

TALES OF LARAFELL

By Bart Brewer

History is often shown through the eyes of great men, through those few people who accomplished some great feat, overcame some odd, or committed some atrocity. Often in our praise or hatred of these people, we forget about those who truly made history. The common people; the blacksmiths, the tailors, the peasants and serfs who made these feats possible. For while history focuses on those great men, even the greatest Devout lacks something the common man has. For without the common man, the wheels of time wouldn't move, and we'd all be stuck here in an unchanging state, our great powers a useless spectacle for the ages.

~Kel'ras the Seer,

'A Plea for the Accursed'

Ch. 1 : Whispers in the Rain

I had been told that not many people travel through the town of Myrihar, if you could call a pile of sticks and nails a town that is.

Sitting near the border of Bragur and Larafell, it's hardly a speck on any regional map, with the larger ones omitting it entirely. I don't think anyone there has ever even seen a map, or else they might have thought twice before building their home in a place called the Endless Marsh. Even if they had thought it a good idea, I would have hoped that the stench of rotting trees and festering muck would have made them consider a less regrettable choice of residence.

However, the buildings that stood in front of me seemed to prove that the people there have as much a sense of smell as they do for smarts. A small hill dotted with reed grass just on the outskirts of

the town is all that's needed to see the whole of it. The seven hacked together buildings looked like they'd been spat out by a giant who grew ill from the very taste of this place. The wood siding was either missing or rotted, and the few good pieces looked as though they were cut by a drunk lumberjack who only had one arm to their name.

The whole place was probably on stilts at some point, but I guessed they hadn't bothered to put them back up after the last storm since half the shacks were drowning in mud. One was quite literally in its death throes, with only a single patch of the shingled roof staying above the muds slippery grasp. The rain certainly wasn't helping that, muddying up the street even more and dripping little specs all over my face. I would have been surprised if the people there were ever dry with the amount of mud they must wade through every day on the single street that runs through the middle town.

"What a gods forsaken town," I thought. "For what possible reason would anyone choose to live in such backwoods, mud filled to- "

*Sploosh! *

"Arghh, right in the eye!" I cried out as the sap laden water dripped from the trees towering above, missing my cowl, and striking my eye instead. The stinging caused me to double over as I grasped at my face. I had only been in town for a few minutes before the rain had started, as seemingly no one could enter before receiving the proper introduction to the landscape. It didn't help that I was already on edge, nervous at the prospect of the days to come.

I was only passing through such a place because it was the closest I could find to the border and seemed fairly backwater, making it an ideal place to sneak across. With the stories of war and unrest coming out of Larafell over the years, it would be best for me to remain unseen. Though given my new situation, soaked in the rain and dirtied with mud, I was wishing that I had just hired a caravan to smuggle me across. The loss of a few coins would have been far more bearable.

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The rain, the mud, the burning sensation in my eye, I was ready to get out of it all and into whatever passed for a bunkhouse in that mud hole. Casting my gaze across the town, I could make out a figure a few dozen paces away expertly sloshing their way down the street toward me. I figured I might as well ask one of the locals, they must be local if they can wade through the mud that well.

I walked off the mound back into the mud's embrace and started to make my way toward them. As I did, I could make out more of them through the growing rain that pelted at us like tiny icicles. It was a younger looking man wearing an old bear pelt on his shoulders, his one arm raised to his face to block the incoming rain. He didn't seem to be bothered by the rain, though being a local he must be used to it. Despite his age, he seemed to wear the pelt with a sense of pride, giving off the feeling that he killed the beast himself.

"Excuse me, sir," I called out to him as we neared each other.

He appeared not to hear me, the rain now thundering down, drowning out most any noise.

I called out again, waving my arm slightly in the air. "Oi! You there!"

He looked up at me this time, his arm leaving his face as he squinted. "You call'n at me?" he asked, his tone slightly on edge.

"I'd better be, would make me a bit crazy to just be yelling out here in the rain," I said as the mud danced around us. "I just got into town, was wondering if you knew a place I could bunk up at for the night."

He looked at me for a bit, his eyes seeming to judge every little detail they could see. I could see his eyes dance between the pack I was carrying over one shoulder and the hilt of my sword that hung along my side. Finally, he took his hand and pointed down the road. "The tavern just at the end ov'r

there has rooms, shouldn't have to worry bout them being filled. Don't get many passers through in the rainy season."

I grimaced as he pointed over toward one of the few buildings that had lights on inside, the glow of the lanterns cutting its way through the downpour.

"Um, thanks," I muttered as I made my way past him and toward the building, his eyes following me for a moment before turning back in the other direction. Despite the short distance to the building, the mud and gunk of the street made it seem as though I was climbing the mountains that surround the damned marsh, every step threatening to make me fall in face first.

I never liked going into taverns. Such dank, horrid places fit only for the lowest of street rats. The same could be said for the building in front of me, from the weathered sign that creaked in its age to the waterlogged porch that begrudgingly welcomed in patrons. I think I could safely say that it had never seen better days, but the pelting rain and ferocious wind coming down on my face convinced me that it would have to do as a place to hunker down.

I would be crossing the border the next day and Myrihar was the last town for miles past it. I would need my full strength to make it to Corzen and the southern valleys. I'd need to plan my route from there, I only had a vague idea of the terrain and roads of the area from studying the ever-disagreeing maps of the region. It's no wonder the Merchant's Guild is in the trouble it's in, I thought, relying on maps from fifty years ago. If I was to ever get even a glimpse of the capital, Dyrlega, I would need to get over the mountains that split the nation down the middle somehow, that much I knew. But I would never get to that point without rest.

I lifted my feet from the mud that seemed to grip me as a young bear would to its mother and sloshed my way over to the entrance of the tavern. I grabbed the door handle, avoiding a jagged splinter that jutted out from the frame, and opened the door as it screeched softly on its hinges. I briefly

considered shaking the mud from my boots before entering, but even from my vantage in the doorway I could already see that the floor was decorated in several layers of the stuff, so I opted to just walk inside.

As I stepped in, the tavern looked to be nearly deserted. The whole place consisted only of a single two-story room, the floor being littered with old furniture and broken glass, all overlooked by the banister on the second floor. The only real noise to be heard was the fire crackling away on the far wall to my left, and the occasional clinking of mugs coming from the bar. There was no one at the bar except for the bar tender who was busy fiddling with something underneath. Casting my gaze across the rest of the room, I could see only three other people, two of them having the typical drinkers slouch that you see from every other bar fly. It was the third one that stopped my sweeping gaze for a moment, if only for how odd they looked.

They sat in the far corner near the fireplace, hiding themselves in shadows that it cast. They wore a tattered cloak with different colored patches sown into it, giving them the appearance of a slightly menacing quilt. It covered their whole body, the only visible skin being the white blotched hands that were laid out in front of them like sticks on the forest floor. In the one hand they grasped a mug of some dark, dense drink, the liquid only going so fast as a crawl whenever they took a sip. The other hand laid on an opened book, giving the pages an occasional flick between every sip of the mug. Their face was hidden underneath the veil of mismatched colors, though every time they raised their glass I could glimpse a long scraggly nose poke out from the shadows. Next to them, a large travelers pack stood propped up against the wall, the thing near bursting as the seams quivered. Worn books and scrolls could be seen jutting out from several of the openings, though I could also see several daggers dangling off the side of it among other trinkets, the stark contrast causing a baffled look to creep onto my face.

The whole scene left me staring at them for a bit longer than I should have as I tried to puzzle out their story. Were they a scribe transporting texts? Surely they had the money for passage on a

caravan, and that didn't explain the daggers. Maybe they were a field researcher doing experiments in the area, it certainly would explain why they were all the way out in the swamp, but not the quantity of texts they had on them. Perhaps they are just a thief who robbed a rich scholar, would explain the choice in weapons, though not why they seemed so relaxed. Whatever they were, there was no doubt that they lived an...interesting life to say the least.

Having given up looking at the strange figure in the corner, I walked over to the bar, the barkeep still fiddling underneath. Looking at it, the bar top seemed to be the only good piece of wood in the place, made of a darker pine that glistened in the light of the lanterns. I swung my leg up and took a seat on one of the stools, the room filled with a deep groan as I put my full weight onto it.

The barkeep stopped for a moment, before standing up and resting his hands on the bar. He was an older gentleman, his hair short and gray, though he was in the shape of someone thirty years younger than him. His arms were about as thick as some of the support beams, his nearly shut eyes resting under his granite block of a forehead.

He opened his mouth, the voice coming forth sounding as though he'd been gargling the mud outside. "Well now, don't get too many new faces in here. Not much reason you know, all the merchant stops aren't anywhere near here." He looked me up and down, his head barely moving. "Though judging by your choice of garb, you ain't no merchant."

He was right of course. No merchant would be caught wearing the brown and gray streaked cowl that covered my head, nor the padded green tunic that covered my torso. For them, they could afford to dress lighter, their caravans being able to support those less prepared to travel. They also tended not to carry swords at their side, they had the money to hire others for that. I smiled softly as I gave the bartender a quick nod. It was nice to know that there was someone in this town who had some smarts about them.

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“You’ve got a good eye on you,” I said. “Though if you don’t mind, I’d rather not get into my work.”

He gave a quick chuckle. “Not many people do. So, what can I do for you lad? If it’s drink you’re after, I can guarantee that I’ve got just as good a selection as any you would find in the bigger cities.”

“No,” I said as I pulled down the hood of my cloak, my loosened hair grazing my shoulders. “Though I doubt you have anything strong enough to get me swilled either way.”

The bartender let out a hardy laugh. “A drinker who says no to the god’s warmth, you don’t see that too often.” His laugh returned to a low chuckle. “So then, if it ain’t drink you’re after, what can I do for ya then?”

“I was hoping to get a room for the night,” I said as I brushed some of the rain from my cloak. “Weathers becoming something fierce out there, and I’d hate to be out there in the dark.”

He shook his head slightly. “Afraid I don’t have anything left. Last good room was taken this afternoon.”

I looked at him, my eyes squinting slightly. “What do you mean ‘good’ room?”

“It’s the rainy season,” he sighed as he began to polish a glass. “I’m sure you noticed on your way in.” His words were punctuated with a single large drop of water falling onto the bar. Looking up, he let out another sigh. “No matter what I do to that roof, the water always finds a way in and ruins at least two of the guest rooms. They won’t be fit for living till the rains have stopped.”

I let out a deep sigh, and I could almost feel my frustration drying the rain off my back. “Are you sure I could still use one of them? If it’s just a bit damp or cold I wouldn’t be bothered. Beats being out in the thick of it.”

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The barkeep looked at me a bit, finishing off the polish on the mug before picking up a new one. "I'll tell you what, since I'm losing money with those rooms being unusable anyway, so long as you buy a few drinks I'll let you sleep down here tonight. It's not like I have any patrons that will mind."

I thought about it for a moment. It wasn't a more private room like I had wanted, but it was relatively dry, and it wasn't as though I was going to find a better place around town. Leaning forward, I said to him, "Well, seeing as I have no better option, I'll have to take you up on that offer."

"Great, so what will you be having to drink then?"

"I'll take a Swampmist," I said now fully leaning on the bar. "I've always liked the kick it has."

"A great choice," he said as he reached under the bar and pulled out a clean glass. "Say, I didn't catch your name yet. I make it a habit to know who I'm do'n business with."

I figured that there would be no harm in telling this bartender who I was, my name would carry little meaning in such an out of the way town, not that it would normally. "You can go ahead and call me Arni. Arni Prestur."

The bartender gave me a quick smile. "Well, it's a pleasure do'n business Arni, I'll have your drink right out."

The barkeep walked over to the other side of the bar to get my drink, and as he did, I took the opportunity to turn myself around on the stool and scope out the tavern for a place to sleep. As my eyes drifted across the room, I looked at the person in the corner again. They were still there, sipping their drink and reading their book as the shadows slinked around them. As I watched, I noticed that the barkeep was walking back down holding my drink, so I began to swivel back around. But in that moment, as my head turned back toward the bar, I could feel something twisting deep within myself. A barbed knot that burned deep in my core, the sound of the rain outside almost completely leaving me, as the

person turned their gaze upward toward me. A single eye lazily piercing my own in that split second, before I was facing away from them again and looking right at the barkeep handing me my drink.

My mug thunked against the bar, and I could once again hear the rain brushing against the roof. I reached forward to grab it, but my hand couldn't seem to grasp it, my breath coming out in muddled gasps.

The barkeep gave me a strange look before asking me, "You alright there? Looks as though you just ran the length of the swamp."

I looked up at him, unsure of what to say. In truth, I didn't know what to say. That the gaze of some random person across the room sapped all my strength? That they were a witch or soul render who wished me to suffer? Such nonsense talk would have had me thrown back out into the mud. There was no way someone holding that kind of power would be out here in the middle of nowhere.

I composed myself a bit before replying, "I'm, fine. Just tired, I guess. Haven't sat down since I got into the swamp."

He seemed to accept that answer, going back to tidying up the bar. As the night went on and the drink loosened my words a bit, I talked with the barkeep as he went about his work. We swapped stories, myself talking about my journey thus far. How I had traveled the whole length of Bragur in my quest to reach the borders of Larafell, not leaving out a single mountain or bandit hideaway I had to conquer to get there. How I was traveling to the capital on the word of my father, though I made sure to leave out some key details.

He in turn told me tales of his youth. It turned out his name was Samson, and he had served in one of the great wars as a third-man, being in charge of his own group of soldiers. He regaled me with many the typical war story, from charging the opposing army in the eastern wastes of the Morean to

capturing castles in the southern forests. After the last war, he finally left the army and moved out to Myrihar having saved enough pay to buy the tavern.

While I talked with Samson, I chanced a glance at the cloaked person every now and then, their stance never changing as they read their book. I just couldn't shake the feeling that was burrowed into me, that feeling that they could glance up at me again and crack my ribs with a single slice of the eye. Something about them, the feeling that they gave off, it felt almost familiar. I couldn't take it any longer, my curiosity and anxiety over that hooded stranger had filled me whole, and I needed some answers.

I turned to Samson once more, pausing briefly before asking, "So what's the deal with that person in the corner? They in here often?"

Without missing a beat, he replied, "Yep, comes in here every few weeks. Strange fella. Always has his books with him, even shares a few with me on the rare occasion. Mostly dusty old tomes and stories by the looks of it."

"Any idea who they are?"

"Nope, and I have no intention of finding out. In this business, you figure out quick who to make small talk with and who to let drink in silence." He held up a finger toward the man. "That guy over there? I'd sooner go out back onto the battlefield before risking a conversation longer than a minute with him. He's nice enough and all, but there's something not right about him." He paused for a moment before leaning in towards me, his voice a near whisper. "If I were to bet, I'd say he's probably a Devout."

A confused look spread across my face, and I stole another look at the man. Devout, that wasn't something that you heard often back in Bragur. Word was they were mystics, people of great power that held the gods' favor. Something out of a far-fetched story than something based in fact. Though there

were enough older people who swore that they were real, that they used to be plentiful in more peaceful times.

I myself held no real opinion on the matter, didn't give it much space in my mind, for there wasn't any point. I had no doubt that such people existed, that power could be given and taken on such whims, but the fact was that there hadn't been a sighting of a Devout in nearly 40 years within Bragur. If such power existed, it didn't have any bearing on my life.

Though if Samson were correct, that stance would have to be changed. Remembering that gut feeling I felt, I looked the man over once more. My immediate thought was frailty, that a slight gust might turn him to dust. His hands looked shriveled, what little hair I could see a light gray; not the characteristics of someone who had been blessed.

I turned back to Samson. "Are you sure?" I asked. "He seems so...frail."

A serious look swept across Samson's face. Now it was his turn to steal a glance at the stranger in the corner, his eyes peeking over at him before turning back to me. "I've only ever met three Devouts in my life. They were all strong, quick witted people, and that guy is, well, like you said: frail."

I almost wanted to stop Samson right there at his mention at meeting multiple Devouts, but I drove my curiosity down and let him keep speaking.

"But let me tell you, having been around that kind of power, you get to recognize that sort of thing. And that guy over there radiates a certain aura you can't just ignore."

Thinking back to that paralyzing glance, I almost felt that Samson was onto something. That perhaps I really had crossed paths with someone truly remarkable. But gut feelings and speculation didn't completely relieve my doubts.

"I don't know," I replied. "No one has seen a Devout in years, I doubt that one has been regularly coming out here."

"Well sure, maybe in Bragur," Samson began to respond. "But here, close to Larafell, I'd say you plenty more...likely.....of....um, I wouldn't look now, but I think he's looking at us."

Despite the warning, I turned to face the cloaked man, Samson muttering a curse under his breath as I did so. As my eyes came to rest on his shadowy form, I could see him staring at me, his pinpricked eyes looking at me as a predator did a small rabbit in a field. Despite the chilly feeling that was creeping across my skin, I held the stare with him as he sat there, unmoving and unblinking. I thought to break eye contact with him after half a minute passed, but it seemed unwise to lose sight of someone who looked so sinister. Finally, after a near minute of looking at each other, the man lowered his head once more and turned back to his book.

I sat there, trying to puzzle out why he had been staring at me, but before I could think of a plausible reason, a flick of movement caught my eye. The man had raised his arm toward me, his cloak billowing out as he did so. Ever so slowly, he moved his fingers into a 'come hither' motion, his joints grinding and popping with each movement.

I looked back to Samson for some advice on what to do, but he simply shook his head and turned away, muttering, "Not my place, I'm not getting involved in whatever business he has with you. I ain't stupid."

Steeling myself, I stood up from the barstool, my legs feeling as loose and sticky as the mud outside and walked over to the man.

As I neared his table, I could hear every creak I made on the wooden floor and see every mismatched detail of the man in front of me. If the colors about him weren't so dulled it would be

almost enough to make a person snicker at the absurdity of his garb. It was probably a dark blue at some point, as it was the only color that was weaseling its way across the cloak in any consistent fashion. The rest was a seemingly random assortment of grays, browns, and greens, with the rare blotch of muddied white gleaming through. Though for such a hacked together looking thing, the seam work was immaculate, not a single loose thread or patch could be seen on it.

It wasn't long before I was across the room, and I stood next to the man as he finished another greedy sip from his mug. Even if he hadn't been sitting down, I would have towered over him, his spindly form a great contrast from my own. He finished the last of his drink and brought down his mug without making a sound. Standing awkwardly over him, I almost let loose a question for him, but before I could he opened his mouth, a raspy, scraggly voice filling the room.

"Go on, take a seat," he said as he gestured toward an empty chair.

I hesitated for a moment before slowly lowering myself into the crooked seat that sat across from him. As I did, I started to ask him, "So, um, why'd you-

Before I could finish, he raised one of his hands to me. He closed the book that he had been reading, picking it up and stuffing it back into his bag. "Oh, come now," he said with a low chuckle. "We both know why you're over here, at least I would hope you know."

"Well, I clearly don't," I said, some of my fear being replaced with indignation. "I wouldn't be ask'n otherwise."

He shook his head in a disappointed fashion. "Well, isn't it clear?" said the man with a cackle. "You've been looking my way all night, I figured that I would indulge in some of your curiosity."

With that he brought his hand up to his head and brought down the hood of his cloak. What sat before me was an aging man, 70-years old at the youngest, with white as marble hair brought up in a

ponytail stretching down his back and a shadow of a smile sitting under his pointed nose. His face was covered in spots and splotches and a thin long beard crept down into his cloak. He looked almost amused as I looked him over.

He spoke again, letting out a slight chuckle. "I don't blame you for looking over mind you, I will admit I have a rather....," he trailed off, twirling his hand as he searched for a word. "...well let's call it an odd appearance. But that's the life of an old wanderer, living with years old clothes and carrying your whole life with you."

