

Bonds of Freedom

Roan Mountains, 5261H

Warmth pierced through the cool spring morning breeze as the sun rose over the eastern peaks and into the narrow valley. Kador could feel it on his skin as he sat with his back to the sunshine on the rock slab on the edge of the mountain. He never felt cold, but he enjoyed the way the sun felt when it came.

The morning birds had been singing for the last three hours waiting for the risen sun to make its way up the mountain and down the steep sides into the valley. Kador had been awakened by them and came outside to meditate. He felt his heart beat, his muscles flex, as he sat on the stone outcropping. He felt his ribs expand with every breath.

Almost there, he thought.

He listened to his thoughts, quieting the ones that were unimportant. He studied his words as they came, judging their purpose, their necessity.

At the door.

There it was, the inhabitant of his body. Kador felt himself command his body, moving his blood, expanding his lungs, minding his thoughts. He was with his soul; no, he was his soul. He felt the power behind his life, his true self, He drew that power from his body as a smithy's bellows draws in air. He held it in his chest, pulling his hands in.

Release.

He spoke to the power within his soul, and pulled tight the sinews of his mind, bring the handle of those bellows down with force. He willed it out of his hands, his mind bringing them down to his sides until they met the limestone ground. They fell softly, just a conduit for the unseen power. He felt as the force pushed against the ground, reaching out from his hand but not leaving it.

Dust flew up as the ground crackled under his palms. He opened his eyes slowly to see the stone under his hands broken into a web of cracks, some rocks flying out of their place and rolled away from him. He shook his head and moved his body around, trying to regain his grasp of the physical as well as the metaphysical.

Reset,

He got up each day focused on doing better at harnessing his chi. That is what they had called it. He poured over the notes he had taken from the Lycandrells vast knowledge of the spirit. And Yonai, the old she-elf, had taught him to harness it for battle, using her years of experience on the battlefield and her years of quiet as an acolyte of Lycus. As some Lycandrells, the blessed followers of Lycus that were imbued with his power of the wolf, knew, knowledge and its accompanying power must be protected physically as well as mentally. That is why several packs that followed Lycus were great warriors. Even Lycus had attacked his twin head, Nocht, protecting his followers and saving their wisdom for enlightenment, not as a weapon as Nocht desired. She had regaled him with stories from the Deicide War, battling the tentacled bodiless wickerwends, the fall of the southern city of Sarnishar, and the loss of her friends at the battles against the Revenant and the Sorceress Safranin. The stories were mostly sad in the end, but there was comfort in knowing he was not the only one to have the weight of impossible tasks put on your shoulders, and somehow victory finds its way to the brave and steadfast.

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And he had spent the passing moons mostly alone, researching histories and philosophies of the spirit and in practice harnessing his chi. Brev had sent an engineering corps back to assist in raising a house for him up in the dark hollow of the mountainside. It was not travelled, having no outlet and shortened days due to the steepness of the sides. It was the perfect place to be out of sight and mind as the world settled from the destructible power of dragons and the Stones of Power given to keep those dragons in check.

Kador cocked his head slightly and placed his hands down on the rock as he sat. He stayed motionless for a few seconds in deep concentration, then finally smiled to himself.

“I don’t remember inviting you, outcast,” he said.



“You are stupid. Always playful, like child.”

Kador slid around to face Val, still sitting down.

“Hey, I’m serious. Didn’t you see how seriously I was just sitting? I felt your footsteps from thirty cubits,” he said, hollering at her as she came into the clearing by the cabin. “I

would know those steps anywhere. You walk like an angry Dwarf.”

He got up and met her halfway. He looked into her face; it was familiar, like he had just seen her yesterday. He placed his hand on her shoulder as she did the same. Once the greeting was over, he turned and beckoned her into the cabin.

