were surrounded. Suddenly, they heard a threatening growl; the others stopped as a huge one appeared in the center.

“Oh, fantastic,” Kaj exclaimed sarcastically. He thought for a moment, and came up with an idea. He lowered himself, grabbed another burning stick and, without taking his eyes off the lalks, threw it toward one of the beasts. The animal avoided it and fled, frightened. They were all baring their teeth. Kaj and Clarice had started to back away, as the lalks got closer and closer. Clarice aimed her bow and shot an arrow, which pierced a neck. The animal staggered for a second, before collapsing. At that point, the largest of the lalks backed away, leaving the battlefield to the others, who were determined to tear them apart.

“Well, now what?” asked Kaj, frightened.

“Now we entrap them,” said Clarice confidently.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Something stupid...”

Clarice took up the bow and killed two beasts, while Kaj

wounded the lalk that pounced on him, forcing it to flee. With incredible aim, Clarice dropped the bow to the ground and threw a dagger at the last lalk. The animal avoided the blow, so she stunned it with a punch on the muzzle and then slit its throat.

“Well done!” said Kaj.

Clarice did not reply; she closely examined the forest. “We can rest tonight; we’ll use their bodies as a warning.”

Dawn came, and it was time to set off. Clarice was still sleeping, so Kaj walked over to her and woke her up. That morning, the clouds had given way to blue skies, and the snow glimmered in the light of the new day as it filtered through the branches of the pine trees. The winds had subsided, and there seemed to be nothing nearby that could pose a danger and spoil the day’s beauty. They passed a clearing, almost slipping on several sheets of ice in the process, and reached a small stream that disappeared underneath the rocks, only to reappear much further down in the plains. The shore was dangerously slippery with all the snow that covered it, but strangely, the water was not frozen.

Kaj saw Clarice approach the water. If she fell into it, she could catch something. “Clarice! You could slip!” he exclaimed, too forcefully.

“Dammit, are you mad!?” The elf glared at him. She bent down to fill the bottle, then threw it to the man with a defiant look. “How caring of you, Kaj. Up until a few days ago, I was the one who had to babysit you...” she said self-importantly.

“Babysit me?” he asked incredulously.

She stared at him intently for a moment. “You bet!”

Kaj returned her gaze without replying. Eventually, he tossed his backpack at her to provoke her, but Clarice elegantly ignored his provocation and resumed her march.

For a good hour, they continued apace along the stream, until they reached the point where it sank under the rocks. The path was impassable in places; the cliffs and the ups and downs forced them to take detour after detour. The time needed to reach Nidath was getting longer. They had to take advantage of the good weather and cover as much distance as they could.

They walked all night. The moonlight accompanied them faithfully, but by the crack of dawn, the clouds had returned, low and gloomy, a portent of fresh new storms. Clarice looked up at the sky. The tops of the tallest trees were swaying in the winds, which were once again strong and freezing. Suddenly, they heard something from behind. Clarice stopped, stretching out an arm to stop Kaj and gesturing for him to keep silent. The man knew what was following them; he sensed the same stench: lalks.

“They’re tailing us,” Clarice said softly.

The man did not lose heart. “Seeing how they screwed us over the other day, I’d say it’s better to attack first, so we can take them by surprise.”

“That’s just what I was thinking. Let’s let them get close.” The elf rose slowly, peering into the forest. Suddenly, the pack leader

came forward, and two other lalks flanked it. Clarice had her bow in hand, and Kaj drew his sword. Two arrows were enough to kill the two lalks at the sides. But the largest remained. The beast avoided Clarice's arrow, thereby yielding its side, and Kaj quickly lunged, managing to score a hit. The lalk turned quickly, growling and baring its teeth. Then Clarice laid down the bow and drew her daggers, before leaping forward for the strike. The animal knocked the elf down, and she lost her blades. The beast was close, and she managed to injure it in on one leg with the dagger that she had fastened to her leg, hidden by her tunic. The animal whined and bled profusely as it fled back into the forest.

Clarice was sitting on the ground. Kaj held out a hand to help her up.

"You were great back there," he said.

She gave Kaj a satisfied look, accepted his hand, and got to her feet. "I know," replied the elf.

The man shook his head in amusement, feeling the traces of blood left by the animal. "It's losing a lot of blood. We should give chase and finish the job."

"Agreed," she nodded.

Trying not to make noise, they followed the lalk's trail of blood into the undergrowth, weapons in hand to avoid surprises. Little by little, the size of the pools of blood was increasing, and the footprints were getting irregular—the animal was slowing down. They found it a little further on in a huge pool of blood, completely resigned to its fate. Clarice approached, and the beast

did not attempt to attack. It only emitted a short growl. The elf took out the dagger, and when she was about to stab it in the heart, she saw that the animal had a collar. She moved its hair and discovered the stone attached to its hide. Kaj came closer to get a better look. The two exchanged a surprised look, and then the elf cut the collar. Suddenly, the animal stirred, frightening them both. It raised its head, looking at Clarice and breathing heavily, then expired.