He reached for his bag, pulling out a different book, the cover being a dark blue with nothing else on it, and he opened it to a seemingly random page. "So, what questions seem to be nagging at you adventurer?"

After recovering from my initial inspection of him, I thought about his question. He already seemed far less sinister and much more eccentric than anything. I looked at him, and then to his bag, and a new kind of curiosity filled me. "So, you say you're a wanderer?"

"That is what I said," he replied, looking annoyed at having to repeat himself.

"Then why are you carrying all those books and scrolls with you? If you were a merchant I would understand, but you've already confirmed that you aren't. As a mere wanderer, it can't be the easiest thing to travel with such a load."

He grimaced a bit as he turned to a page that was half damaged by water. "It would be a greater load for me to carry if I didn't have them with me."

My brow furrowed. "Surely there must be something better to carry with you if you're traveling. More supplies at the very least."

He tutted at my response. "These books contain something far more valuable to me than simple supplies. They contain stories, stories you won't hear in the taverns or guilds. Stories that will fade as those who experienced them depart this world. To lose that kind of history, that would be a truly hard thing to carry with me." He was skimming the book now, the pages like grass in the wind, stopping at any page that had some legible words on it.

"So, I take it you're some kind of historian then?" I asked him.

"Of a sort, I know the histories of many things, as most people do."

"That doesn't really answer my question all that well," I said, squinting at his half-answer. His deflections had taken him from eccentric to almost annoying. "Do you study it like those scholars in the academies, or do you just carry those books around so you can look smart when people ask you about something?"

"I'm not that kind of historian. I may study it, but I don't try to analyze it like those damned scholars you speak of."

I looked at him quizzically. "So, you're not a historian then."

He puffed a bit at that remark. "Everyone is a historian, even if they don't think it. You, just as I, surely know the history of some place or person, not because you read it in a book, but because you have a personal history with them." He waved his hand in a dismissive manner. "You don't need to be some huffy scholar to know at least a little history."

I opened my mouth to retort what he had said, but I realized that what he said rang some truth. I thought back to the village I had grown up in, and how life was back then. How the children would learn to hunt in the bristling summers and forage in the biting falls. How every winter, the whole village would

light an enormous bonfire in the woods and pray in hopes that we could survive to the next spring. How that now there were few who could lay claim to those memories, those prayers unanswered.

He looked up from a particularly damaged page, some form of mold growing on it, and said to me, "Well now, you've had the chance to quench your curiosity a bit, so how about you let me sate some of mine." He looked back down toward his book, mulling over the page briefly before speaking again. "Where exactly are you heading to traveler? I'm guessing you're not in the area for sightseeing."

The question took me off guard for a moment. There was no way that I was going to tell him, a stranger, exactly where I was going, and I wasn't entirely sure he wasn't planning on stabbing me with one of his daggers. On the other hand, he seemed harmless enough, at least more so than I had thought before.

"Well," I said clearing my throat. "I'm traveling into Larafell tomo-_"

Before I could finish, the man had whipped his head up to look at me, one of his hands slapping against the table. His eyes seemed to be bigger, and his mouth grew into a toothy smile.

"Ahhhhh Larafell," he let loose with fondness, his gaze now looking off into some nothingness. "The land of the sword and the ax. What a lovely nation, I'm always delighted whenever I visit. Such a rich history and culture as well." He turned back to me, his voice rising in excitement as he spoke. "Just thinking of it all! The history, the worship, the slaughter!"

He turned his gaze back toward me, his face brimming with anxious enthusiasm, much like you would see on a child awaiting an unexpected treat.

"You must tell me, what is your favorite part of their long and cultured history? The battles of Snowshed? The Great Schism of the church? Perhaps the sacking of Vatnstin? There are so many excellent points to choose from."

“Well, honestly,” I said rubbing the back of my neck, my gaze averted. “I don’t know all that much; this will be my first time going to the area.”

I turned to meet his eyes again, his face having a look of confusion, before changing once more into a blinding grin. He opened his bag and began to dig through its contents, the odd scroll being flung out onto the floor. “Oh well then, I must inform you!” he cried out with enthusiasm. “To be deprived of such a deep and fascinating history, it’s practically a crime!”

“Oh, no,” I said as he chuckled a silver book over his shoulder. “You don’t need to do that, I’m sure I’ll pick up some of the local lore during my time there. Besides I wouldn’t want to keep you from your...work.” In truth, I didn’t want to spend much more time at that table. Something about the way the man spoke, the way he acted, it all screamed of someone marked with the touch of insanity. His eccentric nature was starting to crawl into my skin and give me shivers.

He finally pulled a book out of his bag, a red one with rusted metal hinges adorning its spine. “Oh, I must insist, it’s no trouble at all, really. I so rarely get to tell these tales to anyone; it would bring me such joy to share this knowledge with another,” he said before taking a more serious tone, staring directly at me. “And I don’t think you can afford not to listen either. You said so yourself that you haven’t been to Larafell before, so who knows? Some of what I say might very well save your life out there.”

There was only silence after he spoke as I tried to match his stare. He had certainly made a fair point, despite his earlier ecocentrism. From the few things I had heard, Larafell had descended into a brutal subsistence in the last few decades, with only the most desperate of traders and sell-swords making the trek inward to the war torn region. All that anyone could really glean was that an internal civil conflict had arisen and been fought out over the last few decades. I had my doubts that this old man could have any truly insightful knowledge on said happenings, given the decaying state of his collection, but there was a chance he could prove useful. He certainly seemed excited enough about the subject.

Not to mention I was still rather put off by the strange man. Remembering the twisting feeling I got when I first gazed at him, I still couldn't help but feel as though he posed some danger to myself. If I were to refuse further, I couldn't be sure how he would take it. Afterall, that room is where I would be sleeping, making me an easy target for a mid-slumber stabbing if he chose to strike later. Of course, that could all be avoided by just listening to his stories. What harm could there be in indulging the wishes of an old man?

Having come to my decision, I rested an arm against the table. "Well, I wouldn't want to be rude, and it's not as though I have anywhere to be," I said. "I might as well pick up a few things."

As I finished speaking, the smile returned to the man's face, and he began flipping through the pages of the book. "I knew you'd come around lad," he laughed. "It's hard for people to resist the temptation of a good story." His finger caught onto a certain page, and he gave a chuckle as he looked at the title. "Ah here we are. If it's knowledge you want, there's no better place to start to delve into the maw of historical wealth that is Larafell."

Chapter 2:

The Great Collapse: A Recent History of Larafell

By Vondor Rith

Many a historian likens himself to be a teller of facts, a weaver of words who spins a fabric which he may call the past. Many a historian is wrong, for no matter how right he may feel himself to be, there is no accounting for the invading thoughts of his own mind. Don't let those charlatans in the archives tell you otherwise. Everyone's experience shapes who they are, and thus how one perceives the world. So, I am not writing here to claim to know the definitive facts of the events I am about to describe, rather I am writing to present to you that which I have learned myself, and my interpretation there off to the best of my ability.

The Great Collapse is one of the modern tragedies that still plague our world today. Beginning one year ago on the eve of the Festival of Renaissance, the Collapse is a representation of years of corruption and infighting within the church and the Third Assembly. For years, the Third Assembly, born out of the Great Schism that led to the fall of the Second Assembly, has tried and failed to bring about reform within its own ranks, with constant power struggles between Devouts and nobles alike having led to its degradation.

Indeed, the future looks grim for the Third Assembly. One year has passed, and while attempts have been made at reformation, without serious change the Third Assembly will not survive. What's more, the future of Larafell looks to be frightful as well. Whispers of uprising from the fringes of society have made themselves known, and what started as a localized event may soon turn into that of a nationwide conflict.

The light of the fireplace flickered around us as the old man pulled the book closer to him, the rusted metal of the spine scraping against the table.

"So," I asked. "What will we be starting with?"

"I'm so very glad you asked," he replied. "What I have here is one of the last surviving copies of the works of the historian Vondor Rith. One of my favorite writers I must say. He tells you the truth of the matter, not that mindless propaganda you get from some other loyalist scholars."

"Well, that's...good."

"Indeed," said the old man as he flipped through the pages of the worn book, seemingly unable to find the page he was looking for. Finally, his finger came to rest on a particularly damaged page.

"A shame," he said with a sigh. "Chunks of this section are missing. But that's what you come to expect after half a century of book burnings and neglect. I suppose this will have to do for our purposes, thankfully I'm knowledgeable on the subject. Still, I'll need to see about tracking down another copy of this."

He looked back up at me, taking his eyes off the water-damaged pages. "So, tell me. What do you know about the Collapse?"

The name rang familiar in my mind. I remembered hearing about the Collapse when I was young from one of the village elders. He had told me stories of how towns were burned to cinder and of how it had threatened to spread into neighboring nations, including Bragur. Such stories had plagued my mind as I left for Larafell, as many claimed that there was still fierce conflict within the borders of Larafell. I had my hopes though; Information was few and far between, and there were others that claimed peace now ruled the region. Those rumors hadn't stopped me from sneaking into the nation though.

"Not much I'm afraid, outside of rumors and speculation," I replied. "Only that it carried the types of violence that you find in any other revolt."

"Oh it wasn't something so basic as a revolt," replied the old man as he peered through the pages. "There certainly was widespread destruction, however the Collapse was far more than that."

He had finally stopped leafing through the pages, stopping his flicking at a particular one and dissecting it with greater scrutiny.

"The Collapse represented a complete breakdown in governance, as any learned person will tell you," he said dismissively. "Certain nobles and Devouts, not happy with their standing, seeking to take over the Assembly. Far more interesting, and..."

The old man stopped for a moment, and I could tell that he was thinking about something. Whatever it was, it didn't stop him for long as he recomposed himself.

"And far more deadly," he finished.

"So it was a coup then," I said. "People seeking further power."

"More so an irregular civil conflict if anything," he replied. "So many looping knots of cause and effect, one can barely keep track of all of it. I could speak on it for hours! But that is time we simply don't have."

It all sounded the same to me. Nobles bickering and infighting with other nobles, nothing was more common. Call it what you will, a coup, and change of power, it all ended with the same result. No changes in the movements of life, except you pay your taxes to a different person. Things go on as they will if you are far enough removed from power.

"Either way," he continued. "Those nobles and Devouts made one critical mistake. They decided that the best way to accomplish this was to align a marauding group of pirates who had been causing havoc in the region."

The old man paused, frowning, as though he weren't happy with what he had just said. He flipped through several more pages, each one landing with a crisp silence before he found his spot and continued.

"They offered them pardons in exchange for their help," he said. "Of course, these pirates had no interest in such a thing, but they did see another opportunity. So, they agreed to the terms, but when the time came..."

"They betrayed them," I finished.

The man nodded. "The High Palace burned to the ground with most all the nobles and church elite inside. The capital was sacked, and that was the start of the collapse."

Now that, that was certainly different. By the sound of it, there had been no change in power, but a total elimination of it. No wonder the Collapse had always been described as brutal as it was, power vacuums rarely ever are grounds for cooler heads to come out on top. If that was the case, even after what, 40 years? Tales of battles still being fought might hold more weight.

The old man paused, looking the book over before closing its pages, careful not to damage the book any further.

"As I said, a shame," he said as he put the book away with a gentle touch. "The best copy I have and it's missing some of the finer details."

I could see a sadness in his eyes as he rummaged through his pack, the frown on his face showing his disappointment in the condition of his find. It amazed me how a person could care so much for a simple text.

"When was this written," I asked. "If you don't mind me asking."

"Oh, many years ago," he replied. "Thirty-nine to be exact, back when the Collapse was still a fresh and hot topic of the political world. Now it's faded into the background even though the fire's that were lit are still burning."

"Of course, the collapse probably wouldn't have happened if there had been greater consensus within the church regarding certain key matters..." the old man said, trailing off near the end.

As he spoke, the man had begun to rummage through his bag again, presumably looking for further texts. The ruffling of paper and scrolls almost drowned out the pattering of rain outside.

While he looked through his pack, I thought again about what he had said, of the consequences of such an event, and I was brought back to the reason I was in the tavern to start with.

"So the conflict is still ongoing then?" I asked. "Is there really still unrest after nearly 40 years?"

The old man continued to rummage through his things, barely looking up as he responded. "What makes you ask that?"

"Well, the whole 'Fires still burning' bit you said there," I replied.

"Ah, well it's a very nuanced situation," he said. "The collapse weakened the church for a time, so it allowed for several factions to rise up to grab for power. There isn't much word about that situation I'm afraid."

"Something more interesting is the even smaller splinter groups that arose. That weakened state also allowed for a few scattered cultists following Dausuga to begin practicing again, amongst others. They've been active ever since then; you might run into one or two while traveling out there."

"Dausuga," I muttered to myself. "That's one of the gods yeah?"

He turned to me, his hands still mingling amongst the books and scrolls of his bag. "Why of course, one of the divine twelve!" he said. "Goddess of death and decay, bringer of the void. Her worship was outlawed nearly 200 years ago in Larafell as heretical, don't you know?"

I actually hadn't known that. There had been little time for me to learn about politics and religious movements back home when I was working the fields, not that I had much interest in those subjects. There were plenty more things to focus on that had greater impacts of the flow of the day.

As I thought about it, the old man furrowed his brow a bit. "Tell me, how much do you know of the gods?"

"Well, I know some," I replied as I rubbed my neck, feeling embarrassed for some reason. "Back in my village we had the local church. The preacher would go on and on about Ceara during the harvest months and give the occasional talk on Skijah. Didn't have much else to say on the matter frankly. One time my friend asked him about Bragfur, but he acted like he didn't hear him."

"Typical," replied the old man, having now fished out an old sheepskin scroll. "Most only focus on the gods that most closely affect their lives rather than the whole. Such depravity."

He pointed down to the scroll, now more fully rolled out across the table. "This here is a rare find indeed. Was specifically sought out to be burned for supposed 'heresy', as though they were of any authority on the matter."

"Who's 'they'," I asked with a slight frown.

The old man ignored my question, continuing, "Either way, it contains a wealth of information that's been lost to those who are unread in such matters. It should do you well to know these things in Larafell, the people there are as religious and full of zeal as they come. Don't want your head to end up on a pike because you disrespected a god now do you?"

"I suppose not," I muttered, wondering if that was a realistic possibility. Religious zealotry like that was often looked down upon in Bragur, where fanatic worship was at most tolerated.

"Then I shall begin." And just as he had before, he began to read from the scroll.

As the old man read, my mind began to wander. The scroll, while interesting, was clearly written by someone who only had a loose grasp on the subject at hand. Listening through the prologue, it sounded as though the author was having a paranoid delusion, talking of secret councils and rituals, asking questions which needed no real answer, claiming to have witnessed these 'secrets' firsthand. It was no wonder that the church had wanted these ramblings burned at some point.

It didn't matter either way if they were right anyhow, I already knew everything I needed to know about the gods. You pray to them in their time, give them your respects, and they'll leave you be. No more, no less, no need for it to be any more complicated.

Reading through the sections of gods, Jalas listed off several that I knew, a few that I didn't. I of course knew Skijah and Ceara, goddesses of the sky and of fertility respectively. Their presence was large in the wheat fields of my village. The time of harvest and the time of festival worship were basically one in the same. Though as the old man began to describe it to me, it sounded rather off.

"That's wrong," I said, the old man pausing to look up at me. "That isn't the correct way to worship Ceara."

"Oh really?" he replied. "What is the correct way then?"

"Well for starters," I began. "Ceara is to be prayed to at the table, not in the fields where one works. You invite her into your home to share in the harvest, not to tole alongside you."

"Further," I continued, leaning forward in my seat with a greater sense of authority. "She is depicted not as an older woman, but as a willowy one with the head of a deer. Why else would her full title be Ceara, The Deer? Whoever wrote this clearly doesn't know anything of worship, and I see no reason to continue to listen to something which invites such ill intent."

I slumped back, having finished my tirade. Jalas, after looking me over for a moment, replied, "Are you finished then?"

"Yeah," I sighed, taking a breath in. "Yeah I am."

"Good," he replied. "Then allow me to rebut. There's more to the world than just your little village."

"Meaning what exactly?" I asked.

"Meaning," he replied. "That not everyone has the same views that you do. Where you're from, Ceara might be viewed more for her role as the fertility goddess, given your clear... disposition toward

farming. However, in a place like say, Norja, she's viewed more as a goddess of purity, leading to different worships and practices surrounding that."

"Is it unreasonable to think that this person is from such a region," he continued. "That their views differ because of that?"

I paused for a moment, thinking back to the few times I had been to the church back home. Ceara had always been the main focus of any talk there, and all of that talk was in her relation to the fields around us. Perhaps if those fields had been replaced with buildings, those talks might have been different.

"I suppose you have a point," I replied. "Though don't expect me to grasp on to what this guy is saying."

"I wouldn't expect you to," said the man. "And I do enjoy listening to your viewpoint, always fascinating to learn something new. I just think it best that you know that there are other views out there you may not know about."

With that framing in mind, J alas continued reading through the scroll, my expectations a little higher. At the very least I paid his words a bit more attention, the gods I hadn't known about being particularly interesting.

There were some such as Skendir, The Wolf, God of vengeance and strife, of which I knew nothing. Supposedly he was worshiped by assassins and other such vagrants. Why anyone would ever worship such a god I had no idea. To make a pack with a wolf is to seal your own fate, for no matter what you will always get bitten in the end. It's no wonder I had never heard his name before.

Others such as Hernarda and Vintyr I had some vague knowledge of in that they existed. It wasn't uncommon to have travelers coming through the village, though they rarely spoke of their own beliefs. Though everyone knew that the soldiers made praise to Hernarda as a war goddess, and that travelers stricken with wanderlust would claim Vintyr as their guide.

Each section also made mention of the Devouts of each god, and my mind couldn't help but think back to the conversation that I had with Samson prior. The old man listed off traits: godly strength, soul spitting, the power to control the very ground beneath you; the old man that sat before me didn't show any such quality.

Could someone be blessed by the gods? Certainly, there is no reason to doubt that someone could be granted with a small portion of strength. But giving their followers such divine power? Neither myself, nor anyone else I knew for that matter, had seen such a spectacle. Perhaps such a blessing was less fantastic than what was being described to me, and something that was much easier to hide. Until I could tell otherwise, the whole subject was talk and nothing more.

Thinking back to when I first saw the old man in front of me, I had to mentally chastise myself. Thinking that such an old man could hold such power, such a childish notion. If Devouts truly did exist as they were described, then he certainly wasn't one of them.

The old man ran through the whole list of the supposed “Divine Twelve”, stopping briefly to express his disappointment at several missing sections. One section in particular, speaking on Pekklar, left him in a fit.

“Some, back-hill cretin,” he said as we looked at the scroll. “Has copied over the whole section! It’s completely unreadable.”

He took a few heavy breaths before continuing. “It’s fine, it’s fine. These kinds of things happen,” he said before raising his voice. “But of all the scrolls why-.” He cut himself short, taking another breath to calm himself. He forced his eyes back to the scroll, continuing through the rest of the list.

In the end, nearly half of the entries were unreadable, either damaged beyond recognition or copied over by other writers, Dausuga being one of them. Of course, one of the few I had wanted to know more about was unreadable. But the old man gave off the impression that whatever Devouts or followers worshiped her were few and far between, hardly something to worry about on my travels.

It was with a heavy sigh that the old man rolled the scroll back up into its container.

“I swear to Skendir,” he muttered as he finished up. “There’s something to be said about writing down new knowledge, but to write over something so rare, and with a goat stew recipe no less!”

He took the scroll, now tightly rolled up, and placed it back into his bag as he began to rummage again. “Some people have no sense of decency anymore.”

“Truly,” I replied, humoring him. “Though there must be other copies. It’s hard for anyone to truly remove something from existence.”