There was a fire in the fireplace, and a large skillet sat just to the side of some coals slow-cooking beans with stew meat in them. It made the entire cabin smell savory and inviting. His homestead growing up had been lavish for someone raised with very little spoiling, but this smaller three-room cabin had been as comfortable as he had ever been. He pointed to a chair at the table in the kitchen. The table was thick, dark carved wood. The chairs were of the same wood, with cushions of many colors in ornate floral designs. As Val looked around, many of the items in the room appeared to be valuable as vendors would measure.

“Vwhere you get dis,” she asked, patting the table with her hands.

“Ah, well, as Brev was finishing the house, I asked if I could borrow a couple soldiers and go check on my land, where the fire had been. Most of it was burned, but it was unspoiled. The folks that lived close had been very dear friends of the man that raised me, Allistan. They had kept an eye out for bandits and ratkin in the area. So, I was able to save some of the items from the house and bring them here. The house itself, along with the two barns, are too damaged to be fixed, but I don’t plan on going back there anyway. I have someone looking into selling the property.”

“Den I glad I come,” Val said, staring at him with her serious face.

"I have new from my travels and I have news for you," she said,

Kador leaned forward resting his forearms on the table. He wanted to seem interested, but he couldn't imagine what could possibly affect him now.

"I come from the plains to the east. I needed to find some ancient North Tusk totems that are carried in battle. They are very old and had been brought by the hunting party to the place where we destroyed the men and orcs on the farm. When I got there, the woman we invaded..."

"Stayed with."

"She does not have the crops since her husband has been dead. She sold them to another farmer who did not pay her what he agreed."

"That's too bad," Kador said, looking down. For some reason, he had been drawn to her at the time. It was the thought of what she had. She had told him of her life there, the loss of her husband, and all her hopes and fears. The one night they had been there together made him want that life even more, rekindling his longing for quiet contentment.

"I come to bring you to herr."

Kador's expression became scrunched. That was not at all what the plan had been during the council with the orcs and humans on the field of battle. Brev and Phellis were to claim victory to their superiors, namely the king and his council. Their soldier had watched as they rode bravely to the vast and terrible dragon. They had witnessed them tame the dragon and send it away. Then, in the same moment, they had dismantled the offensive against their borders by the orcs. Songs would probably be sung about them to the next generation.

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This worked in their favor as their word as unquestionable heroes would be believed. No mention of the power of the stone would be mentioned. The effects of the Stone of Power would be blamed on the dragon and its mystical abilities that no one could possibly understand. They would also say that they worked out a truce with the orcs to leave their settlements alone. Later a meeting could convene to discuss borders and a new status quo. The orc council, Brev, Phellis, and Kador and Val knew that would realistically last about as long as it took to bake the celebratory feast, but it bought enough time for the thought of the dragon and the unusual powers to be fogged over. Only after a replacement could be raised up and the keeping of the Stone passed on to another, Kador would live his life reclusively.

“So, that’s not the plan, Val.”

“You said you are selling land?” She switched to her native tongue as she became more animated.

“Uh, yeah, my family’s farm. There’s nowhere to live on it. The fire burned down most of it.”

“He said to sell a portion of the northwest fields to the neighboring landowner, then you can fix the house. Your child will be raised with his inheritance, and when the fullness of time has come, he will protect the stone, and you will be free.”

“What child? Where are you getting this nonsense?”

Val grabbed her sack she had set in a chair at the table and pulled out a dirty cloth wrapped around a spherical object.

“Is that,” Kador began, but he didn’t need to finish. He knew what it was.

“Where did you get this?”

“I got this from the Council. It had been brought to Oga, the Orc Father. I have been travelling for months. I accompanied

the Council to their meeting place. It was there in the Hall of the Great Fire that I met with Oga. And Oga met with the god-man."

Kador understood her. The Old One had been able to converse with Oga as he had with several of the Lycandrell at their summit.

"I will tell you now of my travels," Val said, sitting down in the chair across from Kador. Kador slipped down into his as he listening intently.