They both stood there, speechless. Clarice looked at the collar: the stone, which until recently had been shining, was now dull and opaque.

“What do you think?” asked the man.

“Do you want to know what I think, Kaj?” the elf put forward a hypothesis: “The collar was controlling it, but when it looked at me before it died, it seemed to be nothing more than a normal wolf...”

Kaj chewed over her words. “If it’s the collar that makes it a ‘lalk,’ as you elves call it, that means it’s the work of necromancers.”

“They can probably see through the eyes of the wolf, and the stone influences the wolves that are close to it, inducing them to form a pack...” she said, searching for an explanation.

“It almost seemed like it wanted to tell you something,” hazarded Kaj.

“Without the collar, it had reverted to being under the influence of the goddess Efabi, and stopped being my enemy,”

she noted, feeling for the beast. “It was my duty to free it from the pain I had caused it, and to send its soul to the Goddess.” Angry, the elf’s fist tightened around the collar. “I’ll have to make amends.”

*

Another two days’ walk brought them closer to the innermost area of the forest. The elven magic was so powerful that, despite it being winter, the vegetation was green and lush. Only in that area of Elelreel could one almost breathe in the power of ancient magic—the magic surrounding the creation of the first elves Nariel and Fayriss. They proceeded rapidly despite the shifting terrain. The elf’s purposeful steps served as a guide for Kaj. Suddenly, Clarice stopped to listen.

“What?” asked Kaj, surprised.

“Follow me!”

Clarice ran through the vegetation with such agility that Kaj could not keep up; he kept getting caught in branches. Going past the last shrubs, she spotted with great surprise a group of elves that had recently killed four lalks. When Kaj arrived, he was out of breath and exhausted. He tried to recover by resting his hands on his knees.

“They dead?” asked Clarice, checking the bodies.

“Of course!” replied an irritated elf.

Clarice found another collar at the neck of one of the animals.

She cut it off, and shoved it in the elf's face. "These collars are controlling the wolves! You don't have to kill them!"

"They attacked us and we defended ourselves," replied another member of the group.

Clarice swore in Elvish. Kaj convinced her that she had to explain herself better. "I believe that by removing the collars from the lalks that wear them, they will return to being simple wolves..." she said.

The elf stared at Clarice, eyes wide. "Incredible!"

"We found out a few days ago," said Kaj.

The elf looked at him with suspicion. "And who would you be?"

"My name is Kaj," he replied eagerly, hoping for a nod of acknowledgement.

"You weren't asked," said the elf.

Clarice stepped in. "We're going to Nidath; are you headed there, too?"

The elf shook his head. "No. We don't even come from the city."

"Oh..." exclaimed the Vagabond, surprised.

Without another word to Clarice, the group of elves resumed their journey.

The night came quickly, and the rocky wall under which they took refuge was grooved by the climbing ivy which created a soft coating. Some branches drooped downwards, creating a cascade

of green that concealed and protected the rocky cranny where they were resting. The moss all around them was lush, its intense green contrasted by the white froth of the stream's waters.

They lit a nice fire, and Kaj, sitting in front of the elf, observed her frowning face as he tried to eat one of the roots they had collected. Eventually, he tossed the last piece into the fire. Clarice locked eyes with Kaj, and when she realized that he was laughing at the expressions she was making, she herself started to laugh; she wiped her mouth with her hand and took a swig from her flask.

"This area of the forest is the safest. Not even lalks venture beyond the edge of the Old Larches. They are the oldest and full of magic, and they form the border around the innermost area of the forest," she explained, pointing.

"Where the city is," Kaj concluded.

"Correct."

"I'm learning."

She looked at him with a smile, and the man noticed how deep and beautiful her eyes were, then looked away bashfully. "I saw some bushes earlier. I'm going to check if they have berries," said Kaj.

The man picked up large, juicy dark blue blueberries and mushrooms. As he returned to the field he observed the forest, and the fact that he was unable to orient himself made him anxious. When he returned, Clarice was looking after the fire.

"I happened on some berries and mushrooms," he said.

“Amazed I managed to find any in the dead of winter.”

The elf turned her gaze to Kaj. The light of the fire made her eyes sparkle.

“Have a taste,” said the man, offering.

Though she knew how they tasted, she ate them with relish.

“Thank you.”

“So how long till we reach town?” he asked.

“I don’t know exactly; we’ve made too many detours,” she admitted.