“That’s fair,” he replied. “But that doesn’t mean I can just pick one up at the nearest bookstore. Something like that work, it’s a miracle to find one in a condition that’s readable, much less complete.”

I nodded, still thinking about the text, a new question popping into my mind.

“So how much of that do you believe?” I asked him. “You have a decent idea of where I stand, what say you on all this matter of gods and Devouts?”

The old man chuckled. “Well I’ve been a devout believer all of my life you could say,” he replied. “I always make sure to keep the gods in mind through my actions.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” I said. “But Devouts? People running around with outrageous power? I’ve never seen such things myself.”

“Not many people have,” replied the old man. “In truth such grand feats are really only talked about, almost never seen in this day and age. But there is a certain comfort in believing such things.”

“Is that comfort enough to base a world view around though?” I asked.

“Perhaps not, but it’s all in how you apply it,” he replied as he motioned to himself. “Take myself. Of all the gods, I pray to Pekklar the most. As the god of knowledge, his influence is close to what I do. So, I’d like to think that, somewhere, he is looking down on me favorably for my work.”

"Then I suppose I'm not all that different," I replied, thinking back to the few times I would pray to Ceara during the harvest.

He gave a nod, pulling out another book, this one having a green covering and faded gold lettering. As he opened it and laid it on the table, I could make out the words "Bestiary" on the front cover, along with a faded illustration.

"I think that's enough on culture," the old man said as he leafed through a few pages. "You seem to have a more practical mind about you, so you may gain a bit more from this either way."

He turned through a few more pages, finally stopping at one with a large illustration of a winged creature, though it was hard to make out from the angle I sat.

"Ever since the collapse, the roads of Larafell just aren't patrolled like they used to be," he continued. "All sorts of wildlife running about the place, you can expect to run into creatures of all kinds out there on the road."

"Can't be much different than the beasts we have in Bragur," I scoffed. "Sure, there's the odd wolf or akurv, maybe a bear, but nothing that can't be handled."

"Well, you underestimate the type of terrain you face then," he replied. "Larafell is a harsh and diverse landscape. It's the type of land that breeds creatures that are made to last, nothing so soft born as you find in the low country."

Picking the book off of the table, he let out an excited breath as he glanced at the page, before turning it so that the pages were facing me.

"Take a look at this one right here. Quite the vicious sight."

Before me was something that looked like a mix between a hawk and a woman. Its arms and upper body looked like that of a person, with feathers dotted around its body and wings sprouting out of its arms. Moving further down, its legs made a slow gradient away from human legs to that of a bird, ending with large sharp talons where their feet would be.

Looking further, diagrams next to the main drawing showed that rather than skin where feathers were lacking, were in fact tightly packed scales protecting their underbelly. Further, a diagram of the mouth showed numerous fangs, longer and sharper than any wolf I had seen.

I spent some time taking it all in, before the old man flipped the book back to himself.

"Quite a specimen is it not?" he said as he began to read. "People call it the demantas, or diamond wing depending on who you ask. It's found in the high peaks of Larafell, secluded off in some cave or hideaway. Pretty rare find this one is, but they are also quite dangerous."

"I assume they're flesh eaters, given the fangs and all," I interjected.

The man gave a nod. "Right you are, though that's just the half of it. They're called diamond wings for a reason."

Turning the book again, he pointed to a picture that looked like the creature was spitting something up.

"See this?" he said. "Aside from its talons and fangs, the demantas also possess the ability to ensnare their prey within a crystalline webbing sprayed from their mouth."

"That's..." I began. "That doesn't make much sense."

"Well, it's like..." the man said, mulling something over. "Imagine a spiderweb. Now imagine that webbing coming from its mouth, except it's as hard as a gemstone and shot at speeds that are near impossible to avoid."

"So it pins you down before ripping you to shreds," I said.

"Exactly," he replied. "It's hard to find a more dangerous predator, though you should be fine so long as you stay away from the high peaks."

With that, the old man turned the page and continued listing off several creatures and monsters, most nowhere near as foreboding as the demantas. There were your standards such as scuttling varkras that burrowed into the sand of the coastline, and hill-like risas which could grace the treetops with their fingers.

There were of course several I hadn't heard of before either. A monstrous lizard-like creature that burrowed in within the sands of the east, and disproportionately large rodents which lived deep within the caves of the central mountains. All environments that didn't exist back in Bragur.

It all got me really thinking. I didn't really know much of the world outside of my own little bubble, did I. What histories of others existed, what gods people worshiped, what creatures and landscapes lay beyond the fields and forests that I knew.

I'm strong, I'm capable, I thought. But could I truly succeed on my journey with just that alone? I had brushed off the old man for a delusional sell-story, only interested in repeating the rantings they have long since spoke. However, in such a short time, I had already learned far more of my destination than I had known. Despite his age, this old man seemed almost more capable and well minded than myself, so how well would I truly fair in the coming days?

The slamming of the book made me jump in my seat as the old man returned it to his pack. The sudden movement had broken me from the trance of listening to him speak in his scraggly voice.

Looking at me with his shallow eyes, an eager smile spread across his face as he asked me, "So, what did you think, hm? A worthwhile listen, don't you agree?"

"Well it certainly held my ear," I said, and that was no lie. I had been skeptical, but it had been worthwhile information. At the very least I had a better idea of the road ahead.

"I must thank you for sharing that all with me," I said, extending my hand toward him. "You've saved me some trouble on my journey, I'm sure."

He grasped my hand, his bony fingers pinching at my skin. "And I thank you traveler, for lending yourself to my stories. May Vintyr guide the rest of your journey."

"And yours as well," I replied, letting go of his hand before turning my way back toward the bar.

As I made my way back over, the old man called out a final time. “If you catch eyes with me again on the road, don’t be a stranger. I always have something new.”

As I sat back down in my original seat, I turned to look at the old man, but he was already deep into another book, his eyes tracing the words well. I took a sip of my drink that I had left at the bar as Samson returned to my side, neither of us speaking a word of what had just transpired.

The night went on, and with it most of my ill will toward the town had left. The rain had finally let up, signaling to the few others in the bar that it was time to head out. As the final patrons left for their rooms or their homes, the drinks of the night had finally started to reach me. My head was groggy as an ill-tempered boar who had bashed its head into a tree, and I was ready to head off to sleep. I waved over to Samson as I got up, giving a final good night before wandering over to the fireplace.

The fire was nothing more than a few glowing embers at this point, though they still gave off enough heat to keep the floorboards around it dry. I found a spot with the least amount of mud spackled onto it, before laying down, my head resting against the wall. Looking across the room one last time, I closed my eyes, the last few pops of the fire lulling me to my slumber.

Chapter 3

Cities and Provinces: A Wander’s Guild to Larafell

By Reika Flakk

To the common traveler, Larafell might seem like any other nation. They might seem to have the same landscapes, the same cities, and even the same governance at a glance, but that is a rather uninformed view. To take such a stance is to be a person who has never ventured outside their own little slice of the world into the grand expansion of the wider one. The very thought of it nearly saddened me to the point of despair. How could a world exist in which people don’t marvel at its beauty and notoriety?

But that is when I had my revelation! Sitting atop Mount Isham, looking out at the ranges of mountains alongside Skijah, I was blessed with a thought. Perhaps, those who live their whole lives within their birth village don’t do so because they actively shun the outside world. Rather, they simply don’t know of the many wonders and oddities that this world has been blessed with. That day was many seasons ago, and ever since then I have devoted my life to cataloging the world, in hopes that others may come to share my appreciation of what is out beyond the village walls.

As I had my revelation while atop the glorious Mount Isham, this first catalog features the many provinces and cities of the nation in which it resides. So look dear reader! Look upon the following pages, as I invite you to look at the natural and man-made wonders that lay across the great nation of Larafell.

Klemyri:

Tales from Larafell (Working title)

The region of Klemetry sits in the southernmost part of Larafell, stretching all the way from The Grave Expanse in the west to The Giltre in the east. As it lies in the south of the nation, it butts up against the border with Bragur, acting as the buffer between the two nations. Due to its size, the region is host to many different terrains and wildlife, from the lumbering giants of the Endless Swamp to the aggressive sand crabs of the coast.

Of course, Klemetry is home to many people as well, a large portion of them living in the region's largest city, Corzen. Resting within the mountains at the southern tip of Lake Kalt, Corzen is the trading hub for the southern portion of Larafell. Any trade good that seeks to travel over land to Bragur must first go through Corzen, as the city controls one of the few passes through the mountains. This unique trait has put the city in a place of power with Larafell, able to strike its own deals with the Assembly and allowing them more autonomy. At a glance, one could almost mistake them for a city-state rather than a part of a larger nation.

Of the six provinces, Klemetry sits alongside Norja as one of the most powerful. With its vast land and plentiful resources, she is one of the key provinces of Larafell.

I woke to the sound of long, hard scraping. As I opened my groggy eyes, I could make out a figure, Samson, futilely attempting to get all the mud and dirt cleared from the floor, the old broom in his hands missing nearly half its bristles. From my vantage point on the floor, it seemed like a truly hopeless task.

I couldn't keep my eyes open for a second before a ray of sunlight that had found its way into the room forced my eyes closed again. Shielding my face, I pushed myself up from the floor, brushing myself off as I did, before forcing myself to look out at the tavern again.

Despite the sunlight pouring in through the multiple cracks and crevices in the walls, the room didn't appear any livelier than it had the night before. All the chairs were scattered and empty, with half-filled mugs decorating the tables and the silence only interrupted by Samson. There's nothing more depressing than a tavern in the morning.

Looking over at Samson, he gave me a quick, tired glance before returning to his vigilant sweeping. Picking up my pack, making sure to scrape some of the dried mud off the bottom, I walked over to him.

Before I could say anything, he had already begun to talk to me. "So, I guess you'll be heading out then?" he said. "Gonna be at least a half days travel to get where you're headin'."

"Best to get going while the sun's still low," I replied as I slung my pack over my shoulder. "Just wanted to thank you for putting me up for the night."

Samson stopped his sweeping for a moment, turning to look at me while he leaned against the broom handle.

"Wasn't any trouble," he said. "Always a pleasure to host a new face when one comes 'round, especially one that can handle himself with the old timer."

Samson's comment suddenly reminded me of the old man, about the conversation we had had the night prior. It seemed so surreal to think about; if Samson hadn't mentioned it, I might have thought it hadn't happened at all. But it most certainly had, and all the advice the old man gave and insecurity I had felt came flooding back to me.

Embarrassment, failure, death. My mind began to wonder towards such frightful thoughts, but I quickly reeled myself back in. I had already given such topics enough space, it wouldn't do to give them more. I would simply have to trust in myself.

As I thought about it all, Samson turned back away from me, broom in hand. "Best of travels to you."

I gave a quick nod, shaken from my thoughts, before walking to the door. As I opened it, I turned one last time, calling out to the barkeep, "Maybe I'll see you around."

Looking up, he gave me a quick wave before saying, "Your welcome 'ere any time, should Vintyr's grace allow it that is."

I returned his wave, walking through the door and letting it slam on its rusty hinges behind me. Stepping down off the porch onto the now hardened street, the chill of the morning started to hit me. Even with the sun casting its glow across the swamp, the early morning mist still laid low, the white wisps curling around every building. Through the fog, I could make out the odd section of fencing that attempted to border in the road ahead. Letting out a long, lung chilling breath, I started along the road northward, the town disappearing behind me as it became wrapped in the mist.

Walking along the road, there was far less mud than there had been in the town, as someone had the sense to raise the path above the water's resting level. Looking out at the marsh, a blanket of calm water covered most of what could be seen through the fog. Fallen branches and trees could be seen sticking out of the water, like hands desperately grasping for something. Mounds of earth broke up through the water on the rare occasion, one being home to a rotting stump with another tree growing out of it, taking its place.

Along the path, withered strands of grass sagged off to the side. Like much of the rest of the swamp, the winter air had sapped all the greenery of its color, leaving everything either a pale brown or steely gray, the colors complimenting the stale smell that lingered in the air. The only green to be seen was the algae and moss, the only things that had managed to grow in some relative abundance. Every lonely pool of water and scraggly tree was covered in the stuff.

As the day went on and the sun rose further towards its peak, the haze slowly slunk back into the swamp, pulling back some of the cold air with it. The ground began to shift, from an icy muck to solid dirt, the Endless Marsh slowly disappearing beneath my feet. With the change in ground came a change in the scenery, the old scraggly trees of the marsh being replaced with towering pines that cast the whole path into shadows. The wilted grass slowly withered away entirely, with hardy holly bushes cropping up, their leaves unaffected by the winter weather. The wildlife even seemed to come back, with deer and squirrels crisscrossing the road as they scurried along.

Such a sight was far different than anything that could be found in even the remotest parts of Bragur. There the tallest trees had been cut down years ago to construct the merchant fleets that sailed

the southern and northern seas. Rather than swaths of trees anchored into the ground, there were miles of wheat fields, the breeze of the sea cutting through them with care. I walked up to the base of a tree that was near to the path, putting my hand upon it. Looking up, it towered higher than the tallest lighthouse, and looking around, its base was easily as wide. I stayed there, watching the branches sway for a moment.

Had this been a sight that my mother had been accustomed to? Would she have been as awed by these trees as I was? Father never got a chance to go into the details, not on that day that I left our village. He had been dead for several seasons before my departure, it had only been through reading a few lost tattered notes that I could know his desire.

The village had been nearly abandoned at that point. Two failed harvests in a row ensured that. Everyone had either starved to death or left for the cities to look for work, anything to put food on the table. I had been one of the few people remaining, hoping naively that the duke or the church would step in to help us. But the spring had long since passed; there would be no one coming to save us.

I had been looking through my ancestral home, digging through the last few items I had to my name as I pondered what to take with me. Almost everything I owned had been sold to buy food from the nearby towns, and I could only hope that the little I had would find me housing while I looked for work. Even so, I couldn't take everything with me, I could only take what I could carry. The last few coins I had, a water pouch, and of course a small golden necklace. The only thing I had left of my mother, the one thing I had refused to sell off.

I remember looking through the house, I had come across my father's possessions. I hadn't the will to look through them after his death, but I had no choice but to look through them then. There hadn't been much: a knife, some work boots, but the final thing, a lockbox, had caught my eye. I opened it, the contents being scribbled notes and blotched ink on aged parchment. They were times, places, events that occurred long ago in lands not of our own. I didn't know what to make of them, until I read the one that had been on the top.

I've made very little progress in learning more of my sweet Dafna's past. She used to tell me that she came from Larafell, near the capital, fleeing that horrible conflict. I know she never wanted me to threat over such things, but these last few years, it's been gnawing away within me. I must keep trying. Even if it doesn't sate my own curiosity, I owe it to Arni. He deserves to know who his mother was. He has so little to remember her by as it is.

I blinked a few times, the branches of the trees coming back into focus. What would I find, there in the capital? I'm not sure even my father knew the answer. But he had worked so hard to uncover it for me, it was my duty to go in his place. I took a last glance at the tree, before turning back to the road ahead.

By the time I reached Corzen, the sun was well past its peak, having settled into its mid-afternoon spot in the sky. The path had shifted once again, from dirt to stone brick, hard thumps replacing the soft steps I had been making before. As I neared the city, the trees had begun to grow shorter, though they still were nothing to scoff at. I could see the cobbled stone that made up the outer walls, which seemed to extend all the way to the mountains that bordered the city, sentry stations lining the top. From where I was, I could count five guards patrolling the wall, three up top under the thatched

roof and two down below guarding the entrance itself. Past them, I could make out a few stone roof tops in the distance, as well as a dozen or so people walking the street.

As I approached the gate, one of the guards stepped forward several paces, holding up her hand.

"Hold there," she said. "What business do you have here in Corzen?"

Looking the guard over, she was dressed like many of the other guards, with a chainmail chest piece and an open-faced helmet. In her right hand, she held a long-tipped spear, the handle resting against the ground. She appeared to be much younger than the other guards, probably only just having come of age. Despite her young look, she lacked the features of a green youth, her face dotted with small scars. One caught my eye, a larger one on the left side of her jaw that streaked from the middle of her cheek down to her neck. Besides the scars, her face held an open scowl, far less kind than the blank face that the guard behind her wielded.

"I'm just passing through," I replied, lowering my hood. "Need to pick up some supplies for the road ahead."

"Oh, really now, just some traveler," she said, her scowl worsening as her grip tightened on her spear. "I haven't seen your face 'round here before. How do I know that you're not one of them cultists trying to come here and burn our city?"

The word cultist surprised me, I would have thought she'd be more worried about opposing armies or bandits. Either way, by her stance, I could tell she was ready to trade blows should she decide to go that path. Just what I needed, some upstart guard trying to prove themselves. I would just have to hope that one of the more veteran guards would intervene.

"I'm not here to cause any problems," I said in as slow a voice as I could. "I'm truthfully just passing through for supplies."

"Nothing but talk from you," she replied, spitting off to the side. "Why don't we see some proof, eh? Let's see what's under that cloak of yours and see if you're hiding any talismans or the like."

I started to form a scowl of my own. "Do you speak to everyone like this?" I asked, despite my better judgment. Every word from her mouth seemed to plant another seed of ire within me. "I've tried to be respectful here, but clearly such an effort is wasted on that granite skull of yours. I won't be pushed around by some arrogant bully who has nothing better to do than bother random passersby."

As I finished talking, I could see the guard's face change from a simmering anger to that of a raging kettle. "You think you can just speak to me like that?! I'm going to see who you really are!"

The moment she spit out that last word, she made a grab for my tunic, as though she were going to rip it aside to reveal I was a wolf standing on its hind legs rather than a man. I took a quick step back, causing her to stumble and curse, before she went to grab at me again.

Before she could, the other guard that was manning the gate stepped forward. He looked to be older, the black hair that was sticking out of his helmet speckled with gray strands. Placing a hand on her shoulder, he let out a tired sigh. "Tyra please, there's no need to--"

"Of course there's a need to," said the guard, assumedly named Tyra, her eyes refusing to leave me. "Those filthy hill people would try anything to get into the city. You've done nothing but wave people in all day, how can we be sure--"

"That is enough," he said, a hard look in his eyes. "Now let me handle this."

"Like I'd let some weak bellied twit like you let these people loose on us," she said back.

The two guards continued like this for a few moments, with each exchange becoming louder and louder, Tyra specifically trying to make her voice drown out the other. Soon, the guards on top of the gate had taken notice and were watching the surreal spectacle; it surely wasn't every day that guards would fight amongst each other so publicly. It came to a point where I feared a fight might break out between the two, but before anything further could happen, a call came from the gate.

"Captain on patrol!" As the voice called out, both Tyra and the other guard stopped fighting and looked toward the gate, where a figure could be seen emerging from it. He looked to be on in his years, the white stubble of his cheeks matching his short cut back hair. He wore a large piece of plate mail on his chest, with two bronze cusps holding up a green cape that slithered down his back. His armor featured several engravings, featuring wild animals with a mountain in the center.

As he grew closer, the guards stood at attention, making sure to face him while keeping me in sight. The man, clearly the captain, stopped a short distance from us.

"I was walking the wall just now, checking in to make sure that everything was in order," he said, his voice matching his blank face. "When suddenly, the silence of the day was interrupted by shouting in the distance."

At this point, he was no longer standing, but pacing in front of the guards. "Naturally, I assumed a great danger had come down on us, so I rushed here as soon as I could to assess the situation. Now, imagine my surprise when I saw that there wasn't some monster or army at our gates, but rather two of my guards arguing with each other like children."

The male guard began to speak. "Sir if I could just--"

"No words," interrupted the captain, his eyebrows struggling to stay up. "You will have plenty of time to, enlighten me, to the details later." Stepping past them, the captain then set his eyes on me, apparently done talking with the guards. "I assume that you are looking for entry into the city, yes? I am Leiogi, captain of the guard here in Corzen."