"As I said, I followed them deep into the Roan mountains. I spent nearly a moon with them, giving a full account of our time together and our time with Rys'Kirkisna. In the absence of clear visions from our own gods, the god-man and dragons are the closest to their authority, it was decided. The orc council has weighed the theft of our land and the callousness of humans against our ability to bond, to make our own clan while I was banished from my own."

"While you were?"

"Shut up, hagam. Listen. So, Oga calls me in the the Hall of the Great Fire. As we sit, he tells of the vision he had. There were two great towers of stone. A mist came from one and covered part of the land. Where it spread, it caused desolation. Trees were uprooted, crops withered, and orcs who lived upon the land died in it. From the other tower, a stream flowed out across the land. Wherever the stream flowed, it healed the land around it, and the trees and crops and orcs, not healing all the destruction from the mist, but enough to make the land habitable. Then, as he walked to the base of the towers, he looked down; they shared a foundation which balanced upon a small pebble. One could not be torn down without causing the other to collapse. Both were necessary for orcs to survive.

"He told me that this vision was from many moons ago. It was at the time when I hid inside your home as the soldiers

chased me. Once I told him of our meeting and when it had begun, all things became clear to him. You are the pebble."

Kador looked up at her with his head low. None of this answered his initial question to her which was why this is changing the plan that was agreed to.

"The pebble keeps all things in balance. It has immense power. There are forces that seek to prop up either the sickness or the cure, but either one gets heavier, the pebble must redistribute the foundations, giving more room to the weaker. If one falls, they both fall."

"Val, I don't know anything about orc dreams."

"The sickness tower is Uman. They destroy what belongs to my clan. They take from the land and take from the clans and kinds. They amass more and more. The power to destroy the Uman rests in the other tower. But it can never be allowed to defeat the Uman or Revozul would also die. A balancing force is needed to even the forces."

Kador thought about his father and what he had worked so long and hard to achieve over his life. It was the balance of power between what humans could have and what all other nations could have, ensuring that the power to destroy the other was ever achieved.

"So, what does Oga have to say about this vision?"

"The Orc Father recognizes that Uman have a part to play in Revozul's survival. They cannot be wiped out. That being said, he cannot allow them to amass too much power. This will lead to continued conflicts as they try to expand and fight the the North Tusk. And you are the string that holds the cinches the pieces together. You help them when they are weak, as you cull them when they grow wild and stretch too far."

“You’re starting to sound like my father. ‘You’re good and bad, and rich and poor, and I didn’t ask for any...”

Kador stopped. Something was nagging in his memories. He didn’t ask for any of this.

He had told the Old One the night he met Val the same thing, that he didn’t ask for any of this. All he wanted was a family, a home somewhere to call his own, and peace; he would refuse to help the Old one without a promise. The Old One had said that the future was not clear to him because it was changing rapidly in the face of the current trials, but he had made him the promise.

“He actually did it,” he whispered, looking over to Val. “That sly, frustrating old man actually did it the whole time?”

“Vwhat do you says?”

Kador leaned back in his chair and put his hands on his head. He hated the thought of destiny, of not having a choice in the affairs of his own life, and in spitting in the face of fates and their maker, Ocirico, he landed squarely in it.

“Val, don’t you see? The night we met I spoke with the Old One and told him I wouldn’t help out unless I got something out of the deal. I wanted a family, a home I could call my own, and peace for once. By going on this adventure, I have been given this house, a way to salvage my homestead, the promise of a woman and family, and all the quiet time I can take sitting here learning how to be more at peace with myself than I ever thought was even possible. And none of it would have happened if I would have denied his request and instead pursued those on my own. He told me to stop focusing on the end. Aaargh, that’s so frustrating.” Kador sat smirking to himself. “So frustrating... and remarkable. My father told me I can’t change my lot, just the decisions I make. How right he was.”