“There’s one thing I still don’t get. Are we going to Nidath just to see the King, or is there some other reason?”

The elf thought for a moment. “The key thing is to talk to the King,” he began. “The rest will come by itself... I think...”

“Count me intrigued!” he quipped.

Clarice grinned. “King Yenven will explain much, and then we will have to decide where to start.”

“To do what?” Kaj asked.

“Whatever we have to do...” she replied, unsure.

“Why don’t you finish the account of your past for me?” asked the man. “You left me hanging in Fenan.”

“The story is short,” she began. “They kidnapped me alongside the other children, and locked us in cages in a stable. I managed to open the lock and escape. I went back to the village, and discovered that they were all dead, so I left that place. A family hosted me for a few days, but it was not the place for me, so I left...”

“Where to?” Kaj interrupted her.

“First, I joined a group of smugglers who needed small, fast hands. Then I worked with thieves and mercenaries,” she explained, frowning at the sight of Kaj’s expression.

“Whoa, okay!” he exclaimed. “Smugglers, thieves and mercenaries?”

“Yes, and I was the best,” she replied.

“I don’t doubt it...”

“A few months before the invasion, I left the group I was with and became a Vagabond. I took up jobs that were fairly exacting, but they paid me well...”

“And did you continue after the invasion?” Kaj asked.

“King Yenven had heard of me, and asked me to join the army which sought to contain the invasion. After the defeat, I continued to be a Vagabond, though I still followed the King’s orders.”

“Thanks for telling me,” Kaj said sincerely. “I guess it’s up to me now...”

“We should rest, and take advantage of this night of peace.”

They agreed that Kaj would rest first, and when there were only a few hours left before the crack of dawn, it was Clarice’s turn to immediately collapse and fall into a deep sleep.

Kaj had rested well enough, and was now intent on keeping the fire alive. The winds were cold, and occasionally carried droplets of water from the stream, which evaporated as soon as

they touched the burning wood. The man stood up to stretch his legs, and pushed beyond the ivy branches; the stream's waters flowed energetically, and their burbling was relaxing. Suddenly, he saw them shine in a peculiar way, as if crossed by a flash of light that dissolved not far ahead. He stood still for a moment, then looked up at the stream, and saw it again. He flinched with a start. Stepping forward to try to see it better, the silvery glow about the waters grew stronger and stronger; he stared at the light until, at last, he could no longer keep from covering his eyes. When it started to diminish, he saw a female figure, which was gradually coming into focus.

“Alana?” he asked incredulously.

“Hi, Kaj,” said the apparition.

“How can you be here?” His voice trembled, and his eyes filled with tears; he couldn't believe it. “Forgive me for what happened! I couldn't protect you!”

The girl lifted a hand to calm her brother down. “Don't be hasty, Kaj. Everything happens for a reason,” she said in reassuring tones.

Her voice came from a faraway place, and her figure, evanescent and luminous, created a small whirlpool on the surface of the water that slowly carried the drops of water all around her in an elegant and sinuous dance. He watched her, and thought her beautiful—extremely beautiful. More so than he remembered. She was so delicate and gentle.

“I see much regret within you, Brother, but you must not be

so remorseful, because my death was your salvation. You would have died in the city's pyre, but instead you are now pursuing a greater goal."

"But... don't you care about your own life? I wasn't there to save you! You paid the price for my mistakes!" he said, tears running down his cheeks.

"My death saved *your* life, and in your life there will be glory. You have to find out who you really are. You will find the answers you seek, but not now. I see through to your troubled soul, and to my delight, I see you have not changed," she smiled sweetly.

"I understand what you're telling me... I have to silence the woes of my past. Just like Clarice said."

"Exactly. My spirit is at peace, and I will continue to guide you, as I have done so far, Brother. Now I see *inside* you; I see who you are. See you soon," she said, reaching a hand for his face. Kaj felt a cold gust when his fingers touched it, and then, she dissolved as quickly as she had appeared.

"No! Alana! Wait! Don't go away!" he shouted despondently. "Don't leave me..." his voice trailed off.

"Kaj, what's going on? I heard you scream!" said Clarice, emerging from the cave.

"You wouldn't understand! She was... she was *here!* She arose from the water; there was a silvery light, and then she appeared! I swear it!" he said muddle-headedly, pointing to where she had appeared.

"Calm down! *Who* was here?" Clarice took him by the arm,

trying to calm him down.

“My sister . . .” He lowered his eyes. Deciding he had to tell her what had happened, he tromped sulkily toward the fire to warm himself.

“Did her essence appear to you from the stream’s waters? You are one of the few who can make that claim,” said the elf, following him there; she looked at him with equal parts admiration and disbelief.