He put his hand forward, and as I grasped it, I replied, "A pleasure captain. I'm glad to speak to someone with some manners about them."

"As am I," he replied as he looked me over. "It sounds like you've already been put through enough hassle, just let me ask you a few questions before you enter the city."

Tyra opened her mouth to say something more, but a sharp look from the captain dissuaded her from it.

"I must apologize," he said looking back to me. "Most of the newer ones are on edge, there have been rumors of a Duasugan raid of the city going around."

The name briefly brought me back to the night before. There was that name again, Duasuga, goddess of death. Something about worshiping her being outlawed as heretical. The old man had made it seem like they were a scattered few worshippers, how could they be strong enough to attack a city such as this?

"It's no problem," I said. "Though I hope I'm not so easily mistaken for one of those 'filthy hill people' that I've heard about." I noticed Tyra shrunk back a bit at that.

"Well just the same," he said. "I still need to make sure you won't be causing any trouble here. Where do you hail from traveler?"

"From Bragur," I replied. "In the southern tip. Been traveling ever since my village went and got abandoned"

He gave me a quick nod. "Hmm, yes, I can tell by your voice. Has that distinctive twang about it."

"What business do you have in Corzen?" he continued. "It's become less common for travelers to venture in from Bragur, the roads being in the dangerous state that they are."

"I just need more supplies," I replied. "I have business in the north, and as you know it's a long journey up there."

"Indeed." The captain looked like he was pondering something for a moment, his fingers tapping lightly on his chest piece.

"Alright," he said. "You may enter, though don't be surprised if the folks aren't the kindest to you. Most aren't accustomed to outsiders."

"Thank you," I said. I began to walk forward, but paused for a moment, looking back at the captain. "Say, could you tell me where the city market is?"

"You'll be wanting to head toward the docks," he said, pointing somewhere off in the distance. "It's the main trading hub of the region, Corzen's pride and joy. You can't miss it."

I pulled up my hood as I walked in through the gate, giving Tyra a toothless grin as I went by, causing her to scowl once again. As I made my way through to the other side, I could finally see the city in its entirety. Unlike Myryhar, Corzen was a proper city, being much cleaner as a start. Built of timber and stone rather than sticks and mud, it was an amazing sight for how remote it was. Walking down the cobblestone street, the stones giving a firmness to my step, I was cast in the shadow of the many two-story buildings that rose alongside me. Most looked similar to one another, their rocky bases holding the cedar beams that supported the thatched roofs.

A garden or two could be seen along the sides, the winter air allowing only the occasional rosemary bush to grow in the near empty beds. I allowed my hand to brush through them as I passed, taking in a whiff of the earthy plant. The strong smell reminded me of winters back home.

I stopped for a moment, taking it in. In many ways, it was as though I was back in Bragur, surrounded by high walls and tall houses. At that time of day, all but the crustiest of homebodies back home would have been out, either browsing the markets or working the fields. But looking at the ridges

of the nearby mountains that overlooked the city, it brought me back to the cobblestone beneath my feet.

As I walked along the main road, the sounds of people hanging their clothes to dry on the windowsills and of children playing in the street were abundant, though all were almost completely drowned out by a greater noise farther along. It sounded like one of the auction houses I'd visited when I was younger, the sounds of people's voices overpowering anything lesser. As I walked toward the noise, not many people seemed to pay me much mind, as they were wrapped up in conversation. But others, the few lonely people on the street, all gave me a slanted glance, their eyes following me as I walked. I returned the look in kind.

Following the increasing sounds, I turned off the main street into an alley, crates and barrels being stacked precariously on either side. Squeezing my way through, the light of the day faded into a soft trickle. Only a small strip of blue and white was visible above, the rest being blocked by the extended roofs of the buildings. Weaving around the various heaps of debris, I took a few more turns, passing by the odd beggar as they slept in between the stacks of items, until I finally emerged from the alleys into the middle of the racket.

Shielding my eyes from the returning sunlight, I looked around. In front of me was at first what I thought to be an ocean, a seemingly boundless body of water reflecting the day's light, unbound in all directions. Looking closer though, the boats that were in port and sailing out further were much more akin to river and lake fairing vessels, lacking the sails needed for long voyages at sea. If they went into waters deeper than a noble's bath, they'd sure to be having a meeting with the bottom dwellers. Squinting my eyes further, looking past the water's glare, I could see where the opposite shore met the sheer cliffs of the surrounding mountains. Further proof that I hadn't wandered all the way to the western shore.

Looking to my right, the docks seemed to stretch out for a mile, nearly all the available spaces being taken up by merchant and fishing ships. A little further in, where the docks meet the cobble of the street, dozens of merchant stalls were set up. From what claimed to be fresh caught fish to worn leather clothing, it seemed that most everything a person could want could be found. Where I had seen but a dozen people walking the streets back at the gate, there must have been at least 200 haggling or wandering around here.

Back on the main road the sounds of this market had been loud but being right in it was almost deafening. Merchants and traders could be heard in every direction trying to draw people in.

"Fresh fish, caught this morning right here on the lake, a free one with your first purchase!"

"Clothes, trinkets, exotic wares from Austur and beyond! Come see for yourself!"

"Explosives, arrows, swords! You want it? It can be yours, so long as you have enough coin!"

I was so caught up in the sight of it all, that it wasn't until a sudden shove brought me back. Stumbling back a few steps, I looked up to see what I thought to be a sailor, his ragged clothes barely containing the muscle underneath, no doubt gained from oaring boats around the lake. He kept walking past me, taking a quick glance over his shoulder before continuing into the crowd. I almost went after

him, but I thought better of it. I had my own business to carry out, and the last thing I needed was to be a part of a street fight.

Gathering myself, I stepped out into the crowd of people milling about the area and began to peruse the stalls that were set up. I passed many selling clothes, watches, ceramics, all luxury items for the upper classes. The city must be more well off to have a market for such things. It wasn't until I got near the end of the stalls, away from the crowds and noise, that I found what I was looking for; something more akin to a general store, with preserved foods and other supplies being readily displayed.

As I walked up to the stall, I was immediately hit by the smell of meats and spice, the whole area reeking of earthy flavors. I could see cloves of garlic and other such pungent herbs hanging from the ceiling in long strands. Further back, I could see an older man seated underneath the propped-up canopy that cast the stall into the afternoon shadows. He was busy counting coins at the counter, diligently tossing them into a large coin purse, each one landing with a hard clinking sound.

His silver hair was cut short, not even reaching his squared off ears, with his face being speckled with white stubble. Despite sitting up on a stool at the counter, he was far shorter than me, his hunched over back giving him a brutish look. Had he not been counting the coin, it would have been easy to mistake him for one of the sailors walking the piers.

As I knelt down to walk underneath the canopy, the man plunked one last coin into the bag before looking up at me, his expression staying neutral. Taking his hand, he slid the rest of the coins off the counter and into the purse, tying a knot in it before slinging it into one of his pockets.

"Well then," he said. "See something that's caught your eye lad? What are ya looking for? Daggers? Potions? Maybe a little something to help your short stature?"

I frowned. "No, what I need- "

"Are you sure?" he said, cutting me off to look under the counter. "You're looking a mite bit stout there. One taste of this herbal root will perk you right up."

"I'm taller than you," I said bluntly. "And I'm looking for- "

He popped his head back from behind the counter, looking me over for a second. "Really? Hmm, if you insist. So, if you're not interested in an herbal brew, what do you want?"

I let out a sigh. "All I'm looking for is some rations for the road, and a map if you got one."

"Well sure thing, just give me a moment."

Hopping off the stool, the man walked over to one of the shelves deeper in, picking through the items before pulling out a few different jars. Placing them onto the counter he went back over, rummaging through some wicker baskets.

"So," he said as he looked. "How's the city been treating ya?"

I furrowed my brow at the rude little man. First insulting me and pushing some oddity, then trying to carry on with some casual conversation as though nothing had happened. It was vexing, but if I wanted to do business with him it would be best to play along. Might even get him to lower his prices at any rate.

I let out a sigh as I resigned myself to the conversation. "Alright, I suppose, it's certainly nicer than the last town I was in. Seems a bit less friendly though."

Turning around, the man put a few slabs of hard meat on the table, before ducking below the counter. "Ah, people giving you the ol' side eye are they. Not a surprise there."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

He popped up once more, a rolled-up scroll in his hand. "Well, Corzen's been through a fair bit of rough times in the past few decades. It's kept people's suspicions up."

I thought back to my confrontation at the gate, especially what Tyra had said. "That wouldn't have anything to do with that raid I heard about, would it?"

He gave a nod. "Ey, them cultists have been trying to gain hold of this city since the Collapse. If it wasn't for Corzen, Dasugan cultists would have full control over the whole region."

I squinted. "I've been hearing that name a lot recently, Dausuga. How can a few scattered and outlawed worshippers be of any threat to a city like this?"

The man stifled a laugh, before replying. "It's no wonder you need this map, cause you sure as the snow aren't from around here." He looked around a bit before leaning in. "Ever heard of the Resurgence?"

The name rang familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

"No, can't say that I have."

"Well, since you ain't from around here, I'll clue you in a bit," he replied. "You see, when I was growing up tales of Dausugan cultists were more a myth than anything. Stories to keep us out of the hills and out of trouble. 'One false step off the road and they'll take your soul!' is what they'd say."

"After the collapse, there weren't many folks left keeping an eye out for those outlawed worships and all," he continued. "So those cultists became a lot more real. And after being forced to subside in the mountains for generations, well, they came back with a vengeance. Hence why it's called the Resurgence and all."

That had to be wrong, it must be, I thought. There was no talk in Bragur of such a cultist population within the area, and something like that wouldn't go unnoticed. How could it not be until that moment when I was learning of what a real threat it might be? I was reminded again of how underprepared I might be; I didn't even know what danger these cultists threatened.

"Sorry," I said, growing slightly nervous. "But why was Dausugan worship outlawed? We never had many followers back home."

"Well cause it's dangerous," the man replied. "Them cultists, they could do stuff with your soul, manipulate your very being, even control you after death! Dausuga is a truly twisted goddess."

The man stopped for a moment, looking out at the lake, his eyes glazing over.

"I remember when they came back. Villages burned to the ground; the dead were raised. My sister, she, was killed in one of the attacks."

I could see a look of longing sadness wash over his face. As I watched him, I couldn't help but cling to what he had said. 'The dead were raised,' he couldn't be serious, could he? Those types of things only happen in stories meant to scare children from wandering off. Could something like that really happen? I was unsure of what to say. "I'm sorry," I said. "That must have been tough."

The man blinked a few times, before turning back to me. "It certainly was," he sighed. "And still is." He started to wave his arms about, as if trying to pantomime something. "For 40 years now the whole eastern side of the nation has been either controlled or terrorized by those people. They'd have the south too if it weren't for Corzen."

Outlawed cultists controlling half the nation and a massive resurgence that's lasted 40 years? How had I heard of none of this back in Bragur, by Cearea's grace why hadn't that old man told me about it the night before? He had sounded so relaxed about the issue, as though he had meant to mislead me for some reason. What had I truly gotten myself into?

"If they have that much power," I said, more concerned now. "What's stopping them from controlling the rest of the nation?"

"The bigger cities mostly: Ranadur, Dyrlega, and of course Corzen," he replied. "That, and what's left of the Third Assembly, the Fourth Assembly if you're a damned loyalist. Those kinds aren't welcome here."

More questions popped up. "Why's that? Wouldn't they want all the help they could muster, given that they're up against a death cult?"

He shook his head. "All comes down to pride really," he sighed. "Corzen got no help from the church during the worst of the Resurgence. They cried out, but the church was busy fighting their own battles. Even without their help, Corzen was still able to fight off the cultists. Seeing the weakness of the church, most of the respect people had left after those times."

We looked at each other in silence, a look of remorse coming across the man's face. The brashness that I was met with no longer showed. After a moment, the man broke the silence.

"Anyway," he said, motioning to the wears on the counter. "You have your choice here of salted venison or pickled vegetables, whatever best suits you."

I left my few lingering thoughts for later, picking out a few cuts of the hardened venison, along with a jar of pickled carrots, letting a few coins drop onto the counter.

Counting them out, the man said, "The coins good, safe travels there. You never know which corner a cultist will be behind, 'specially if you're traveling along the east side."

I turned around to leave, but before I could the man called to me, "Oi, almost forgot your map here."

Turning around, he handed me the map, the old fibers rubbing soft on my skin. I thanked him before walking out of the stall back onto the pier, though my mind was still reeling from the recent

revelations I had received. The sun was starting to dip, and the crowds that once filled the area were starting to leave back into the rest of the city. There wouldn't be nearly enough sunlight to travel any further for the day. Walking back to the main street, I left the docks, looking for a place for the night.

As I walked the streets, I unfurled the map the man had given me, and started to study it. I quickly found Corzen, the map confirming my suspicions that the mass of water at the pier was indeed a lake surrounded by mountains. Lots of mountains. I had known that Larafell was made up of rather tough terrain, it often being called "The Peak of the World", but the sheer number of peaks and hills on the map made the whole landscape seem near impassible. There looked to be only one clear way to get past, an eastern route that would have me swing around the right half of the nation.

I let out a groan. The eastern route would be longer than I had anticipated. It had me swinging halfway up the central ridges, taking me straight through the eastern wastes and through a valley in the mountains. That, and based on the conversation I just had, the whole area would be brimming with cultists. I had trained briefly before I had set out, but who knows what could happen out there.

Of course, I could always try to scale the snow-covered mountains or back track through the swamp and swing around the mountains to get to the western side. None of them seemed like good options, with cultists in the east and an extra month of travel in the west I would need time to look the map over and plan out a route. I furled the map back up, sliding it into the inside pocket of my cloak.

It wasn't long before the sun had been blocked by the nearby mountains, and the whole city was cast into the early twilight. The light of the sun was replaced with the light of lanterns, most of the houses becoming illuminated. The departure of the sun welcomed in the chill of the evening, the bristles of the wind causing me to tighten my cloak. Looking up, one could see a cloudless sky, the stars of Skijah starting to blink into existence.

I was so busy looking at the closing twilight, that I nearly missed the group of men walking toward me, a scowl on all their faces as they talked amongst each other. There were three of them, each dressed in more common clothes speckled with bits of rock and dust; most likely miners returning to town for the day, their larger physiques reeking of manual labor.

The man in the middle looked to be the sullenest of the group, his thick eyebrows furrowed like ridges on his cliff of a forehead. He was slightly larger than the other two with him, having a solid couple of inches on both, and seemed to be ranting about something. As I neared their group, I could make out in part what he was saying.

"I swear, Corzen has been on the decline," he said.

"Well come on now," said the man to his right. "Things have been pretty good lately. We've gotten more trade than ever with the river being secured."

"That's just the problem," exclaimed the middle one, his arm stretching out. "All these outsiders having the run of our grand city, leaching off our success!" He turned to the man on his left, somehow frowning even more. "It's a disgrace to us all. Corzen has always been a strong independent city, we have no need for these people."

As he kept speaking, his gaze slowly shifted over to me, his eyes looking me over as though I were a child who had been caught in the pantry. He swung his trunk of an arm over to point at me.

"See?" he said. "Nothing but lowlifes coming in 'ere and dirty'n up the place."

Below my cloak, my face scrunched as I tried to hold my tongue. I'd dealt with plenty of angry do-nothings before, but this man had the size to back up his mouth. A wrong word in his direction would probably end with my body sailing over the mountains and my essence returning to the Void.

I pulled my cloak down further, steadily walking forward as I grew closer to the group. They were all eyeing me now, each gaze brighter than the stars above. As we passed, my legs were suddenly swept out from under me as I tripped. I had just enough time to spread my hands out in front of me before hitting the rough cobblestone of the street. I rolled myself over just in time to see the large one of the group retracting his leg back into stride, letting out a laugh with his friends as he walked away.

In an instant, I could feel the fury of Skendir pulsing through me, my teeth clenching to the point of near shattering. Looking back at the street below me, I quickly picked up a loose piece of cobble in my scrapped-up hand, one roughly the size of my fist. Before I could gather myself, I could see the stone hurtling its way toward the group, before connecting with the back of the bigger one's head. The audible thunk it made was as if I had thrown it at a hollowed log, and as the stone clattered to the ground, the man turned around with a vengeful glare in his eye.

"Oi," he yelled, the sound of his bellowing voice seeming to silence the entire street. "You'll pay for that, ya filthy outlander!"

Standing up, I responded with snarl, "Why don't you make me ya garmur."

Turning to the other men with him, a storm in his eyes, he yelled out, "Leave 'em to me, I'll kick this fokk through the mountain." I braced myself, leaning backward on to my left leg. I barely had time to steady myself before he was charging at me in full force, a fist raised above his head. The other two seemed to stay back, each smirking to themselves.

Soon, he had closed the gap between us, his full form towering a foot above my own. As he reached me, he brought his right fist down, aiming straight at my head. I ducked down to the right, his knuckles nearly grazing the top of my cloak, before I swung in at his exposed stomach. I dared not to unsheathe my sword, the last thing I needed was a man's blood on it. As I connected, it felt as though I had hit a slab of granite, and my hand simply bounced off. The man gave a quick grunt, before swinging out at me with his left, barely giving me time to duck out of the way.

Facing him, he took another swing at me, forcing me to backup as he continued his onslaught, until I found my back against the wall of one of the surrounding buildings. Pulling his fist back once more, I hastily rolled in between his legs, avoiding the punch that nearly broke through the wooden wall. I sat there on my knee for a moment catching my breath and gave a quick glance to my surroundings. Our fight had apparently stirred up a crowd, as cheerers and onlookers had gathered both on the street and up on the balconies to yell and jeer at us. Some had clearly come from a nearby tavern, as they shakily stood in the crowd with mugs in their hands laughing at the situation.

The man had come back to face me at this point, the anger in his eyes still burning. He charged again, and as I braced myself I glanced back over at the tavern goers, their frothy drinks spilling over onto the cobble, sparking an idea. As the man brought his fist down once again, I dodged and rolled over to the tavern flies, grabbing one of their drinks from their hand, eliciting some surprised cries from them.

Turning back toward the man, he had barely the time to turn to face me before I had thrown the contents of the mug into his face, causing him to grab at his eyes and yell in pain.

As he curled backwards, I jumped forward, springing off his knee and vaulting over his shoulder. As I came down behind him, I flung my arm around his neck, bringing him down to the street with me. We landed hard, him on top of me, his weight taking the icy air from my lungs and nearly causing me to lose my hold on him. The stinging of the beer had just about run its course, and the fight was returning to his eyes.

He yelled out, "You're dead ya skit, they'll never find all ya pieces!" I had to finish this now, if he got up, I wouldn't get another good chance.

Strengthening my hold on him, I grabbed my wrist with my other hand, putting as much pressure on his neck as I could while he flailed and thrashed like a penned deer. Unable to stand up, he began to slam himself against the ground to try and loosen me, but each one was weaker than the last one. It was only a few seconds more before he made his final attempt to pry my arm from his neck, clawing at my arm until his own arms fell slack against the cobblestone.

The crowd that had grown around us had become silent, until with a grunt I rolled the lunk off me, causing a wave of cheers and hollering. Standing up, I braced my leg with my arm, and turned to the other two that had been with the man. They both looked skittish, and I was so concentrated on them that I didn't notice the thwack that sent me tumbling to the street and into darkness.

CHAPTER 4 REVISION NOTES: We need a little bit between Jalas and Arni were Arni asks why Jalas didn't tell him about the cultists.

Chapter 4

Gods and Worship: The Secrets They Won't Tell You!