Kador jumped up and uncovered the orb in the middle of the table. The familiar red glow emanated from inside. The orb had not changed, but the way he saw it had. He no longer saw a mysterious magical ball, but the hidden path to a secret meeting where the mysteries of the world were unfolded. The Old One was not a hazy sorcerer, but a conduit to knowledge. He did not understand, but he trusted him.

As the day wore on, Kador had cleared the table after he had given Val a true meal, the first in a week of traveling to his location. The midday sun finally retreated behind the western mountain peaks. It would be light still for hours, but the extended shade in the valley kept the temperature cool, even in the heat of summer. Val sat in a high-backed chair on the porch of the house. Her eyes drifted up and down the mountainsides surrounding them. Kador joined her, wiping his damp hands on his trousers before he sat in the chair next to her.

“Dis mountain,” she said, nodding behind her to where the house sat, “is not safe.”

“I know. I’ve seen them.”

“You see dem?”

“There is a cave, north of here, just up the mountain a little. Twice now, they have come out that I have seen. I would say they are spirits, myosha, but there is something strange about them. They seem to have all things living. They will consume any creature they find. I have been able to hide myself from them so far, and they only come out of the cave for a brief time and do not wander far.”

“Dey sick.”

Kador turned to Val as he pulled a pipe from his pocket and began stuffing the end.

“You know about them?”

“All know dem. Dey come from elf, uman, orc, even ratkin. Is sick dat come on dem. It eat away body until only left spirit.”

“I went to the tunnels one day, midday. They seem to run deep.”

“Yes, dey go down to goblin home, but dey leave long time.”

Val turned sharply to Kador who was lighting the pipe and pulling air through gently. She finally spoke up, the reason for her visit still heavy on her.

“You cannot stay.”

Kador didn’t turn to her. He was trying to enjoy this last bit of calm before the next phase of his journey got underway.

“Kadorr,” Val said, leaning over and grabbing his shoulder, “I must tell you deh rest of my journey. After Oga had his vision, he spoke with another god-man in another vision, but just before I came to him. This is what he says. He says there is a great warrior sent by the gods in the last great war. They fought against the Dark One and his armies.”

“The Warwizards, yeah. I know of them. Allistan told me of them when I was young. He said they were sent by the Celestials, and they were the reason we won the wars.”

“They all did not return,” she said, turning her chair to face his. “Oga had vision where he saw and spoke with one of them. So, he asked the warrior what he should do. He said that he did not meddle in the affairs of this world any longer. Oga pressed, and he finally said that if the Stone were brought to him, he may be bound to protect it in place of the Elvonnen, since they have disappeared and no longer keep it. But, he would not tell Oga his

location. Oga said he did not know where he was except the cave where the warrior was resting was of light sandstone with flashes of red and black in them. It seemed to be a wasteland, no plants were visible to him."

"That sounds ridiculous. If there was a Warwizard still out there, why wouldn't he come gather the Stone? Aren't they supposed to be ensuring our safety?"

"I do not know. But, Oga asked the one from your stone what he should do. He told him that the Stone of Power was needed here but not for a long time. He said that keeping it safe would not be possible if it were passed from one to another. It needed to be held for some time by one who could withstand the passing of time. But, even after that, he said that passing power to this Warwizard as you call him, he would in turn pass power to you. He says what Mel'ela and her wolves have taught you is only a portion of the power necessary for what will come, and someone will need to pass this knowledge to the next generations, in the tradition of Lycus' gathering of his disciples, a dojo as it is called in wolfkin speech. This must be completed."

Val stared at him in silence. Kador pulled deep on his pipe and sat back in his chair, looking out into the shaded valley. He let the smoke ease slowly from his mouth.

"We could spend countless years searching for him, you know that, right?"

Val shrugged. "You have better things to do with your days? But if we find him fast, you go home and den you no longer banished from you clan."