“I have to tell you what happened. Maybe it’ll help with what’s been plaguing me.” He leaned over to pick up his old diary, and opened it to show Alana’s portrait to Clarice, who formed a high opinion of her traveling companion’s drawing skills. The young woman had long straight hair, a dainty face, a sweet smile, cheerful and deep eyes, and a contented expression. A delicate necklace dangled from her slender neck.

“There used to be trouble among some groups of criminals in Lochbis. Their dealings were damaging the city’s economy, and city guards often turned a blind eye in exchange for bribes. I’d frequently visit Freh’s ore market, though sometimes we needed other, more hard-to-find wares, so I’d go sometimes to the large market in Varlas, too. One day, I’d returned from Freh, tired and hungry. I couldn’t wait to get home. I wasn’t paying enough attention to what was going on around me, and a group of bandits attacked me. I fought back, but they stole a lot. The losses were substantial, and when my father went to complain to the guards, they told him that he should be thankful I was still alive.” He

sighed. “Long story short: they tried to steal weapons from the smithy, but unfortunately for them, I was there. I killed all three of them. Once I heard the guards, I cleaned up the scene, and then I recognized their tattoos: they were the same symbols that I had seen on the bandits outside the city. I found others from the same gang and killed them without thinking about the consequences. Then, one day, I found a note hanging on the smithy door that mentioned Alana. I rushed home, and when I opened the door...” His voice trembled a little. He got a lump in his throat, and his eyes began to moisten. Clarice was listening quite attentively. Kaj got up to take a sip of water and try to calm down.

“Don’t repress your feelings; it’ll only make things worse.”

“It’s better this way,” he said. He sat down and continued: “She was dead.” His voice was still choked, and a tear ran down his cheek. “The note on Alana’s body read: ‘Eye for an eye.’ I found out to my bitter chagrin that one of the bandits I had killed was the son of the gang’s leader. If nothing else, thanks to that, the corrupt guards were arrested and hanged.” Kaj clenched his fists. “The message was addressed to our parents, but it was my fault,” he concluded.

“I never would have imagined,” she admitted, visibly affected. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Trying not to burst into tears, he asked: “How was Alana able to show herself to me?”

“Most of these streams originate from the glaciers of the Hallowed Heights. These waters are full of the ancient and

powerful magic that can be found there. They say only those on journeys of self-discovery can see loved ones or benevolent spirits. Those spirits can show people the way forward, or warn them about some personal shortcoming or imminent mistake they're about to commit. Some believe that what's actually appearing is the essence of the god Luhreil, who takes on a familiar appearance, or that they can arouse trust in the person who sees them." Her words did not cause Kaj's anxiety to abate. He was still in shock, and he still felt Alana's cold fingers on his cheek. "Whatever happened to me, it'll take me a while to digest."

"Cilna reminds you of her, doesn't she?"

Kaj nodded. "Yeah... she looks a lot like her..." He was clearly upset; he couldn't make heads or tails of what had happened. He had always been a realist and skeptic, and apart from magic, he had never given credence to anything related to gods and divine manifestations. Clarice respected his mood, and knew she had to leave him alone for a while.

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Far from the forest, much further east, Sheera was busy distributing patrols along the banks of the Twinlakes. The marsh that connected the two lake basins had allowed some escaped slaves to reach what remained of Lochbis, venturing through the Whitetrunk and the grueling paths of the valleys

of the Slumbering Peaks toward Falcon's Pass. The orders from Eyjanborg were clear: they were to kill any fugitive slaves, along with the militia groups that provided them with relatively safe escape routes.

When Sheera arrived at Godar, she found some soldiers waiting for her. The highest-ranked among them presented himself, awaiting her orders.

"Is everyone here?" she asked.

"Yes, Commander," replied the Chosen Soldier.

"Good. I will not give specific orders until tomorrow," she yelled, proceeding toward the house that would have been her lodging. "Watch the beginning of the path that leads into the swamp, and check the nearby banks of the Twinlakes. I won't tolerate any blunders."

The soldier went on his way, and Sheera, annoyed and tired, holed up behind the door. Inside the building, the uggars had been waiting for her arrival for days; everything had been perfectly arranged. The sight of the food-laden table was quite welcome. Sheera put down her armor and weapons and sat at the table, devouring the splendid meat that the slaves had only lightly cooked for her, leaving it full of blood inside. She drank many a chalice of keb-brew, and partook of the grapes and berries that she so loved. She was sated when she could not even bring a small blueberry to her mouth any longer.

Just then, a knock on the door.

"Who in blazes!?" she shouted.

Quickly, a female slave went to open up. A messenger wrapped in a cloak and hood entered the house and handed Sheera a note. The tulvar read it and gave the male slave a glass of keb-brew as a reward, whispering a few words in the slave's ear before sending him away.