By Trurkinn

Most everyone, from the highest nobles of Dyrlega to the lowest of beggars in the Ranadur slums know of the Gods. The greatest of all beings who have bestowed this world with all the things that inhabit it. The great molders and shapers who have made the grandest monuments of the lands. The titanic whisperers who have helped guide the likes of mortal men. I speak of course of the Divine Twelve: Ceara, Skendir, Smindar, Bragfur, Dausuga, Pekklar, Hernarda, Fradurst, Vintyr, Otamin, Uthalf, and Skijah. Such beings are deserving of the worship we'd give a hundred, nay, a thousand mortals.

However, when it comes to the act of worship, many are at a loss of what to do. We are told to light a candle here, burn the odd rosemary sprig there, but we are told nothing of what we can do further! And that's no mistake friends, for it is an obscurity by design. By whom you might ask? Why the very church itself! The damned Third Assembly is the holder of many secrets, they're priests and Devouts telling us nothing of the services and practices of their inner circles. They claim to guide us forward, but they do nothing but blind us! If this path of deception and lies continue, our favor with the Gods will surely falter.

But there is hope yet friends! For I have gained access to the archives and hidden records that the Assembly keeps locked away in their 'grand' church at Dyrlega. I have seen firsthand the many acts and practices that are undergone by the initiates and apprentices. I have heard the whispers of priests and Devouts alike as they meet under candlelight. And now I shall pass this knowledge onto you dear reader! Gaze here now, as I list to you the full pantheon, the full worships, so that you may finally commune with the gods as they had originally intended!

Pekklar, The Hawk: God of Knowledge, Scholars, and Ancient Things

There are many secrets that exist in this world, many of which have yet to be solved. However, for Pekklar, all these mysteries have already been revealed long ago. As the god of knowledge, Pekklar holds all information on the workings of the world. No secret is safe from him, from the knowledge of how the stars shift in the heavens to the private conversation one had with a lover in the night.

Pekklar will often take the form of a hawk, soaring about the white tipped snow tops of the mountains and the cobbled roofs of the cities, always keeping an observant eye out for new knowledge. His symbol, a hawk's feather draped across a scroll, is worn and displayed in many of the libraries and academies across the land, often showing one to be a student or scholar.

Of all the gods, Pekklar is one that takes a great interest in human endeavors. Rumors and legend have told of Pekklar appearing to people in disguise, ready to help them in their work. One of the great scientists of our time, Grugur, has even given credit to Pekklar for his discoveries.

Pekklar is the god of knowledge, and as such the best way to worship him is to bring knowledge into your life. Go out today, go out and discover something new. Learn of the wider world beyond yourself and bask in the glory of the knowledge bestowed upon you.

I could feel the lump on my head before I opened my eyes. It felt as though a boulder had been sewn under my skull, and it was trying every bit to get out. Cracking open my eyes, I was met with the solid gray of a stony brick floor, the bland color blurring together with that of the wall. It hurt my eyes to look at it, especially with my face being plated on the floor. Groaning, I propped myself up on one arm before sitting myself upright, my hands reaching up to scrub the gunk from my eyes. It was only then that I noticed my wrists were locked in shackles, the gray of the iron speckled with bits of rust. Giving my arms one last stretch, I gave my head a shake before glancing around the room I was in.

Directly in front of me was a large section of crisscrossing iron bars, the gaps in between letting me see just outside into the hallway. The corridor looked much like the cell, with mismatched stone bricks making up the concave walls. Looking back within the room, there wasn't much worth speaking about. Just an old rickety bed in the corner, without so much as a blanket or padding on it, along with a bucket in the other corner for relieving oneself. All the hallmarks of some godforsaken dungeon where they dumped the lowest of the low.

As I rubbed the lump on my head, I thought back to the night before. Some nosy garmur must have called the guard, like they've never seen a street fight before. I let out a sigh. I should have tempered myself, let my anger slide away. Instead, I was trapped, gods know where, my future uncertain. There was no telling what they would do to me, anything from letting me rot in my cell to having me toll

away in the mines. Either way, if I didn't find a way out of there soon, I'd never see the shores of the capital. I had to get out of there.

Turning to the bars once more, I tried my best to peer into the hallway to get a better scope of the place. The lock on the cell was painfully generic, yet durable, with its large key holed face keeping the cell's latch firmly in place. Despite the lock, the latch itself looked rather flimsy, with years of age and wear quite visible. I could break it with enough effort, though the noise it would make would be a whole new problem.

As I puzzled through the situation, the shouting of familiar voices down the hall drew my ear. One of the voices, a women's, sounded particularly angry. Pressing up against the bars, I shoved my head through the best I could, trying to catch whatever words made their way down to me. I couldn't quite make out what was being said, until a particularly loud shout could be heard.

"I don't care what you think!" the voice bellowed out. "He is a respected ally of the city and a good friend of mine. If he's put in a good word for the prisoner, then we are honor bound to hear him out. Now go get him!"

With that, the voices died down, replaced with the sound of clanking footsteps pounding heavy on the stone toward my cell. I quickly made my way over to the bed in the corner, leaning my back against the wall and trying my best to look comfortable despite the state of the bed. The footsteps kept getting louder, until I could hear them come to a stop in front of my cell. Trying to keep a casual look, I peered up to see a guard fumbling around with the lock. Looking closer, I could make out a familiar scar on her jaw.

I kept up my neutral appearance. "Well, look who it is," I said. "Tyra, right?"

She refused to look over at me as she jammed the key into the door's lock. "Don't say a damn word," she growled out as the door flew open. "You're lucky that you got someone to vouch for you. If it were up to me, I'd see you rottin on a pike outside the gate."

Tyra stood there at the door impatiently as I slowly got up from the bed, taking my time to stretch out my joints. I went so far as to shuffle along in my shackles, despite them not hindering my movements that much. By the time I had gotten over to her, she was fuming, so much so that I could see her jaw clenching hard enough to shatter her teeth. It might not have been the smartest move to test her anger, but it felt rather cathartic.

She slammed the door to the cell shut and began leading me through the cobbled hallways, passing by the few other occupied cells. Each person we passed watched us with interest, Tyra's loud actions rousing the tired and alerting the able-minded.

We trudged along dim hallways and climbed several sets of stairs, finally coming into a small room that was much nicer than the cells below, sunlight leaking in through the tinted windows. Unlike the cobble of the dungeon, the floor was a dark brown spruce, the floorboards creaking as we stepped onto it. The room was filled with similar wooden beams supporting the ceiling, though they each looked ill fitted for the room's modest size.

In front of me there were two men, both of which I recognized. One was the captain I had met on the wall, Leiogi if I remembered correctly. He was sitting down in a plush chair behind a hard-oak

desk, looking at me with a tired gaze. Looking over at the other, I could only lay my eyes on him for a moment before being taken aback. Standing there in the same mismatched outfit and over bursting pack was the old man I had met in the swamp.

Glancing over at the old man, Leiogi pointed to me. "Is this the one you're looking for?" he asked.

The old man seemed to take his time, looking me over for a bit, as though we hadn't met just two days prior. Finally, he turned his gaze back over to the guard. "Yes, yes this is the man I was looking for," he said in an oddly feeble voice. "One of my guards, you know. I'll be needing him for the eastern roads."

Guard? I had no idea what he was talking about, talking as though I were some sell-sword picked up at the promise of a few coins. There was no way to know, but I thought it best to hold my tongue. He was trying to get me out, and I wasn't about to jeopardize an attempt for me to leave such a dank place. Any plans he had would have to be faced later.

Glaring over at Tyra, Leiogi gave her a nod. Reluctantly, she fiddled with the irons around my wrists for a moment, before letting them drop to the floor. I gave my wrists a quick rub, before making my way slowly over to the old man.

The captain cleared his throat, before standing up. "Well, I'm glad that we worked all this out," he said. "It's always a pleasure when you stop by here in Corzen."

The captain took one last glance at me, before returning his sight to the old man. "Though in the future, try to keep a better eye on the help over there. Even with your, er, status, I can't have people brawling in the streets."

"Oh of course," replied the old man. "We'll be heading out today anyway. Best to make use of the sunlight while we have it."

The two continued to exchange a few pleasantries, all the while I could see Tyra muttering to herself in the corner. For a brief moment she looked over to see my glancing at her, returning an angry frown at me before heading off into an adjacent room. What an odd woman, I wondered if she treated all travelers like that, as though every passerby were a threat.

My thoughts turned from her to the conversation before me. The old man and Leiogi were still chatting away, forcing me to stand there awkwardly like a child waiting for their parents to finish up.

Finally, the old man said, "Well, we'd best be getting on our way. Would hate to get stuck out in the dark, been hearing some terrible rumors about the roads as of late."

Shaking the old man's hand one last time, Leiogi replied, "Safe travels, may Vintar grace you." Releasing his grip, Leiogi shouted toward a room behind us. "Tyra, get in here!"

Entering just as she had left, Tyra came back into the room, her face still twisted in a scowl. Walking over to the guard's desk, she stood at attention, the scowl leaving her face and her arms folding behind her back.

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Turning to her, the captain said to her, "Please escort these men to the street. Come back to see me afterward."

"Yes sir," she replied, the scowl returning to her face as she turned away. Walking past us, the wooden floorboards creaked as Tyra's footsteps thundered across them. As the old man turned to follow her, I began to fall in line behind him before Leiogi spoke up.

"Wait for just one second there," he said as he moved out from behind his desk and walked over to me. He stopped only a few feet in front of me. "I'm being lenient with you, as I'm good friends with your employer. However, if you cause any problems in my city again, I will not be as patient. Am I clear?"

"Yes sir," I replied. "I wouldn't dream of it."

"Good," he said, walking back to his desk. "You're free to go now, I suggest you catch up before you lose sight of him."

Taking his cue, I turned to leave the office. It wasn't long before I was back out on the cobblestone streets, the midday sun glistening off the surrounding mountain tops with a blinding glare. The caressing of the sunlight on my skin was a welcome feeling after the night spent in a cell. Much as the day before, the streets were busy with sounds of the day, from misshapen wagons bouncing along the stone to the gentle murmur of distant voices bartering at the market.

In front of me was the old man and Tyra. The old man let out a throaty cough, before turning to me, "It's best we get going then", he said. Turning then to Tyra, who had taken to standing beside me, he said, "Thank you for the escort, I'm always pleased by the kindness shown here."

Tyra looked at him with contempt, clearly not happy with anyone who would dare to associate with me. After a few moments, she replied, "Just following orders, sir."

The old man smiled. "Well, may Smindar watch over your work," he said, before beginning to walk slowly towards the market, one hand clasped to one of the straps on his pack. "Come on then Arni," he said, turning his head slightly while waving me over with his hand. "We have a lot of ground to cover, you know."

"Wait, I..." I stuttered before stopping myself.

Now that I was out of the cell, I was about ready to be done with this act that I'd been forced into. But with Tyra still behind me and my curiosity rather peaked by what the old man was planning at, I decided it would be best to at least follow him for a moment longer. Should Tyra suspect anything was amiss, I could find myself back in that cell.

With that decided, I yelled out "Coming!" before starting to walk after the old man with some haste in my step. But before I could cover any distance, I felt a hand descend on my shoulder, pulling me back with the strength of a warhorse. I could feel a hot, hissing breath pouring out onto my ear.

"You listen here," Tyra whispered. "You belong in that cell back there and you know it. Next time I see you, I won't care who you're with, I'll see you rotting down there in your own filth."

With that she let go of me with a push, causing me to stumble slightly. I turned my head to look at her, but she was already walking back into the building. Rubbing my shoulder, I turned back and fell into a steady jog, not wanting to lose the old man in the crowds ahead.

The rest of the journey through the city was done in near silence, the old man weaving his way through the streets while occasionally giving the odd “This way” or “Through here”. Any attempt on my part to start a conversation was met with a quick glance and a grunt, though sometimes he didn’t even bother with that. For someone his age, he certainly was agile; I almost lost him several times in the crowds surrounding the market.

Finally, after a half hour, we had reached the outer wall of the city, the road we were on leading straight to a gate within it. Unlike the side I had entered, this gate had a full view of the lake to the left of it. We must have been on the Eastern side. Walking up to it, the guards only gave us a glance before returning to their stalwart positions, allowing us easy passage out of the city and onto the forested road that laid before us.

We walked for a time, the city leaving our view as the trees and hills blocked it out. With Corzen having just faded into the distance and the road empty, I closed the gap between myself and the old man, eager to get some answers. “So, what was all of that back there then?” I asked him as I walked alongside him. “What exactly is going on?”

The old man kept on walking for a moment, before addressing me. “Well, I couldn’t just leave you in jail,” he said. “Afterall, you are my bodyguard.”

His statement had me taken aback. Rather than answering the question he had double downed. “I’m not sure what kind of deal you think we have,” I said. “But last I checked, I didn’t sign up to be anyone’s guard.”

“You could be,” he said.

“I could be a lot of things, but hired help certainly ain’t high on that list.”

Keeping in stride, the old man replied, “Well, I think we can come to a deal that benefits the both of us here.”

“Sorry,” I said, letting out a short chuckle. “But I don’t see how you could offer me any kind of deal that would help me out.”

Rather than replying, the old man kept walking, before stopping in front of a low-lying boulder next to the road.

“Look,” I said. “I know you got me out of jail just now, and I am thankful for that. I’m in your debt.”

Taking in a deep breath of the woodland air, the old man dropped his pack, dusting off the boulder before taking a seat on its mossy surface.

“But I just think it would be best if we went our separate ways from here,” I continued. “I didn’t go on this journey to act as someone’s guard or mercenary or whatever it is you’d like to call it.”

Finally finding a comfortable spot, the old man turned to look at me, speaking in a raspy voice. "How far do you think you'll make it?"

"Make it...where?"

"To the capital," he replied. "Sure, a young man like you is certainly capable, and I know that you at least have a bit of wits about you. But traveling alone in an unfamiliar land with dangers around every tree and boulder? How far do you think you'll really make it?"

I paused. "How do you know where I'm going?"

"Ah, a question for a question," he replied. "People talk, you know. You can be as careful as you want, but after a while enough people know things. Things they don't feel are important enough to keep hidden. All it takes is someone putting them all together to know the true version of a person."

My mind went racing, searching for the face of any person I had talked to in the last weeks. "Not everyone would run their mouth like that," I replied.

"Oh really," said the old man. "You have too much faith in other's perceptiveness, Arni Prestur."

I stared at him, a smug smile forming on his face. "Alright," I said. "You've made your point."

"I'm glad," he replied. "Now, will you answer my question? How long do you think you can last out here alone?"

"I'll manage it," I muttered. "Somehow."

"Oh come now," he replied. "I know that you know better than that. Why did I meet you before in that tavern? Because you were being smart, avoiding the more traveled route in favor of secrecy. You knew the customs of the area and acted accordingly."

The old man let out a small groan, placing his hands on his boney lower back and arching it backwards, before continuing.

"Now take what happened in Corzen. You got into a street brawl and landed in jail, because you acted without knowledge. You have no real sense of the area around you, and thus your decisions are skewed in such a way that hinders you."

I looked at him, a slight frown forming through my beard. "So you're saying that I'll fail because I lack knowledge of my surroundings."

"Lad," he said, looking at me dead in the eye. "You won't just fail, you'll die."

In that moment, I was taken back to the swamp. I felt as though I were sinking into the muck, air refusing to enter my lungs as I was buried alive. I was fighting the large man again, this time his dirty fist connecting with my gut, leaving me breathless. The dread and feeling of helplessness enveloping me like mist that refuses to leave in the sun's presence.

I stood there, not doing anything, the world around me a silent husk as me and the old man looked at each other. Was he right? Is that how my journey would be destined to end? No, I would be

able to take on any challenge, I had to. But he spoke with such confidence, as though he had already seen the outcome. It took me half a minute before I could shake the feeling and reply.

"That's yet to be seen," I said. "And if I recall, part of my 'lack of knowledge' is on you. Ya failed to mention during our little talk that the nation was still in a bloody religious civil war with cultists swarming the place. In fact you outright lied about it, a few cultists 'here and there' wouldn't result in the fear I saw back there."

The old man sucked in his breath. "Perhaps I did mislead you, and for that I'm sorry. But if I had told you the full truth, would you still have gone on this journey of yours?"

"Of course I would have," I replied. "Would you suggest otherwise?"

"You'd be surprised," the old man chuckled. "At how little it takes to dissuade the spirits of men. I wouldn't have wanted it to be my fault for taking you off your path."

I looked at him, unconvinced.

"And fine," he continued. "Perhaps I saw an opportunity with you. One that I couldn't just give up on so easily, and one that will benefit us both."

I let out a sigh. "Well let's hear it then. Either way, I don't see how being your bodyguard will help either of us."

"Ah, that's where my proposition comes in," he said, shifting his weight toward me as he leaned over. "I've spent most of my life traveling around Larafell, gathering all the knowledge that I can find. There are few secrets left in these lands that I have yet to glimpse."

The old man stopped suddenly, a look of pain about him as he cracked his elbow with a sickening pop. He looked back at me. "But as you can tell, I'm getting closer and closer to Dausuga's grasp," he said. "It's become harder to traverse the lands at my age. That's where you come in."

I looked down at him. "So you want me for, what, protection?"

"Precisely," he exclaimed. "You will bring the muscle, and I'll bring my know-how of the land. Together, we will have a much easier time traveling."

I pondered his proposition for a moment. It certainly would be useful to have what was essentially a guide along with me. He could help prevent situations such as what had happened in Corzen the night prior. That, and it wouldn't hurt to have the company of someone who had more to talk about than your average mercenary. Even so, I still couldn't shake the odd feeling that I got from him, the same twisting dagger in my gut I got when I first laid my eyes on him.

"Suppose I do agree to this, arrangement," I replied. "It surely can't last. I doubt we're going to the same place."

"Oh, don't be so certain," he said. "This world is filled with seemingly unrelated happenstance, just like our meeting in Corzen."

My eyes shifted into a squint. "Oh really? Then where are you off to?"

Giving me a crooked grin, the old man replied, "Why, the Capital of course!"

I felt my eyes widen, before I forced them back to their nearly closed position. "What are you heading there for? If you've traveled as much as you say, you've surely seen all it has to offer."

For a moment, the old man didn't say anything. His eyes seemed to go dead, with them looking straight through me to the cloudless sky above. A small part of me thought that perhaps, right in the moment, he had passed on to the Void, his soul rudely leaving in the middle of our conversation.

I stepped forward, putting out my hand to try and touch him. "Ummm," I said. "Are you alright?"

Before my hand could touch his shoulder, he blinked a few times and slowly bent his head back, before looking back at me.

Clearing his throat, he said, "Oh, I'm sorry. My thoughts have grown accustomed to wandering away from me as I get older. What did you ask again?"

"Um, well," I said awkwardly. "Why are you going to the Capital?"

"Ah yes, the Capital," he replied. "Well for one, it's a glorious sight to see, even after it was sacked at the beginning of the Resurgence. The lights of the temple still shine upon that city." He readjusted himself, laying his right leg over his left. "But more importantly, there is a certain book there that I wish to lay my hands upon."

"Really?" I asked. "What kind of book is worth traveling through lands like these?"

"Oh it's not just any book," he exclaimed, a glimmer of excitement bubbling up into his words. "It's the last known volume written by Kel'ras the Seer, something he wrote near the end of his life."

"Kel'ras...isn't he that devout? The one who....", I trailed off, unable to remember.

"Who was the only Devout of Skijah, yes," he replied. "Said to be one of the most powerful devouts to have existed." The old man took his eyes off of me for a moment, tilting his gaze up to the gray clouds above. "To know what some of his last thoughts were," he mused. "Oh, what a wonder it would be to read them."