Kador admitted this much to himself already. It was his best option, not factoring the safety of the Stone of Power. The mountain, however, was also not safe from those who lived under the mountain. The two largest armies, men and orcs, already knew of his whereabouts and of his possession of the

Stone. How long would it be until the information came to someone that could not be trusted, he thought. He sighed.

“What did the Old One say to you?”

“I have not ask him. Is forr you.”

Afternoon turned to evening as they continued their discussions. Kador made arrangements in sealed documents for a portion of his land to be sold and the proceeds to be used to repair the damage to his family’s home. Couriers would take the documents to the scribes at the Hall of Ocirico in Thronefast where the transactions could be carried out. They allowed for the possession of the land to be shared full with Lissara of the House of Leon. She would be taken care of there and little to worry about. In the end, he just wanted to express his desire to return to her as often as he could, although it would not be extended visits and there would probably be long periods in between. But, he pleaded with her to wait for him as he waited for her.

“Val,” he said, sealing the last piece of correspondence. “Are you ready?”

“Is forr you, not me.”

“No, we do this together. From now on, we do everything together. We are clan.”

Kador removed the dirty cloth again from the glowing orb, hesitating.

“He better have an idea of where this Warwizard is. I’m not spending half my life running all over Terminus looking for him. What if he says I am gone for years and I don’t make it back to Lissara, or worse... she doesn’t wait?”

Val shoved him, rocking his shoulders.

“You no listen. You good at that.”

He looked at Val for a moment, his best friend in the world, an orc from a warring tribe searching the world for a god-like warrior in hiding so they can save the world from destruction and be able to return to a normal life. In his mind, it was obviously absurd. In his heart, he seemed more at home in that thought than he ever had before.

He shot a smirk over at Val as he placed his hand on the orb.

“I like where your head’s at, Val,” he said, and smoke began swirling around them.

Black Rose Keep, Luckson Hollow, 9871H

Five years after the assault...

“Is that the best you got?!”

E’mani Karos’ sword riposted the incoming attack. He stepped to the side trying to tangle the feet of his attacker. The other stumbled slightly crossing his feet over to stay postured, but E’mani was too quick. He lunged quickly past their right shoulder, spun counter-clockwise and swung the sword the turning chest of his enemy.

WHACK!

“Son of a -!”

“Yeah! Hurts, doesn’t it,” E’mani said, raising his wooden sword over his head to the cheers of the surrounding soldiers. A few of them exchanged money, half of them begrudgingly.

“Lesson is over, kids,” he said and dropped his sword off in the metal rack at the edge of the courtyard. He looked up and saw one of his lieutenants lock eyes with him.

“Is she finally here, Brandyn?”

“Yessir. She just arrived. Her companion is the only follower. We watched her come all the way from the Pass; there’s no one else.”

“Good, good,” he grinned, and tossed the kerchief he had wiped his sweat with to the lieutenant, who immediately made a sour face.

E’mani headed through the main hall and saw her through the open doors in the foyer.

Helena Albridge strolled up to the foyer, greeting the men chatting by the front doors of the keep. Her eyes looked across the adjoining room and saw E’mani.

E’mani quickened his pace until she was within arm’s reach. He pulled her in and placed his cheek on hers.

“I’m so glad you are here, my love, “ he whispered in her ear. She pulled away for a moment, looked in his eyes, and gently kissed him.

“Come with me,” he said, pulling on her hands. “I have a surprise.”



E'mani pulled her back down the path she arrived on. Down the embankment and through a lightly worn path in the forest until they arrived at a broken down stone cottage. New building materials were lying around on the ground, and it appeared that restoration had already begun. Boards had been set in the open holes as window casings. Even the king's plate for the top of the stone walls was in place to catch the timber for the roof joists. Helena was led in through the opening where the door would be to find a small table and two chairs inside in the kitchen area. It had been already prepared with wine and fruit and cheese and some roasted pheasant.