An hour later, the Commander was in her room, waiting for the time designated by the message to arrive. She was swinging before her eyes the pendant her mother had given her. Sometimes it pulsed, and at other times, the light was more constant. Sheera could tell it was reacting to her mood. She had been the first female tulvar in several generations not to become a priestess. Forced to struggle constantly to earn a place in the military hierarchy, in ways her brothers Ramil and Ziglan hadn't needed to, she learned to control her powers, and thereby stopped being an iveti (a so-called "wandering witch")—she was now accepted as a warrior.

Outside the window, a sudden light flashed from the nearby woods, followed by another, and another. It was the signal—the hour of the meeting had arrived. She went to the bedroom door, and heard no footsteps or movements in the whole house. She put on her cloak and pulled up a large hood, before opening the door and scanning the corridor cautiously. Everyone was sleeping. With haste, she left the house, her footfalls light. The moon bathed everything in its light. When she caught sight of the trees, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“You may come out,” she said.

Three tulvars emerged from the darkness of the bushes. “We were afraid you were busy,” stated one of them.

“Why are we meeting earlier than planned?” asked Sheera.

The three looked at each other, and Enetor Urgal-Khun—a tall tulvar with extremely elegant bearing, the eldest of two brothers, and a member of Khelun’s right hand House (which was to say, the House of Sheera’s mother)—took the floor. “Datnu Turag-Khalin is dead.”

The princess burned with emotion. “What?”

“You knew he didn’t have the right motivation to go into all this. The Turag-Khalins have always been spineless. Not one of history’s greatest tulvars has ever hailed from that line. What matters is that she can’t harm any of us, now that she’s dead.”

“How did it happen?” asked Sheera.

“I killed her myself,” said Enetor. “Your brother Ziglan is in Banran now. His presence alone make her start raving. I killed her because otherwise she would have spilled everything,” he told those assembled. “It had to be done, Sheera.”

She knew he was right. “How did you justify it?”

“I blamed the human slave. I promised him that I would kill him myself without making him suffer...”

Zler Naled turned to Sheera. “We lost one individual to save the whole. Remember the rules you laid down: our goal is more important than any one person.”

“I know, Zler...” she admitted, unable to hide her soft spot for

him. Zler was a few years older than her, and they'd known each other from an early age. Zler equaled Sheera in height, and he possessed a beautiful physique but also an angular face. He too was elegant, even if his gait and poise revealed he was a warrior at heart.

The last among them was the witty and bashful Rerik Irbhun. He was an important Archon of Athal, on whose shoulders the burden of all the commercial affairs of his house was placed. He was listening carefully, and thinking over his words. "Sheera, we have to decide how we proceed from this point forward; many are starting to get impatient... what do we know about the dwarves?"

"We know nothing for certain. The wall that blocks access to the Iron Plateau is constantly guarded by dwarves and the warriors of the human Brownbear Clan, killing any and all tulvars who draw near," explained Sheera.

"Not to mention how isolated Vetmark is; every access-way has been blocked by the snow..." Enetor reminded everyone.

They could hear excited voices from afar: the sentries had sighted slaves. Sheera was forced to return to the city, and so the four saluted each other, and the meeting was ended.

VI

In the following four days, the journey had been relatively uneventful. Kaj and Clarice were walking along a path to a shallower area of the forest. The light became more and more intense, with the sides of the path hemmed by small ferns and shrubs. The trees were very tall, with huge trunks, wrinkled and gnarled. Meanwhile, the branches were entwined in an increasingly dense weave. A light mist embraced the area, and the humidity that made them feel so unpleasantly wet amplified the already bitter cold.

The path often changed direction and incline; they had been walking uphill for a long time, and the stream was now at least three meters below them. The vegetation was constantly changing, and they ventured from very dense areas to clearings and glades. The bend of the stream they were skirting was very sharp, and there they came across the first bridge. It stood out against a small waterfall, and sunbeams were penetrating the thick foliage of the fir trees, creating picturesque light effects.

“Does that mean we’ve arrived?” Kaj asked, hoping.

“I’m afraid not, but there’s a system of bridges and walkways ahead. They’ll help us cross all the rocky ledges to Nidath.”

“Well that’s a relief!”

“I was afraid I’d never see these places again,” she admitted, looking around. “Let’s get a move on. We can pick up the pace

now.”

A little further on, the walkways kept crossing over the stream, winding tortuously to avoid the trees.

“These bridges were built during the time of the Great Reconciliation for the sake of pilgrims and travelers who, not being elves, didn’t know the forest. The wood they’re made of comes from ancient trees. I can feel their strength.” Clarice put her hands on one of the trunks, and closing her eyes, perceived its inner essence—or at least, that’s how it really seemed to him.