Taking his eyes off the clouds and back to me, the old man then asked, "So, what do you say? Shall we travel together, or will you risk your hide in these cultist-filled forests by yourself?"

"I...hmm," I thought out loud. In truth, I still wasn't quite sure. The benefits of accompanying him certainly were there, but I still had that uneasy feeling. Was it just some coincidences that he happened to be going to the same place that I was, or did he have something planned?

I also still didn't quite buy his explanation for leaving me in the dark about the cultist situation. He was hiding something, I just wasn't sure what. Of course, if he were planning something, it would be better that I keep him in a place where I could keep my eye on him.

Eventually, I came to my decision. "Alright," I said. "You've made your point. I'll accompany you to the capital."

"Splendid," he exclaimed, jumping to his feet, his limbs suddenly alive with energy. "I knew a fellow like you would come around to the idea."

Bending over, the old man picked up his pack from against the boulder, dusting off the few stray pine nettles that had stuck to it. As he adjusted the pack on his back, I asked him, "So, how will we go forward? I got this map here..."

Pulling the final strap, the old man turned to me as I pulled out my map. Before it was even out of my pocket, he had already unfurled it upon the boulder, his eyes slowly passing over each landmark. I walked over to him, peering over his shoulder as he scanned the map.

"Hmmm," he said. "This must be an old map, still has Eldmur marked on it. Doesn't matter much though." Glancing over, he shuffled to the side and beckoned me to come in closer. "Come now, take a look here." His finger was pointed right at a jagged lake, with Corzen sitting at its far end below it. "So we're about here. To get to the capital from here, it will be best if we go this way," he said as he dragged his finger up the east side of the map. "The mountain passes will all be snowed up this time of year, so we'll need to go all the way around the Milara mountains and along the northern coast."

Looking over the map, I could see his proposed route, and it looked long. It would take weeks to complete such a journey. Taking a close look at the map, I spotted something. "What about here," I said, pointing at a large valley that cut through the mountains. It was probably halfway between Corzen and the northern coast. "Couldn't we just cut through here? There's no way that a valley of that size will be blocked off, and it would save us a great deal of time I reckon."

The old man shook his head. "Oh no, no we don't want to go that way," he said.

"And why's that," I asked. "It looks perfectly fine."

"See, this is why it will be good for us to travel together," he replied. "You really don't know anything about the area." He pointed back at the valley that I had seen. "This valley here? It used to be an important pass for goods coming from one side of Larafell to the other. That made it quite the valuable location to control. If we were to go through there now, we'd be completely blocked off, not by the snow, but by dozens of cultists patrolling the area. It's part of the reason why the east is so cut off."

I nodded my head, looking closer at the map. "So if we're going the eastern route, it looks like we'll have to pass through...", I petered off, squinting at a town on the edge of The Giltre region. "Hartre."

The old man gave a nod. "We'll have to for certain, though if you expect a town to be there, you're in for some disappointment."

"What do you mean?" I replied, pointing to the spot on the map. "It's marked right there."

The old man looked at me with a deep gaze. "The last time I saw Hartre, I was sneaking out of it, the whole town surrounded by cultists." He turned back to the map. "I'd be surprised if anything was left of it."

I was taken aback. "Wait, so the town was taken? Is it even safe to go that way then?"

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"I'm honestly not sure," he replied. "No one is quite sure what happened in Hartre, not too many folks are keen on finding out. But if we're going east, we need to go through it either way."

Looking at the mountains and ridges that surrounded the town, I knew he was right, but that didn't make me like the sound it any better. The journey ahead had already sounded dangerous, but now we would be passing through a town that, what, was captured? Destroyed? There were so many unknowns ahead, we would be heading straight into a fog of war. At least if we had decided to just climb over the mountains the dangers were obvious, frostbite and avalanches make themselves readily known.

"Maybe they were able to hold out," I said hopefully, though deep down I knew better. "Just like Cozen has."

"Perhaps," he replied, his voice fading away. His mind was clearly in a different place. "But we won't find out just standing here. The journey to Hartre will take three days, two if we're quick about it. We'd best get moving."

With that, he rolled up the map in one quick motion, before flinging it right back at me. I fumbled it for a catch or two, before grasping it and shoving it back into my pack. The old man had already started walking at a horse's pace, blazing 20 or so feet ahead of me. As I jogged to catch up, a question bubbled up in my mind.

As I caught up to the old man and fell into his brisk pace, I asked him, "Say, you already know my name. What should I call you?"

After a moment, the old man replied, "I've had a few names over the years, but you can call me Jalas."

I figured that would be the best answer that I could get out of him. I turned back to the road in front of us, the green expanse of the forest surrounding us. I noticed that just up the road, there was an old post with several signs on it, the wood nearly rotting underneath the moss that draped off them. As we passed it, I could make out two of them. One pointed back the way we had just came from, with the name "Corzen" chiseled into it. The other, pointed the direction we were heading and more disheveled than the other sign, could be made out to say Hartre.

Ch 5: The Charred City

Monsters, Beasts, and Mythical Sightings: The Creatures of Larafell

By Skepna Rimsli

Like I was saying at the start of this catalog, Larafell is home to the widest variety of creatures on the whole of the continent. Ain't nowhere is this more apparent than in the wilds of The Giltre. Untouched by the likes of man in over a century, the forested cliffs of the region have long mothered all manner of beast and monster, growing them larger, stronger, and ever more deadly. It's a rare sight to see such creatures that have been birthed from that land.

Tales from Larafell (Working title)

It's a right bit of luck that I'm writing this while bunking up in Hatre - all the best hunters spend long lengths of the year here - which sits right at the base of the ever present cliffs. It being the closest settlement to the region, it is one of the few places to witness the likes of these beasts when they decide to wander down from the cliffs. And witness something I certainly did, a tale worth recounting.

I was in the market, your normal spring afternoon see, when the cry could be heard. It was a sound of trees being splintered and metal grinding on stone. Everyone in the square froze, looking up to see this massive shadow crash down from the sky into the market. I myself dove out of the way, the stones of square cracking underneath the weight of the thing, though not everyone was so lucky. Least their deaths were quick.

As soon as I could get eyes on the thing, I could tell it was a creature no person had seen before. If it had been standing, it would have easily been the size of an Ulk, but it was slunk down on its side after the impact. Even still, it looked the size of a house from where I witnessed it. The hide was a nightsky's black, with patches of dark red staining it as it bled out. I could hear it still breathing, labored; it must have somehow fell from the very top of the cliffs.

I thought we were in for a right bit of luck. Damage to the square and the recently departed aside, the thing would make for some good eating, and the hide would prove to be very warm, if we had been able to get a hold of it. Unfortunately, we weren't the hunters in this case, just bystanders to another creature's hunt. Before anyone could even think of approaching, a giant shadow swooped down, and a pair of talons grabbed hold of the beast, tearing it away from the ground and high into the sky.

An Orn, largest creature to fly, unless you count one-off sightings of other beasts; another one of The Giltre's children. Had likely dropped whatever that creature was off the cliffs to crack its skull. We were lucky it wasn't interested in us. We watched it disappear out of sight, prize in hand.

All the other hunters are abuzz with activity. Some are already making plans to scale the cliffs and find another one of those beasts which crashed into the market. I may just join them, it ain't every day folks want to muster an expedition of such scale. To document the upper reaches of The Giltre would be a truly rare experience, I wouldn't miss it for Lady Cerea herself.

Closing the book, J alas quipped, "Ah, always a delightful read," as he stuffed it into his pack. While we had chatted briefly as we began our way along the road, J alas had insisted on reading some of his books to me. First had been a story on the founding mythos of Larafell, which was about as engaging as a day of watching the clouds shift across the sky. I'd never had any interest in politics, especially those that had happened at the time of my late ancestors.

Following that was an admittedly interesting account of local wildlife, ending with the life story of some ancient Devout. Such unrelated ramblings, but even so the amount of excitement that J alas brought to his readings certainly brought life to the road. For someone who seemed so old and eccentric,

he certainly was an excellent storyteller. Just like back in the tavern, he seemed to come alive when telling a tale.

After leaving the walls of Corzen behind, the road had gradually shifted as the flat lowlands made way for mountainous foothills. It hadn't taken long for the road to turn into steep switchbacks that zigzagged their way through the brush covered slopes, each turn becoming steeper than the last. The current one was the largest and steepest of them yet, with the road taking on such a sharp angle that I was dubious that people had used the road for any kind of transport in the past.

We had been traveling for a day and a half at that point, though the trees and wildlife hadn't changed much in that time. The tall pines that breached the sky still surrounded us just as they did in Corzen, something I was grateful for in the night. I had learned to appreciate the usefulness of pine needles as a cushion and insulator, they certainly made the nights bearable as we slept underneath the heavy branches of the forest. Though with any luck, I'd be sleeping on a bed that night in Hartre, even one like that in the Corzen prison would do.

I took a moment to look over at Jalas, who was busy examining another scrap of paper. I still wasn't sure what to make of him, but I was ultimately glad that I had agreed to his proposal. In the whole time we had been traveling to Hatre, we hadn't laid eyes on another person. While I enjoyed the feeling of being alone on the road, it was nice to have someone alongside me, to distract me from the worries I felt about where we were headed. I only wished he talked about more common things every now and then.

With there being a pause in Jalas's stories, I took the chance to look up, past the swaying pine trees and into the sky. The once morning sun was hanging overhead, the heat of the early afternoon no match for the chill in the air. Despite that, the clouds had burned off from the touches of sunlight, leaving the sky clear as a calm sea. Taking my gaze back down, I could still see the clear sky in front of me as we crested the hill, and the trees began to thin out into a view.

We emerged at the top of a ridge line, a scraggly line of rock scraping its way deeper into the mountains. Below us, the road could be seen making its way back down, going out of view as it meandered into the valley below and beneath the trees. Gazing back up from the valley, it was the cliffs of the opposing side that caught my attention.

Completely sheer, they rose from the forested valley floor, climbing far higher than the ridge we were stood. They were dotted in places with moss and ferns, the vibrant green standing out among the grayish white of the rocks. Closer to the top, the occasional pine tree had made their homes on the cliffs, each one desperately clinging on with their sunbathed roots. Reaching the top of the wall of stone, trees shrouded in a cloudy mist poked their way out, the veil of fog lingering despite the sun's presence.

It wasn't simply the sight of such monolithic cliffs that caught my attention, but also the sounds emanating from them. Even at this distance, I could hear a distant roaring, as though a thousand birds were taking off at the same time. Sure enough, looking northward, I could see a large waterfall spilling over the edge of the cliffs, the white crested water reflecting the afternoon sun. Following its path downward, I failed to find where it connected with the ground below the cliffs, implying a much deeper point of impact. Looking back to the top, I could see that the river feeding the falls had carved out its own little valley within the mossy rock; a river valley overlooking one of its kin.

I stood there for a moment, awestruck by the monolithic land laid before me. "I've never seen such...imposing cliffs before," I finally muttered out.

I looked over at Jalas, his gaze set on the cliffs as well. "They are impressive, aren't they," he replied dreamily. "There's no mistaking them for anything else. We've reached The Giltre."

I focused back onto the cliffs again. "The Giltre...Giltrte," I said faintly. I pulled the map from my pack, looking just to the east of Corzen. I thought I had seen that name somewhere before, and sure enough I spotted it on the map. It looked to be the name for the entire region in front of me, the area taking up a vast chunk of the eastern border.

As I looked back and forth between the map and the cliffs in front of me, I furrowed my brow. "What...exactly is this place," I asked. "Either this map is wrong, or the entire place is just...cliffs."

"Well of course," replied Jalas. "That's what The Giltre is famous for after all."

Taking his hand, he pointed out at the mass of cliffs. "They say it was created by a Devout of Otamin back in the time before Larafell was founded. Whole region is sacred to Otamin, you know? Fearing the surrounding armies and what they would do to such a place, it's said he raised the very soil beneath him to form The Giltre, a place cut off from civilization."

"Otamin..." I muttered. "God of the wilds."

Jalas nodded. "Indeed. Very fitting as well. You'd be hard pressed to find a greater haven anywhere else. Sheer cliffs like that, no one's stepped foot on top in decades."

I stared off at the distant cliffs a moment more. Could someone really be so powerful as to shift the earth in such a way? How else could such a formation occur? Looking upon the cliffs, they seemed to stare back at me, as though they were trying to tell me something important. I left my thoughts to the wayside, shifting my gaze back to the road below, following it until it reached a half-filled clearing at the base of The Gilrte.

Squinting back and forth between the map and the land below, I asked, "Is that Harte down there?"

Jalas followed my gaze and replied, "Indeed, though it appears the trees have overtaken it." He kept looking down, his eyes growing larger with intensity. "Hopefully we won't find anyone there."

With that, Jalas began the descent down the road into the valley. I paused a moment, my hopes of a warm bed dashed, before falling in line beside him. We made our way down past several switchbacks, the trees once again forming a roof over our heads. We were making good time as the road began to level out, the terrain switching away from the scraggly cliffs of the valley wall to a rolling forest. The sun was still bright overhead, the shadows of the leaves dancing in the road as we walked along. At the rate we were going, we'd reach Hatre before the sun began to dip.

As we grew closer and closer, I could feel a heat in my chest. Not from the beating sun or from the effort of walking all day, rather a sudden nervousness that began to rack me. I kept glancing over at Jalas, who was torso deep in a faded manuscript, wondering and puzzling until I finally outright turned to face him as we walked.

"So," I said. "Do you think we'll have any trouble passing through Hatre?"

He glanced up at me. "I'm not sure, I haven't been there in quite some time."

"When it was under siege," I replied.

Jalas didn't say anything, looking back at his texts. I pressed further. "Why did you leave?"

He let out a deep sigh, slipping his scrolls into his pack before looking over to me. "It's not something I like to talk about."

"Oh," I quipped. "The man of tales and legend suddenly doesn't feel like talking? I'm amazed."

We kept walking for a few more minutes, a few downed trees getting in the way of the road. It was after we got over them that Jalas said something.

"Shame," replied Jalas with a longing I had yet to hear from him. "I left in shame. Shame and regret."

At this point our brisk pace had turned to a crawl. "I don't like to talk about it," he repeated.

I chose not to reply, instead looking at Jalas's face as he stared down the road. It was as though he were trying to say something, but his lips refused to part and let forth his thoughts. He closed his eyes, shaking his head gently before looking back at me.

"I may tell you about it someday."

And like that, the moment had passed us, with Jalas resuming his quickened pace down the road, his shoes thumping against the worn stone. We walked the rest of the way in near silence.

Soon, we were in the shadow of The Giltre, the cliffs dominating the sky above. I thought that we were surely close to Hartre, the clearing I had seen was right in the area. As we rounded a bend, now walking parallel to the cliffs, I could see stone walls surrounding a wooden gate, much like what I had seen in Corzen. But unlike the pristine cobblestone from the latter, this wall was littered with tangled vines squirming in and out of the gaps in the stone. The gate itself also didn't fair much better, with one side of it completely charred black, barely standing as the rusted iron reinforcements lay embedded in the ground.

We soon were at the wall, Jalas holding his hand up and placing it against the stone. I looked at the gate, then down along the battered wall until it got lost in the shrubbery. Beneath some of the vines, I could see several black markings, perhaps smaller parts of a larger symbol that had been drawn there.

"We should look for a hole in the wall to go through," I said. "I don't like the looks of this place."

Jalas gave me a nod, and we began to creep through the brambles and vines. Soon, we came across a gaping hole in the wall, as though a dragon had come along and taken a large bite out of it. Stepping lightly into the hole, I looked inward toward the village. From where the hole was, I couldn't see much, a crumbling building blocking my view. Beckoning for Jalas to come forward, I stepped out into the village and slid up against the building, Jalas soon joining me.

I shuffled over to one of the corners, taking a peek out from behind the house. Before me, I could see what likely used to be the town square, a group of buildings surrounding a large opening filled with the remains of carts and stalls. Vines and moss grew from everywhere, drowning the area in a sea of green. It was no wonder that I hadn't been able to see it clearly from the ridge, the whole place had been reclaimed by the surrounding wilderness. It looked as though no one had been there in a long time.

I let out a relieved sigh. "The place looks safe enough," I said to J alas. "But don't let your guard down. Wilderness is just as dangerous as any attacker."

"Quoting the basics of wilderness survival," J alas chuckled. "I'll have to add that to my book of wisdom."

"Let's just get through here," I replied shaking my head. "I'd rather leave this patch of forsaken ground behind us."

Coming out from the cover of the house, we began our way through the once village center. Looking at the crumbling buildings and stands, it appeared that the place had already been picked clean of anything valuable. The few remaining doors hung on rusty hinges, letting out the occasional shriek as the breeze moved through.

Looking to the right of the main square, a long line of foundations and rubble dotted the sides of the street, though one stood out. It was a building that I would recognize anywhere, a blacksmiths forge. Unlike its surroundings, the forge was still relatively intact, still maintaining most of its walls and half of a roof.

We turned down the street, and as we passed the forge, I took a detour inside. While most of the tools and ore had long left, the forge itself was still intact on the back wall, black from years of melting down iron and steel.

Looking around the room further, something in the near corner caught my eye. Slumped down, staring right through me, were the hollow sockets of a long dead skeleton. Stained a yellowish white, it bore the marks of battle, with large chunks missing along with several ribs. Its entire lower half was completely gone, save for a loose femur that was stuck in the dirt.

As I stared at the remains, J alas, still outside, said to me, "Hey, you alright in there lad?"

"I'm...fine," I called back. "Just seeing if there's anything worthwhile here."

I hastened to leave, wanting to leave the skeleton and this village behind us. No man should idle in such places. As I stepped out, I saw J alas leaning against the side of the building. When he saw me exit, he stood up straight and faced me.

"While you were in there," he said. "I took a look at the map again. We're going to want to head out that way." He pointed his finger down the street to the gate at the end of it.

I gave him a nod, and just as we started walking toward gate, my eye was drawn to something off in the distance. Some movement? No, a glint, a piece of metal catching the light of the afternoon. If it hadn't been so silent in the area, I would have missed the distant twish of the string being released.

In a second, I turned, grabbing Jalas by the shoulder and pulling him to the ground with me. By the time we hit the ground, I could see the arrow embedded in the building next to us, its fletching's still shuddering from the impact.

I stood up as quickly as I could, racing to act before our assailant could fire again. Grabbing a hold of Jalas, I dragged him back through the doorway of the forge just as another arrow punctured the ground where he had laid a moment earlier.

As we got through the doorway, I huddled up with my back against the wall, Jalas doing the same. Right next to me laid the skeleton I'd seen before, the light hitting it in such a way that it glowed a soft purple.

"What was that?" I said as I breathed in heavily.

Turning his head toward the entrance, Jalas replied, "An ambush. I should have known there'd be people here."

He looked over to the opposing wall. "We're probably best sneaking out over there." He said as he pointed to a hole in the wall. "Whoever it is, I'd rather avoid a fight if we can."

I nodded. I had dealt with enough bandits to know that there were surely more than just the one shooting at us. "Right. Just let me see if they're still there."

I quickly stood up, taking a stick from off the ground and draping my cloak over it. Taking the setup, I moved it in front of the doorway. It hadn't been there for a moment before it was punctured by another arrow.

Taking my cloak back, I said, "Not too bright, but they got a good shot." I put my newly damaged cloak on, the hole small enough to go without notice. "If we stick to cover, we should be fine."

Jalas gave me a nod and we made our way to the other wall, careful to avoid any exposed spots along the way. As we reached the opening, I stepped forward and peeked out. The hole opened out to what had been a back ally, long rotting barrels dotting the crumbling walls. Looking further, it seemed that the ally went all the way to the street.