Sit down, my love," E'mani said, grinning unashamedly. He pushed in her chair as she slid in and took his place opposite her.

"What is this place," Helena asked, looking around, confused.

"I lived here once. Well, I stayed here some."

Helena looked around the broken down shelter that appeared to be old human ruins.

“There was an old woman who lived here. She had no home, and I was an orphan. Turc and I would come see her when we had the chance, between odd jobs couriering items to and from the plains. She had nothing, but the little she did, she shared with us, and we tried to take care of her as best we could. Please, eat something. You must be starving.”

Helena took some fruit and dropped it on her plate.

“So... it looks like you are trying to restore it?”

“It is sentimental, yes. But, more than that, I feel it is more a metaphor for how my life has turned out. After losing my status in Thronefast, I thought my life was over. Everything I had accomplished was discarded.”

E'mani looked around the cottage. Helena saw him smile at it, like it was a beautiful portrait.

“I have, uh, thought differently as I have been able to get some perspective on the last few years of my life. I'm not starting over, Helena. I'm getting back to my roots, building upon the foundation that made me who I was, who I am. Most people would look around and see a structure lost to time and progress...”

Helena chuckled. “Yes, it's hard not to, E'mani. It's so old and small and run down! And you see all that?”

“Well, I look past the hard times and see its rebirth. It has a solid foundation. Its walls were built sturdy. Even the hearth, with untold number of fires in its bosom, has withstood wind and rain and fire. The heart of the home is good. All else can be repaired.”

"Only you, E'mani, could look at something like this and get such romantic ideals. It's part of your charm, you know?"

"What? Being a romantic and an idealist? Ah, I wasn't aware women were drawn to charming, handsome romantic idealists. I thought they only liked dangerous and brooding mysterious types."

"Hmmm, sounds like we are still talking about you..."

"Who, me? No. I don't brood... much."

Helena laughed again. E'mani watched her as she tossed her fiery hair around in the intermittent rays of sun that peaked through the trees down on them. When had he become happy again? He couldn't name the date and time, but at this point, it didn't matter. He was.

"Helena, I brought you here to discuss something important to me. You know how busy everything has been the last couple years. The times we have met in secret have been wonderful, but I am building something greater than a camp of outlaws. You know that, don't you?"

"I am well aware of your intentions, sir," she said slyly.

"Yeah, well, I don't hide much these days, I guess. This is not some lawless rebellion born out of bitterness. I have seen the fundamental problems with the noble class that rules over men. And, although I believe in a united people and nobility itself as a characteristic in our leaders, I cannot sit idly by either and let these monsters steal and kill in the name of prosperity and peace. I want to build an independent nation state, outside Thronefast. It would be a new nation, wholly apart from Thronefast and its laws. We will have our own system of government, fitting for a strong and

independent generation of Men with like ambitions of freedom and courage and compassion for the weakest.”

Helena folded her hands on the table. “As much as I admire your ambitions, darling, do you have any idea how hard this task would be? The Crown has all the wealth and power, and leverage over those who would have sympathy for your cause. They will use the wealth and power to send countless raiders after you in the name of justice. They’ll offer rewards, gold and supplies. It will be constant battles, losses on both sides.”

“I’m aware, but this is not just me. I would have gladly played down my desires after the assault from Amenthiel five years ago, but do you know we have had an endless stream of supporters, recruits for all sorts of actions, willing to risk sedition to join our cause. It’s more than Turc or I were ever able to accomplish in the beginning. The people are tired and upset at the malpractice of their governors, especially here in the Pass and in the Plains. But, as much as I believe in this vision, there is still one thing I lack.”

E’mani reached across the table and placed Helena’s hand in his.

“Helena, if I am to be governor, I need a council that has a broad perspective. It would do me well to have a governess beside me, on my council, in my family, that I could depend on. Yes, it would lend our nation state credibility to have a recognized woman of noble blood sitting at its head with me, but more than that...” Kador said as he caught her eyes and held them with his look of passion. “I need a partner, a confidant, a friend, and a woman who can make me better every day.”