“You’re feeling its power?” he asked, intrigued. She nodded.

The wood of the walkway was dark, and covered with moss in places. The fallen yellow leaves created a striking contrast with the dark green of the trees and the bright green of the moss. The closer they came to the city, the more surreal it seemed—the leaves were fallen as in autumn, but the trees were not bare. On the contrary, they stood quite lush and leafy. During the first few days of the journey, they had braved blizzards; now they were preoccupied only with trying not to slip on the wet leaves.

Kaj was absorbed in his thoughts. Alana’s appearance. The things Clarice had told him in Fenan. Oloice’s arrival. The orcs that had attacked the village. Every one of these events seemed to be linked by some invisible thread. Eventually, he realized that he didn’t know who he was, or for that matter what he would become. All he knew for sure was that he could shape his own destiny.

Clarice's voice jolted him from his thoughts. "Kaj, are you listening to me?"

"Err... I... I wasn't listening." He smiled, but realized that was not the appropriate response in this particular scenario, as she was quite annoyed.

"How about giving me a moment of your time? As I was saying, it's not long now. The forest has changed a lot since the last time I was here, so I can't be sure of our position, but if I'm not mistaken, we should be close to the Sacred Brume of Desail."

"One of your gods?" asked Kaj, interested.

"She's the goddess of the hunt. According to the stories, the Brume is where Desail used to rest after her hunting excursions. Let me let you in on something: 'Initiates'—that is, elves that are preparing to become hunters—learn the art of hunting from their Master, a position achieved after receiving the Embrace of the Goddess. Have you ever wondered how an elf can outflank their prey without being heard or noticed?"

"I always imagined it's because of elves' connection to the forest."

Clarice shook her head, satisfied. "I'll tell you a story. It's said that, in the beginning, Desail was a distracted goddess. During a hunting trip, her arrow missed its mark, and the animal it hit suffered so much that its groans of pain shocked Desail's kind soul. She then decided that none of the children of Efabi, the goddess of the forest, should ever have to suffer like this, and

gave her hunters what we call Desail's Breath. A hunter is only a hunter if the Breath accompanies them; it's what allows them to get close enough to their prey that they can exercise enough precision to kill the animal instantly. A hunter does not want to kill; they do it to feed their people, so it is incumbent on the hunter to make their prey's death peaceful. The hunter entrusts their arrow to Desail, and the soul of the prey to Efabi by reciting some words in the Tongue of Old. The Sacred Brume of Desail is the only place in the forest surrounded by a perennial patch of fog, hence the name. Some like to think that when there are small patches of fog in the forest, Desail is out hunting," she finished, contented.

"Charming. These sorts of things aren't widely known in the other realms."

"I was wondering whether we could afford to take a detour... I'd like to go to the Sacred Brume."

"I think we have time. Plus, now I'm curious to see the place myself."

Clarice lit up, happy she had his approval. Kaj understood that it was important to her, so they left the walkway system for a fairly rough side path. After a while, stones about twenty inches tall appeared on the sides of the path, each carved with strange symbols. Clarice approached the first rock, touching the symbol with her fingers almost fearfully.

"What are these symbols?"

"These are words in the Tongue of Old. It's a prayer that

accompanies the hunter who goes down the path leading to the Brume, but I can't translate what the words mean. It wouldn't make sense in your language."

The elf's words did not surprise him. He made a joke. "Strange tongues and secret prayers! So much for the Reconciliation!" he exclaimed.

She replied in kind, with a pinch of dry wit: "This is who we are—what makes us elves. It'd be like asking humans to stop being greedy, but you know that's not happening."

"Hey! That's a cutting remark. Not all humans are greedy, you know," he scolded her, proud to be a human.

Clarice laughed heartily. "Please, Kaj, you don't believe that yourself! I've never met a human who doesn't allow succumb to corruption over a few tinkling coins!"

Kaj took after her example and replied in kind: "Sure, maybe we can be a tad bit greedy, but we have our good points, too. Besides you know a human who doesn't correspond to your description..."

"Really? Who would that be?" she asked, feigning surprise.

"Last I checked, you never offered me coin to follow you on this crazy adventure. In fact, I came despite the fact many would have considered your arguments unconvincing."

"And yet, you're tagging along. My unconvincing arguments were enough to convince you."

Kaj shook his head in amusement. "Okay, okay, I give up."

Clarice looked down, laughing. "I must admit that out of all

the humans I have known, you are the most likeable... at least so far.”

The man was taken aback. “Thanks. I’d like to say the same about you, but you’re an elf...” For a moment, he was afraid that came out wrong, but fortunately she understood what he meant.

“I know.” The smile soon left her face. “Unfortunately, among the noble families in Nidath, there are still elves who do not accept the Reconciliation and the sharing of their culture...” she looked up, and stopped in her tracks.