"Seems safe enough," I whispered to Jalas as I pulled my head back in. "We'll just need to keep a low prof--"

I stopped myself as a sudden low cracking sound could be heard on the far side of the room. We both whipped our heads in the direction of the noise, staring right at the old skeleton that sat near the entrance. The soft purple glow from before was now a glaring light, with swirls of purple dancing across the ribcage. The cracking grew louder, as the skeleton shuddered in place.

Putting his hand on my shoulder, Jalas said to me, "We need to leave, right now."

I wasn't able to move, transfixed on the clanking pile of bones. "It can't be," I muttered.

Before Jalas could reply, the purple light faded, leaving the skeleton still for a moment and the room once again silent. That moment didn't last long however, as before anything could be said, the skeleton's left arm lurched forward, grasping at the air toward us. Its jaw became unhinged, and as it did it let out a low hiss, as though it were a snake rather than a skeleton. Lacking its lower body, it fell

forward so that its ribcage laid on the floor, and began to crawl forward towards us, each movement of its arms bringing a sickly popping sound as they lurched forward.

I couldn't move myself. Looking at the skeleton struggling to move in front of me, I couldn't bring myself to accept this as my reality. My world was grounded, grounded in the soil, the fields, the sky above, things that I could see and understand. How could something such as this, a story that is whispered out around the campfire, be something so tangible in front of me? My mind was drawn back to Corzen, to the merchant on the docks who had told me of such things.

My thought was interrupted by J alas shaking me. "Oi, don't grow a coward's head on me now," he said before pointing at the skeleton. "You don't want to become like that one do ya?"

I came to my senses, reaching for my sword as the wretched husk struggled forward. I lunged forward as I drew it from its scabbard, swinging the spotless steel blade straight at the skull as the skeleton reached forward. As it connected with its temple, the top of the skull caved in in an instant, exploding in a splash of white powder as pieces of bone were flung about the room. Its once extended arm flopped to the floor with a hard clacking, the bones that had been moving just moments before resting once again.

I stood over the remains for a moment, giving the bones a quick kick to make sure it was truly down. More and more thoughts were twisting through my mind, I felt as though I was a small child who had just seen a corpse rotting in the field. I had so many questions, but before I could start to even think on them, I could feel J alas put a hand on my shoulder.

"We'll talk about this later," he assured me. "But we need to leave now if you want to have a chance at that conversation at all."

He was right of course. The prospect of more corpses coming out of the woodwork, along with the archer still outside; it was best that we left before anything else could happen. We went straight for the hole, going through before making our way down the vine filled alley. The vines clutched to us as we passed, forcing our way through.

We soon got to the street, the surviving walls at the mouth little more than waist high. Ducking down, we crawled our way through the underbrush to the alley's entrance, where I could peek out. However as soon as I poked my head out from the brush, I immediately drew back to cover. Much to my horror, I had been able to see several more skeletons, some wielding swords, some outfitted in armor. And unlike the skeleton at the forge, these ones were very much fully intact, somehow standing on their skeletal legs, not a muscle or ligament holding them up.

I turned to J alas. "It's no good," I said. "There's at least four more... undead out there, all better equipped than the one from in there."

"Let me see." J alas crawled over to the wall, peaking out at the street. As he came back into cover, he said, "Hmm, lot of em out there. We'll have to find a way aro..." He stopped mid-sentence, a look of dread on his face as he looked over my shoulder. Turning to see what he was looking at, a similar sense of dread washed over me as I saw what was making its way out of the hole in the forge.

Two skeletons, both clad in loose fitting leather armor, with long steel swords in their hands. They had already seen us and were fumbling their way down the alley, the narrow corridor thankfully

giving them some trouble as they fought to see who would slice us up first. It wouldn't be long before they were upon us.

Standing and drawing my sword, I was briefly aware of the skeletons in the square chittering in alarm as I dashed forward to meet the one's bearing down on us. Seeing me charge, the front skeleton raised its sword, the blade coming down as I brought mine up to meet it, the loud sound of grinding metal being heard as I dragged my sword up to the opposing guard. Pushing forward, I could tell that despite it having the strength to move and wield a weapon, the skeleton could do little to oppose the strength of real muscle. Taking advantage of the initial shock of the clash, I brought my leg up, kicking the skeleton in the ribs, flinging it back into its partner.

As they fell to the ground, they're different parts became intermingled, ribs and legs interlocking in a ghoulish dance. They were nothing more than a writhing pile of bone and armor, helplessly flailing to become untangled. I quickly thrust my sword forward into the skull of one of them, and as it turned to dust, I brought up my foot to crush the other. As I swung down with my leg, the skeleton let out a loud clicking sound before turning into nothing more than white specks on my shoe.

I hastened to catch my breath, turning back to the alley entrance. Sure enough, the skeletons from the square had made their way to it, the front runner taking out a sword and pointing it at me while it unhinged its jaw. It let out a clicking sound just like the other skeleton before charging into the alley, several other skeletons following.

"Back to the forge," I yelled to Jalas, grabbing some of his cloak and pulling him with me. I was running on pure instinct, if I had stopped for a second to think I would have surely been consumed by the sheer terror of what was laid before me. I knew we had to get out of the alley, if we got flanked in such a tight spot, we would be goners for certain. We reached the hole in the wall once again, Jalas almost tripping over the crumbling brick as we vaulted through. I pushed Jalas behind me, putting myself between him and the wall. When those skeletons started coming through, I'd have to keep them busy at the choke point.

It wasn't long before the first skeleton, one clad in merely a leather helmet, came into view. Before it could even swing its sword, I stabbed it clean through its spine, a sickly crunch accompanying its chattering skull as its upper half fell to the ground.

Soon more skeletons came to replace the fallen one, and as I clashed swords with them the same chittering could be heard at the door. Risking a glance over, I could only look in horror as two undead came charging in, aiming straight for Jalas. I had to act, but with the skeletons bearing down on me, swords pressed against mine, there was no way for me to intervene. Not wanting to see what would happen and also wanting to save my own life, I turned back to face the fight at hand.

Pushing back against the one skeleton, I shoved it off balance, leaving it readily open for me to cleave in half. The other skeleton swung down at me, forcing me to raise my sword in defense, the clanging of metal echoing the room. Across the room, I could hear the scuffle taking place between Jalas and the other skeletons, similar sounds of metal on metal being heard. He was somehow holding his own, if I could just finish my own fight, I could help him.

I gritted my teeth, locking my sword with my opponent. I quickly twisted them around, flinging the sword from their skeletal hands. Without a weapon, they were helpless to protect their skull from the butt of my sword as I bashed it in.

White dust still fresh on my hands, I spun around, ready to charge into a new battle to protect Jalas. However, just as I began to run, I stopped. Standing by the door was Jalas, a dagger in each hand, looking down at what was left of his attackers.

Turning to me with an eerie blankness, he said, "That won't be the last of them, there are sure to be more."

All I could do was nod through my shock. I couldn't fathom how he had dispatched the skeletons so quickly, how he did so without even seeming out of breath. For the time, they were questions to be asked later.

Moving back to the wall, I looked through the hole, only to find the chattering remains of the several skeletons I had cut down. There weren't any others in sight. I moved from the wall to the doorway, where I could see Jalas peering out at the central square.

"Shh," he said, holding two fingers to his mouth. "Look out there."

I shuffled up alongside him and looked out at the road. Immediately, I could see at least six more skeletons in a defensive circle, some with swords and others with bows. Standard fair for what we had just been fighting. However, the being in the center of them is what stood out. There, surrounded by the skeletons, was a man clad in black robes chanting. In his right hand he held a staff, while his other empty one was aglow in a purplish mist.

"A Dausugan cultist no doubt," said Jalas. "And a Devout at that."

I looked back at the robed man. "A Devout?" I asked. "Are you certain?"

Jalas nodded. "There's no mistaking it. Once someone starts to raise the deceased out of the ground, it doesn't leave much doubt." He looked back out at the man, his chanting having become louder. "He must be raising more undead to replace the others," said Jalas. "We'll need to act before he can finish."

"So we strike him while he's at his weakest," I said.

"Exactly," replied Jalas.

I looked out at the square. The skeletons, in their protective circle, had vision on the entire area. For beings without eyes, they were certainly perceptive. There would be no sneaking up on them, we'd need a different strategy.

I turned to Jalas, looking down at the sickled knives in his hands. "How good are you at throwing those daggers" I asked.

"I'm skilled enough," he replied. "Though if you want me to try and hit him from here, it'll be tough with all those skeletons blocking him."

"I'll distract them," I said. "You just get off somewhere with a good view of him, I'll handle the rest."

Jalas gave me a nod before running off to the hole in the opposing wall. I was remiss to let him fend for himself, unguarded, but we didn't have many other options. As he left, I could have sworn he was grinning. Turning back to the door, I took a deep breath and gave a quick prayer to Ceara before stepping out onto the street.

Almost immediately the skeletons surrounding the man spotted me, bones rattling as they turned to look at me, their slightly open jaws showing a constant state of shock. Those with swords adopted a fighting stance, while those with bows notched arrows into the spindly strings. I braced myself for their attack, but none came. They stood there, still as the undead should be, waiting to see what I would do.

I began to walk forward, the skeletons keeping their stance even as I drew closer. I began to wonder, why weren't they attacking? The plan relied on me distracting them long enough for Jalas to strike. Then I looked at the man they were surrounding. Of course, I thought. They are defending him. If I want to cause a true distraction, I'd have to get his attention.

I stopped where I was, probably twenty paces from their little group, close enough to where one could see the nicks and scars that decorated the undead.

"Oi," I called out, pointing at the robed man. "You there! You and me need to talk."

ALT TAKE: Idea is that instead of a conversation, this guy thinks the main character is so far beneath him that he won't even speak to him.

There was nothing but silence. I yelled once again, "Answer me you *expletive*."

He said nothing, rather making a quick flicking motion with his empty hand. Immediately, the skeletons flanking him creaked into action. Those with swords charged in at me, while those with bows fired.

I quickly raised my sword. One arrow grazed off my blade, burying itself in the dirt, another just barely piercing through my cloak. The final one found its mark, slicing a red sliver along my forearm. I was thrown off enough by the pain that I wasn't ready for the sword coming down at me.

My sword was quickly lurched from my hands as the skeleton brought his sword down. Stumbling back, I quickly righted myself and kicked at the mass of bones, knocking it to the side.

I lunged for my sword, now lying in the dirt. Before I could grab hold of it, one of the other skeletons brought their sword straight down, pinning the cloth of my tunic to the ground. I tried my best to wrestle my arm free, but two other undead quickly pinned me on my back, leaving me helpless as the other skeleton held a sword to my neck.

Soon, the black-robed man was standing over me. He gave another flick of the wrist, the skeleton with the sword backing off, leaving only the man in my view. He looked me over for a moment, looking over to the forge, before speaking.

“Now that you are where you belong,” he said in a rough, gravelly voice, “we can talk.”

I tried to hide it, but I was terrified. The man looked as though he were looking straight into my soul. If the skeletons holding my arms hadn't been there, I still wouldn't have been able to move them.

“Answer my question, and I will grant you a mercy,” he continued. “A quick death. Much better than what will happen if you don't.”

He motioned to the skeleton with the sword, its blade coming to rest on my gut.

“Now tell me,” he said. “Where is your companion? I know there is another person here, I can sense it.”

My mind was brought back to J alas. Surely he could see what was happening, couldn't he? Or had he simply left once he saw everything go south? Either way, I wouldn't give him up. No sense in another person dying.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I replied, consolidating the last bits of resolve I had.

The man frowned. “How disappointing, I expected more from you. It's no matter, you'll soon serve me in other ways. As for your friend, I'll find him soon-”

He never got to finish what he had been saying, as he was rudely cut off by the spear protruding through his chest. I felt a jolt throughout my body as the spear head embedded itself mere inches from my head, having pierced the cultist through his back. He looked down at his chest as he gasped for air, choking sounds mixed with the occasional spurt of blood coming from his mouth, leaking down onto me. The blood loss had already made him weak, as his few attempts to grasp the shaft of the spear ended with his now crimson fingers sliding off.

Around us, his undead guards had begun to collapse upon themselves, arms and legs falling to the ground at random. The purple glow that was once housed inside their eyes had grown dull. The ones holding me to the ground lost their grip, allowing me to frantically scramble out from underneath the dying cultist. Whatever power he had given them was leaving them, and it seemed that the cultist was leaving with it. With one final labored breath, he slumped over onto the spear, slowly sliding along it to the ground like a tree falling in slow motion. As his body hit the ground without even a thud, his final breath hissed out of his body, the final skeletons falling to the ground.

The cultist and his minions were nothing more than dead men decorating the ground, the town once again silent. I stood there in shock, still processing what had just happened. In all but a moment, the man behind the most powerful feat I had witnessed was dead, done in by a simple spear. It didn't seem real, that such power could be so easily snuffed out.

In an instant, the man stopped his chanting, opening his eyes to reveal ghostly silver spheres. He brought down his gaze to meet mine, looking at me as one would look at a misbehaving child.

"Ah, so you finally decide to show yourself," he said, his voice nothing more than a gravelly hiss. "I knew that I could sense the presence of another."

"Who are you," I asked. "And why attack me with those, things?"

The man let out a low sigh as though he were already bored with the conversation. "My my, so direct. You city folk truly have no sense of manners." He seemed to ponder something for a moment, rubbing at the whispers of whiskers on his face before addressing me again. "I am a loyal servant of Dausuga, but you shall address me by no name other than master."

I tightened my brow hearing the last bit of confirmation that I needed. "So, you're one of those cultists then?"

The man, let out a further sigh, his contempt becoming increasingly evident. "Well done, you've managed to piece it all together. You must be a follower of Pekklar to have figured that all out."

"Such brave talk for a coward," I replied. "And you can finish answering my question. Why did you attack me?"

The cultist drew his head back in confusion. "You must be truly dense if you don't know my purpose here. Has the Assembly taken to denying our very existence again in the hopes of quelling fear?"

"That's not an answer," I said through a hollow scowl. He just needed a little more pushing.

"I want your life you fool!" he yelled, gesturing to his undead bodyguards. "The purpose of all life is to serve Dausuga!" He then turned his attention from me to the forge, his gaze settling on the door. "Of course, I would also like your companion as well."

I tried my best to look confident, my right arm stiffening as I spoke. I had to stall for Jalas to make his move. "There's no one else, it's just me."

The man glared at me, his disdain changing to anger as his face began to twitch. "Do you take me for some kind of back-alley fool," he bellowed. "I know that there is another with you, I can sense it, so you can stop acting so half-witted!"

He held out his staff, and his hand began to glow once more. "It's no matter if he comes out or not," he said. "You may have been able to handle some of my servants, but let's see you take on an army!"

I smiled at him. "I'd hardly call six barely held together skeletons an army."

The cultist grinned back, letting out a low chuckle. "Fool! This town was one of the first to fall to Dausuga's decay. There is no escaping the sense of death here. You are surrounded by legions of the dead!"

He drew back his staff, the purple mist now enveloping his lower half. "Your, tenacity, is admirable for one so low born," he yelled, his head thrown back to face the sky. "But we shall see how that fares against the power of a Devout!"

The mist was now swirling around the cultist, the light casting the entire square into all shades of purple. The ground began to rumble as bones of all sorts broke through the earth. If Jalas didn't strike soon, I'd be in the middle of a tidal wave of bone. Could he not find a spot to strike from? Had he abandoned me here to face this crazed man alone? I gritted my teeth, knowing that no matter the answer I'd have to be ready to fight.

The cultist had begun his chanting again, the sound of a cobbled together language filling the area. The mist had begun to travel outside the square, delving to every corner of the town. As the chanting reached its peak, he looked over to me, and I grasped my sword.

"Lady Dausuga," he yelled, his arm overextending as though were trying to grab me. "Grant me the strength I beg of you, and bring forth the wrath of-"

He never got to finish what he had been saying, as he was rudely cut off by the spear protruding through his chest. I took a step back in shock as the cultist's blood stained the stone of the square, the spear stuck halfway inside him, having pierced him through his back. He looked down at his chest as he gasped for air, choking sounds mixed with the occasional spurt of blood coming from his mouth. The blood loss had already made him weak, as his few attempts to grasp the shaft of the spear ended with his now crimson fingers sliding off.

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Inwardly, I was celebrating. Jalas must have been able to find the spear and thought it better to use. There I was worried that something had gone wrong, but everything had ended up far better than I could have thought. Outwardly however, I was still worrying. My encounters with the undead still had me on edge, and Jalas had yet to reveal himself.

I started walking in the direction the spear had come from, taking a brief look down at the remains of Bangar before continuing.

"Jalas," I hesitantly called out. "Where are you? We need to get moving!"

I kept walking, nearly getting to the gate, before worry began to set in further. Had something happened to him after he had thrown the spear? Had one of the skeletons made it to him before the cultist had died? All questions that only hastened my step.

I was now at the gate, the surrounding walls similar to the one we had entered through with holes dotting its length. I opened my mouth to call out again, but before I could, a filthy hand clasped over my mouth. I tried to turn, but the hand held me firm in place as another held my arm behind my back. I tried to reach for my sword, ready to swing around and cut down this ambusher, but was stopped by Jalas running into my view from the left.

"Settle down, it's alright," he said, holding his hands up to me. "Just be quiet. Tyra, for Pekklar's sake, take your hands off him before he chokes."

I must have misheard what he said. There was no way that brutish guard could be all the way out in the wilds, days away from Corzen. But sure enough as the hand drew away from my face, I could hear that familiar voice, making my muscles tense.

"Fine, fine. Not my fault he doesn't know how to keep quiet."

Shoving myself away, I turned to see Tyra, her guard uniform replaced with a brown tunic and grey trousers. Her expression, while not that of anger, certainly didn't do much to ease my feelings.

"Just what are you doing here?" I asked, standing a little taller and digging my heels into the ground.

"Never you mind ya filthy garmur," she replied as she spat into the dirt. "Just be thankful that I skewered that cultist rather than you."

As we stood there looking at each other with varying looks of disdain, Jalas spoke up. "Both of you settle it down," he said, looking toward me. "I know you have questions, but they'll have to wait for later."

"Aye," said Tyra. "We'll be needing to get out of this town before more of his lot show up." She gestured over to the town square at the cultist's fresh corpse. "They'll be able to sense somethings off, I'm sure."

Jalas gave a nod and began to walk through the gate, Tyra following right after him, giving me a piercing stare as she did. I looked back at the town again, then back at the gate, still unsure of what had just happened. I didn't like that Tyra of all people had just shown up out of nowhere, it didn't sit right with me. Saved us or not, I could only sense further trouble from her.

It didn't matter though. I was under an obligation to protect Jalas, even if that meant dealing with Tyra. I would get my answers soon enough, one way or another. Taking a deep breath, I jogged to catch up with them as they exited through the rotting gate, leaving Hatre and the dead behind us.

Ch. 6

The Rise of the Assembly: A Short History of Larafell

By Vondor Rith

The Milarra mountain range, which runs down the center of Larafell, is one of the key geographical advantages that has led to the success of the nation. It has provided both protection and

plentiful resources, doing its part to shield and supply the nation in times of peril. One only needs to look at the Battle of the Eastern Wastes to see this.

Beginning in the middle of the 2nd Era, The Eastern Assault, as it is known in Larafell, began with the invasion of the Eastern Wastes by the neighboring nation of Austur. Fearing the new power base being formed by the First Assembly, Austur hoped to deny them land and access to the east by capturing both the Eastern Wastes as well as the capital island of Norja.

At the outbreak of the war, the Austur cavalry faced little resistance in the Wastes as the Larafell army retreated. Still recovering from wars of unification, the First Assembly was short on manpower and weapons; there was little they could do to repel such an invasion. While they were able to keep casualties light in their retreat, they also forfeited large swaths of land to the invading Austurs. It wasn't until the Austurs reached the Milarra mountains that they began to face their hardships.