Helena smiled as her face turned red.

“Look, I understand that this is asking a lot from you. This would end your ability to socialize with your friends and family in Thronefast. You would be branded a traitor as well, at least until Thronefast acknowledged us as our own state. And that can be helped with some negotiating with the elves and dwarves. I have already noticed softening in the alliances with the Crown. Amenthiel’s ambition are rubbing many the wrong way. But, beyond that, Helena, my love, I believe this is destiny.”

“Oh, do you,” she said. “How convenient for you.” Her smile kept getting wider as E’mani continued his flattery.

“Yes, let me show you.”

E’mani got up from the table and raced around and grabbed her by the hand and led her to a box on the floor in the corner of the house. It appeared to be nothing more than a tool chest.

“I have collected remnants of this cottage’s past, artifacts that help tell its story.”

E’mani opened the lid and pulled an engraved stone from it. He held the stone in his hand, and it was almost the exact same size. It was polished smooth, ground flat on top yet keeping its rounded river rock form on all other sides. The engraving on its top was delicate, and carved with great skill, as if by a jeweler. It was a poem.

“I found this here, among the broken stones on the inside of the cottage. It had been covered with years of soil and roots and moss. But, I had it restored and was I think you will be surprised by what is on it

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He handed it to Helena, who cupped it and immediately began reading. Her smile faded with each passing second, replaced with awe and the weight of the inscription. She read:

*None can break the bonds between;
Sworn in time's tempestuous seas;
No black rosebud's crystalline:
Nor the fire from powers beneath;*

*Not the dark of fathoms deep;
Nor exalted celestial beings;
This shackle with which I wed thee;
Is wholly liberating.
~Kador, to my Love, my Leon*

She gasped as she read and re-read the stone. E'mani gave her a moment to allow her to process.

"This, this is..."

"Yes. It's a covenant stone from a marriage shrine, one of the few vestiges of the lost culture of Vas Demith. I mean, I don't think anyone has used them for several hundred years now."

"It's so beautiful."

"Do you have any idea who it could be referencing?"

"No. I don't have any records past my great-grandmother. It wasn't until then that our Orders of

Nobility were signed. Even our estate here in the valley was purchased just over 80 years ago. This would be the oldest artifact of my family. And there was only one Leon family in the Collision. At least, that is the story.”

E’mani came up behind her as she fingered the letters in the stone. He wrapped his arms around her waist and hugged her close.

“My proposal to you is open. I understand you may need some time to think over this situation. I just... I just know I’m better with you than without you.”

Helena spun around in his arms and looked up into his eyes.

“Tell me the truth, E’mani. Will this be dangerous.”

“...yes.”

“Will there be a lot of hard work involved in accomplishing your vision?”

“Yes, it will.”

“Will it require sacrifices?”

“Unfortunately, yes, my love.”

Helena looked away, seemingly searching her feelings. But, she stopped and looked back up at him smiling.

“Well, we all know women are better than men, so I should probably be with you so you don’t mess it up.”

E’mani smiled wide. He picked her up and spun her around in the small, broken down cottage.

“Yes, we all know this.”

E'mani left the rest of the food and cleanup for one of the hired hands to deal with as he took his betrothed back to the fortress. She leaned on him, holding his arm as they strolled back up the path.

"Is that where you got the name Black Rose Keep?"

"Yes, I had seen this many years ago, but it never meant anything to me until it found again as we were renovating the cottage."

"It's so amazing, like it was meant to be," she said, squeezing him tighter."

"So, what do you think it means, black rosebud crystalline?"

"Well, I think I now know. It has taken my entire life to learn of the riddles on that rock, but it was worth it. I think it's time to tell you what happened the night I left Thronefast. Are you familiar with the storm drains behind the western walls of the castle?"