“There it is—the Sacred Brume of Desail. Follow me!”

A thick fog obscured the path, and Kaj saw Clarice disappear into it.

“Where did you go?” he asked.

“Don’t worry, come in!” she urged.

Kaj advanced forward, and after a few steps in the fog, he was paralyzed: a huge tree stood at the center of the clearing. The trunk’s knots and the curling of its branches reminded him of a woman’s body. Its powerful roots were visible in places; when Kaj placed his hand on the trunk, he felt the energy that emanated from it, and he pulled back almost out of fear. The tree had a bright aura all around it, and was surrounded by various objects: there were tablets and stones, engraved and decorated with elven symbols and words, and there were the beautiful yellow flowers that grew all around the tree. Clarice pointed out the skins, teeth and skulls of animals neatly arranged at the foot, all gifts and tokens of thanks left by the hunters who had received the Breath.

At the center of all the offers lay a larger tablet, and above it, resting on a root, sat the huge skull of some deer-like creature.

“That skull... what animal is it?”

“That trophy, together with the largest tablet below it, belong to the Master. He faced his opponent and received Desail’s Embrace, and that’s the skull of a silverdeer, the rarest and most shy deer species of all the Shadetrail. If one finds you and guides you, and if you manage to kill it, it means that Desail has given you her Embrace; silverdeer are immune to the Breath. When the hunter receives the Embrace, they are wrapped in Desail’s invisible fog and can approach it without running away. When a silverdeer is killed, two of them are said to mate during the next full moon, to restore balance. These deer only conceive during nights of the full moon, and the birth of a fawn is extremely rare.”

“It’d be nice to see one...” The tale had Kaj fascinated.

“Don’t get your hopes up!” she replied, laughing.

“I was serious,” said Kaj, annoyed.

But Clarice didn’t heed his response. “Let’s go.”

They passed through the fog, and Clarice knelt facing the Brume, reciting a few words in Elvish before resuming the journey.

They were walking apace, but Clarice was forced to slow down from time to time to wait for Kaj, who stopped to observe the landscape and to catch his breath. She realized that her desire to get to the city was strong, and that it was affecting her mood.

“Could you avoid stopping constantly?” she eventually snapped.

“I’ve never been here. These places are so beautiful. You can’t blame me if I stop to enjoy them a little,” he replied.

“We’re not here for the view!” she scolded him.

“The world won’t suddenly disappear if I stop to look at the forest for a moment,” he replied, annoyed.

Clarice took a deep breath before answering. She tried to ignore that. “Shall we go now?” Upon seeing Kaj had no intention of moving, she couldn’t hold it in any longer. “Get a damn move on! I won’t wait for you if you don’t move. “

“What’s the matter with you? I was just resting!” he said, worked up now.

“What’s the matter with *me*? We have to. Reach. Nidath. And you keep wasting time!”

“Then go, if you’re so impatient! I’ll follow the bridges and find the city by myself!”

“Oh sure! And after three or four walkways, you’d already be headed in the wrong direction!” she retorted.

“I can find my way perfectly well, thank you very much!”

She shook her head. “Why don’t you stop being such a capricious child?” Clarice’s anger was evident.

“Capricious child? You are unbearably arrogant and irritating!”

With a gesture of annoyance, the elf spoke words in Elvish whose meaning Kaj did not know, but which were obviously an insult.

“At least have the decency to cuss me out in my language, and not with words I don’t understand! It’s always like that with elves. You people don’t really care about peace; it’s only everyone else that respects it!”

Clarice then turned toward him threateningly. “Don’t you dare talk of peace, Kaj! Don’t try to tell me elves don’t respect peace! You humans have never missed an opportunity to humiliate and abuse us! You are corrupt and obtuse and you don’t realize when they’re giving you a helping hand!”

“Are you done?” he asked cockily, then continued. “You know why I *dare tell you*? Because I think you are so obsessed with being an elf that you don’t realize how similar you are to me! You prefer to submit to the rules of arrogant nobles who don’t even support you. You should know by now that there is no absolute good in any race! Maybe that’s why it was a human who managed to spearhead the Reconciliation, and not an elf! Which isn’t surprising, since at least we are better than you at being humble!” He paused, and realized he had hit a nerve.

Clarice turned around, taking him unawares: the man let himself be pushed against the balustrade of the bridge, and she pressed her forearm against his neck, making a fist with the other hand. He blocked it not far from his cheek. The man felt the elf’s body on him.

They stared at each other for a while. She was obviously angry at him for what he had said. Her glare could almost kill. But deep down, she knew that Kaj was right.

Clarice lowered her fist, and he let go of her hand.

“Could you let me go now?” asked the man.

Clarice also lowered her other arm, then turned abruptly and hit him with an extremely painful backhanded slap.

Kaj felt his cheek burning. “Ouch! Are you crazy? “

“You deserved a good slap to the face. Mark yourself lucky.”

“Of course, now you’ll tell me that you did it out of respect for me...” he teased.

“That’s why I didn’t hit you with that punch. *Out of respect...*” she said, emphasizing those last words.

Kaj shook his head. He no longer wished to argue.

After three hours of travel, the forest had suddenly opened up before their eyes, to make way for the expanse where the city stood. Nidath was imposing—new quarters and new walls had been added to the original layout of the city. In addition, after the invasion, an expanse of huts built by refugees had developed all around the outer walls. Leaving the forest, they crossed a small stretch of plains, and then entered the hutment that surrounded the city, which had become a huge market: colorful, lively, noisy, and chaotic. There were people of all races, dwarves, elves, and humans. There were those who sold, those who bought, those who bargained, and those who argued. And they all shared one thing in common—they were ignoring the two. Kaj looked around in disbelief. It was almost like they had returned to the ore market in Freh or Lochbis. Or, even better, to the large market in

Varlas. He found himself smiling, his eyes enchanted, forgetting all else for a moment.

They passed that area slowly, wending their way through noisy throngs. At a certain point, all that mess gave way to a very different area, which was no longer a hodgepodge of huts and stalls, but rather a stretch of stone and brickwork houses.

“Not so fun anymore, is it?” asked Clarice.

“No...”

Kaj was disconcerted by the poverty, so different from the previous area. Everything around them was gloomy. The houses, while more solid, were decaying and bare; the environment was smelly and depressing. The street was always full of people coming and going, but everyone was sullen and withdrawn. Some of them were busy carrying baskets with food that had apparently just been purchased at the market, while other shabbier, scruffier sorts proceeded slowly, keeping their light cloaks tightly closed and their shoulders hunched.

A little further on, majestic walls stood before Kaj’s eyes. They were tall, and decorated in places with splendid climbing ivies. The top of the walls was marked by openings for the archers, framed by simple carved motifs. The wooden gates contrasted with the light-colored stone. Kaj’s mouth was agape. From the walls, towers and spires could be seen, all slender and very white. Farther away, a larger, shining, richly decorated tower was situated, probably forming part of the royal palace.

“Welcome to Nidath,” said Clarice, proud.

“It’s incredible...”

Clarice cracked a half-smile, and headed for the door.

“By the gods! It’s really you!” exclaimed a guard.

“Inform the King immediately and let us in. It’s been a long journey,” she replied.

The gates opened. The port district was decidedly poor, and it was characterized by the very famous and picturesque river landing which had helped trade between Sahelica and Draelia flourish. Nidath had arisen there precisely to facilitate exchange between the nalnirs of Sahelica, who populated the archipelago in ancient times. It was a lively and noisy neighborhood, which, with the passing of generations, had become predominantly human. Criminality abounded, and the city guard presence was scarce and inadequate. Despite the ongoing invasion, there were some ships moored there, and the sailors were intent on moving their cargo to make room for new goods. Ever since the Reconciliation, the bustling taverns along the city road beside the Malivon River succored sailors with drinks, low-quality bar food, and prostitutes. They were next to shops with various exotic goods that gave visitors the impression this place was anything but an elven city.

They walked past another portion of the walls that divided all this from the commercial district, which was more sober and peaceful than the previous one. The construction of the buildings reflected the clearly higher social class. Kaj was surprised by the vastness of the neighborhood, to which numerous wealthy

humans had moved. The paved road went uphill, and led Clarice and Kaj to the ring-walls of the “Citadel,” as it was called by humans. Upon reaching the door, Kaj was blown away by its imposing magnificence. The door opened, and the houses on the sides of the street (as well as the other structures) were made of white, grey, and ivory-colored marble; they were extremely elegant. They were decorated with coils of ivy and expertly carved geometric motifs, and connected by ethereal openwork arches that almost floated above the main road; the windows and walls were decorated with vaults, columns and lanterns. At the end of the road lay a large square, around which stood majestic temples.

Clarice let Kaj drink in the city. “Everything is so harmonious and perfect here.” He was speechless, as he hadn’t expected such beauty.

At that moment, some guards arrived, decked out to the nines. Kaj had always envied the splendor of elven armor, shiny and flawless. Crafted by expert blacksmiths, it was composed of a helmet, breastplate, and boot covers, all in steel, while the other parts were in carved leather. The cloaks they wore were in elven green velvet, and were mostly decorative. They each carried a long spear tipped with eborium alloy, a legendary elven alloy created with a rare iron ore from the distant Plateau of Dragons.

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