As many know, Larafell is a mountainous nation, nearly a third of the land being covered by them. As such, the people of Larafell are natural mountaineers, able to navigate and traverse them with relative ease. So, when the Larafell army was forced to retreat, they did what came naturally. They climbed over the Milarra mountains in the dead of winter, leaving their pursuers behind as they escaped to the west of the nation. This left the Austur army at a loss. They had planned on capturing the bulk of the Larafellian army in the East, forcing the First Assembly to surrender. But with their escape, the Austur army now had no way of following them. In the north, the mountains ended before they reached the coast, but the winter snows would make it impossible for horses to make it through. In the south, The Giltre, a long sought-after defense of Larafell's eastern border, prevented them from advancing through. If they hoped to make any progress, they would need to halt their advance and wait for the spring to melt the snow blocking the mountain passes to the west.

And wait they did. For many moons, the Austur army waited in the Eastern Wastes, planning their assault on the west. Soon, spring came, and with it the mountain passes opened. Expecting a swift victory, the Austur army marched through the center of the Milara mountains, eager to solidify their victory. However, that victory never came, as the moment they came through the pass and entered the west, they were met by the revitalized Larafell Army. Out numbering the Austur force 2 to 1, the Larafellians quickly fought the Austur force back through the pass, until at last, they had reclaimed the Eastern Wastes for Larafell.

How was it that Larafell was able to raise an army so quickly? Half of that answer lies in the Milarra mountains. As well as being a great natural border, the mountains are also resource rich, containing vast amounts of iron and coal. Those living at the base of these mountains had already been mining them for centuries, meaning the vast networks of mines were available for the First Assembly to use to rearm its forces.

Of course, weapons are only as good as the soldier who wields it, and a lack of soldiers wasn't going to solve itself. It is through the Priest Harvur that mass recruitment was fir-

If I had known at the start of my journey that I would be traveling with a strange old man and a woman that hated my guts, I might have just stayed in Bragur. We were an hour outside of Hartre, having left the fading road behind and bushwhack through an overgrown hunting trail instead. The events that

happened in Hartre had served to make us cautious and hastened our steps, leaving us at a quickened jog as we navigated the trail, branches whipping me across the face.

Tyra wasn't making traveling any easier. She had butted her way to the center of our pack, though she spent half her time glaring back at me. She clearly still harbored her ill feelings toward me from when I was in Corzen, which was fair enough, for I still didn't care for her. Nor did I trust her. I had no idea what J alas was thinking, trusting her so easily; if it weren't for the fear of further cultist keeping us moving, I would have stopped and demanded some answers.

Despite the growing unease that I was mutually sharing with Tyra, we kept up a decent pace. The sun hung low in the sky as we burst through the shrubbery into a clearing, finally taking a moment to catch our breath.

As we rested, J alas straightened his posture, looking around as he took in a few deep breaths. The clearing wasn't too large, maybe the size of two small houses, but featured a long dead campfire in the middle of it surrounded by several logs. Most likely an old hunting camp if I had to guess.

"We should rest here for the night," said J alas as he gazed up at the darkening sky. "This'll be good a place as any to make camp."

Tyra gave a nod. "I'll go collect some firewood," she replied as she turned back toward the forest.

I attempted to call out to her in between my gasps of air, but before I could she had already made for the trees, disappearing into the foliage. I looked over to J alas, who was now taking his pack off and leaning it against one of the center logs. He seemed to already have regained his composure, his breathing returning to that of someone relaxing alongside a fire pit. Stretching his back out, he lazily turned to look at me.

"We better get some shelter set while she's off," he said. "Winter nights out here will make you cold enough to snap a finger off."

He turned to make for the forest as well, but I called out to him before he could start. I was tired of being dictated to, of being treated as though my input wasn't important.

"Hold it," I replied. "I'm not doing anything until I get some answers. What is she doing here?"

"It would be best if you heard it from her," said J alas as he walked to the clearing's edge. "Always best to get your information from the source you know."

"Oh, don't give me that," I huffed as I walked over to him, the edge of the clearing now right in front of us. "Knowing you, you probably already know her life story. So why not just tell me instead of giving me the run around."

"I did promise you some answers," he sighed, sitting down on the mossy log. "So I'll tell you. But then you must help me gather supplies."

"Fair enough," I replied. "So, what did she tell you?"

"I don't know much honestly," he said. "I ran into her while I was trying to get a good angle on that cultist. She jumped out from some bushes, nearly stabbed her in surprise."

"And?" I asked. "What did she say?"

"She didn't have time to say much, given the situation," he replied as he shifted on the log. "Simply put, she said she was out here looking for us, and that she was willing to help."

"And that didn't raise any suspicion in you?" I said, taken aback by his statement. "She clearly doesn't trust us, blatantly hates me, so how can you be sure we can trust her? You saw how she acted in Corzen."

Jalas looked back up to the sky, the first few glimmers of stars appearing in the twilight. His eyes danced between each new one that appeared.

"I can't be certain," he replied. "But I believe she was sincere in what she said. She spoke her words as though she were embarrassed, as if she were aware that she was exposing her true self. One is hard pressed to find another who is willing to speak what they are ashamed to say."

"So, you'll just trust her at her word?" I replied. "I'm sorry if I'm not so willing to do that, given that the last time I saw her she said she would leave me to rot in a cell, given the chance."

"If you don't want to trust her word, then trust her actions," said Jalas. "Who do you think threw that spear back there? It certainly wasn't me, not with my strength."

So, it had been Tyra who had killed that Dausugan cultist. That wasn't a surprise, she hated them with a passion, that much I knew. I'd be lying if that act didn't endear me a bit more to her. But still, why step in to help us? Why come out here to find us in the first place? I wasn't going to be getting anything more about it from Jalas, I would need to hear it from Tyra directly. In the meantime, I had other things on my mind.

"Fair enough, I suppose you're right. I'll just need to talk to her," I said in resignation. "But you still owe me an explanation of what happened back there with the...bodies."

At this point, Jalas had left his place on the log and was wandering the edge of the clearing, gathering branches and rocks. I followed suit, picking up a particularly large branch to be used as a support beam.

"That's a large question you've asked there," he replied. "Be more specific."

"Well, I know that the person we fought was a Dausugan cultist," I said. "I've figured that much. What I don't understand is how he was able to raise the dead like that."

We had made it back to the center of the clearing, Jalas dumping the various trigs and branches he had collected to the ground. Dropping down to his knees, he began to arrange several large rocks to fix the gaps in the existing firepit. As he moved a particularly large one, he spoke to me.

"So you've already forgotten one of the first things I taught you," he grunted as he struggled to make the rock fit. "Even without that lesson, I would hope you know what a Devout is and what they can do."

"Of course I do," I replied, grabbing hold of the rock and shifting it into place. "They are people blessed with power from the gods. That doesn't explain how this one could reanimate a pile of bones."

People raising the dead, emptying the ocean, traveling to the void, those are just stories told to children.”

Jalas let out a long breath through his nose as he began to arrange the twigs in the existing charcoal. “So, you’ll just try and deny what you saw then,” he said. “Tell me, how do you think Devouts receive their power, for Pekklar’s sake, how do you think they even get that name?”

In truth I didn’t really know, nor had anyone else I had asked. Growing up the priests would only talk in vague statements when asked, and I soon had grown tired of asking.

“I know it has something to do with the church, given it’s a blessing and all,” I replied, propping the large log I had collected against a nearby tree. “That it’s some rite of passage that someone goes through.”

“Well, you’re half right,” replied Jalas. “But that isn’t the full scope of it all. Let’s take a seat.”

Having finished preparing the fire, Jalas took a seat on one of the surrounding logs, myself taking a seat on the other end. Glancing over, we still had work to do on the shelter, which currently only consisted of the one long branch I had propped up.

“Devouts, as the name implies,” he said. “Are people who are extremely devoted to the deity of their choosing. Whether it’s a soldier who prays to Hernada or a scholar who commits their life to Pekklar, a Devout gives their life in service to them. It is something that takes years, if not decades to become, and involves hard work and dedication.”

“So, someone could just one day decide that they want to commit their life to worship and become a Devout?” I asked. “It can’t be that easy, there’d be as many of them walking around as there are field mice in the grain.”

Jalas nodded. “That’s because it isn’t that easy,” he replied. “One almost never chooses to become a Devout, because not everyone is capable of it. Often, they are picked out at a young age by church members who can recognize their ability, their potential, and to what deity they would best lend themselves to. They are then trained, and it is only after they have proven themselves to the highest members of the church that they are able to receive their god’s blessing.”

That just left me with other questions. “You keep talking about training,” I said. “What kind of training could possibly make them into Devouts?”

“It’s all very secretive,” Jalas sighed. “The church, like most institutions, like to hold onto power. The exclusive right they have to train Devouts, that’s just another way they have of holding onto that power.”

“But imagine a soldier,” he continued. “They train through drills and exercise, and as time goes on, they become stronger, better at what they do. The same applies for Devouts. As they go through their training, they become more and more powerful, until at last they receive the full blessing of their deity.”

I nodded. “Alright, sure,” I said. “But how does that translate to someone raising the dead? I can’t imagine that what, praying and singing the praises of a god will allow you to do that.”

“Devouts aren’t simply people who are stronger or smarter than others,” he replied. “They are people who have been blessed with power. As such, they receive part of the power that their deity possesses. Let’s take Dausuga in this case. She is primarily the goddess of death and the handler of many people’s souls. As such, part of her blessing to her Devouts involves control over the soul, to a lesser extent than herself of course. By sharing her power in this way, Dausuga can further spread her influence, using her Devouts as an extension of her power.”

I sat still, pondering what Jalas had said before responding. “Alright, so if I’m hearing this right,” I said. “A Devout is really just a conduit for the god’s power?”

“That’s correct,” he replied. “I’m glad to see that you’re finally starting to get it.”

For the first time since the attack, I could feel a crushing weight in my mind lessen. Gods, Devouts, they had been such distant concepts back in Bragur, a set of stories and myths I never took seriously. To have it all be so real, so sudden, it had been as though I were drowning in the ocean, the pressure and fear gnawing away at me. To know that such forces had clear rules, clear ways of operating; it meant I had something I could work with.

Though now that all this talk of Devouts had been brought to the table, it was hard for me to contain myself. There were so many questions I still had, not ones birthed from fear but rather a child-like desire to know more. What traits separate Devouts from others? How do they fit into the rest of society? I was ready to let loose a deluge of questions toward Jalas, but before I could the silence of the forest was broken by the rustling of bushes behind me.

We both whipped our heads toward the sound coming from the edge of the clearing. Whatever was coming didn’t care if we heard it, as the sound of breaking branches and rustling pines could be clearly heard. As it grew louder, I put my hand on the hilt of my sword, and I could see Jalas reaching for one of the knives from his pack.

But as it turned out, he wouldn’t need them. Mere moments after Jalas laid his hand on the sickled dagger, Tyra came bursting through the underbrush with a heavy grunt, a selection of large branches balanced on her shoulder.

Throwing them to the ground, she slid her hands onto her legs as she took in some deep breaths. Her hair, which had been tied back in a ponytail earlier, had grown to be as wild as the surrounding woods, with twigs and moss sticking out of it. Her clothes, which had been relatively clean, were now laden with tree sap which only served to cover her in more twigs and pine needles. As she regained her composure, she looked up at us from her stance, eyeballing us both.

“Well,” she huffed. “Are you lazy sacks going to help me set these up, or do I need to do that as well?”

Both Jalas and I looked at each other for a moment before putting our weapons away and walking over to where Tyra had dropped the assorted branches. In the last few twinkles of daylight, Tyra and I worked on setting up a makeshift shelter while Jalas began work on starting a fire. I kept my eye on Tyra while we worked, still unsure about where I stood with her.

We layered the logs over the large one I had placed earlier, making a sort of lean-to shelter as we layered branches thick with green pine needles on top. As we made the finishing touches, the clearing lit

up as J alas coaxed a fire into existence, the heat already making its way toward the edges of the clearing. I waited for Tyra to walk over, each of us giving the other a side-eyed glance as she passed by, before going to sit down at one of the surrounding logs, now dancing with light.

As I sat down at the fire, I pulled my pack to my side, taking out some of the dried meat I had bought. I put it onto one of the rocks of the fire pit to let it warm, and as I did the others took my cue, both pulling out their own bits and pieces of food. J alas had similar rations to mine along with some tea he had made, while Tyra began to peck at some dried fruit and nuts. It wasn't long before my deer was warmed, the meat still tough and salty as I began to work at it, each bite a battle in its own right. We sat there, not a word said between us, as we ate our fill.

As I finished my last few bites of venison, I glanced over to Tyra just in time to see her gaze move elsewhere. She had been looking over at me the whole time we had been eating, though I couldn't blame her, as I had been doing the same. While I was now full in my body, I still felt empty in my mind. I was tired of these passing glances; no problem had ever been resolved by merely looking at it.

"So," I said as I cleared my throat. "I think it's time that we all got everything out in the open, yeah?"

I turned to look at Tyra, who was in the middle of taking a swig of water. "Starting with you," I continued. "I appreciate what you did for us back there, but you'll understand if I'm not completely trusting of you given our past encounters."

Finishing a last gulp from the waterskin, Tyra lowered it from her mouth, looking at me with a solemn eye. "I don't know what you expect of me," she replied. "But it won't be much."

"What I expect," I said. "Are some answers. I think I'm owed that much."

"I don't owe you anything," scoffed Tyra. "If anything, you owe me for saving your pathetic hind."

A scowl crossed my face, Tyra wearing a similar expression. "I'm in no mood to argue about this. I'm not about to make camp with someone I barely know or trust. So, you can either answer my questions, or leave and fend for yourself."

At that comment, Tyra's scowl worsened, the lines in her brow deepening as she began to stand. I tensed up, as she looked about ready to spring toward me in anger. Taking a brief look at J alas, he seemed to be unphased by the sudden escalation as he took sips from the drink he had made. How he could be so calm was anyone's guess.

His calm attitude seemed to rule out in the end however, as just as Tyra began to rise from her seat, she paused herself. Closing her eyes, she breathed in deeply through her nose, letting out a visible fog in the crisp night air as she returned to her seat.

As she sat back down, she looked up to the sky, now filled with stars. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice sounding tired, frustrated. "I'm just.... I'm trying something new here, and...it's not working out how I'd thought and I'm just not used to it yet."

She lowered her gaze, turning it from the sky toward me. "What do you want to know?"

For a moment, I didn't say anything. In my short time knowing her, I had never seen Tyra so calm, so restrained. It was a whole new side of her that was just peaking out. After taking some time to compose myself, I finally leaned in toward her, combing my head for questions.

"To start, I want to know why you're out here," I said as I rested my hands on my knees. "It ain't the most common thing for someone to just show up in the middle of nowhere like you have, especially with our history."

"I'll admit I'm rather curious as well," said Jalas, who had leaned in on the conversation. "It's rare for someone to make the journey out here by themselves, given the perils of the region. One needs to be either very bull-headed or determined."

Tyra let out another sigh and began to speak. "After you were released," she said, pointing at me. "The captain gave me the worst thrashing I've ever seen him give. Said I was too 'ill tempered' to be a part of the city guard any longer, that I was an embarrassment."

Grabbing a loose twig from the ground, she began to break off pieces and throw them into the fire as she continued. "Ever since I was little, I'd always dreamt of being a part of the guard. Something about the way they walked, the way they handled themselves, it just called to me. There was nothing I ever wanted more in life than to join their ranks."

"Nothing else?" I interjected. "There's nothing else you've wanted to do with your life?"

Tyra began to open her mouth to yell, before catching herself and shaking her head. "Corzen is...it's a special place to me alright," she said, her tone shifting in and out. "It's my home, the place I've known all my life, and I wanted to be able to protect it. Wouldn't you want the same for your home?"

Thinking about it, I knew that she had a point. My home, my village, now a forgotten place barely on a map. If I had not started on my journey, I might still be trying to protect what was left of that place, for I too treasured it.

I nodded. "I suppose you're right."

Tyra nodded as well, turning back to the fire. "I've committed my whole life to serving in the guard. I trained every day, pushed myself as hard as I could, and was top ranked amongst my training unit. But just as I got in, they threw me out like I was nothing. Like I was one of the outsiders I was trained to protect us from."

I could see the sadness in her eyes, a tired look of someone who had been beaten down by the world. I let her words linger on the group before I spoke up.

"But why come all the way out here?" I asked. "I'll admit you seem like the type to make rash decisions like that, but that doesn't mean you don't have a reason."

"I'm getting to that," Tyra spat at me, before recomposing herself. "It's just...embarrassing for me alright. I don't normally talk to people this way."

"It's alright," interjected Jalas, shooting me a glance as if to say, 'be patient'. "The evenings still young, you have time."

Tyra nodded, taking a few deep breaths before continuing. "I didn't take the news well, as you could probably imagine. I...I might have lost my temper, said some things...I regret. I was so angry at the captain, still am, but as I sat outside on the front steps, I couldn't stop thinking of you two."

Jalas and I shared a glance while she continued to speak, not knowing where she was going with this. "I kept thinking and thinking, and the more I thought the angrier I became. I couldn't help but think that it was because of you lot that I was kicked out."

"It was your own fault that they let you go," I said, cutting in. "Don't try and put that on us."

Tyra frowned, giving me a cutting glare and choosing to ignore my comment. "I won't lie, I came out here to find you two. I figured that if I could bring you back and prove myself right, I could reclaim my job. Reclaim my honor."

"So what, you're here to capture us?" I replied, growing uneasy once more. "I'm not about to be hauled off by the likes of you."

"Oh settle your wind, that was the plan, but things have changed," she said looking off toward the woods. "I realize now how far fetched the idea is."

"Oh, and which part of that plan made you realize that?" I asked sarcastically. "The part where you try to capture two grown men, or the part where you try and convince that captain that one of his good friends is a criminal?"

Tyra shot up, the flames of the fire dancing in her eyes. "You don't know me you dog-headed drifter! I could take the both of you like you were drunk boars."

Now it was my turn to stand, the crackling embers of the fire the only thing separating the two of us. "I've fought wolves, bandits, somehow the undead themselves. What makes you think that you'd be able to take me?!"

"You're forgetting," she rebutted. "Who saved your sorry life today! I was the one who killed that cultist, can you say the same?"

"It doesn't matter either way!" I replied. "Because even if you had gotten us back, you'd probably have been thrown in the very cell I was in yourself, because you are apparently incapable of having a single, rational thought!"

Tyra opened her mouth to yell back at me, clearly ready to spit more venom, but before she could, Jalas intervened. "That is enough, both of you," he said in a stern whisper. "We all clearly have our differences here, but I'm not about to let all of this yelling attract some beast to tear us in twain, or Pekklar forgive me more cultists. Now, both of you sit down, quit squabbling like children, and have a proper conversation."

A scowl returned to Tyra's face as she looked at Jalas and then to me, slowly returning to her seat. "Fine," she spat. "I can act civil. But only so long as I'm allowed to finish."

I looked down at her, thinking for a moment before returning to my seat as well. "Very well," I replied. "Though that won't stop me from refuting anything outlandish you say."

We stared each other down, our gazes stretching across the snapping fire. I felt, for a fleeting moment, that I could see past her anger and witness something more, but before I could glean anything, Jalas spoke up. "Wonderful, I'm glad you both can come to an understanding," he said, turning to me. "Now Arni, did you have anything else to ask our friend here?"

"Right," I replied. "I still had a few things."

I turned back to Tyra; her anger having shifted to the background to be replaced by a look of neutrality. "If you were so intent on capturing us, what changed your mind? Someone as think-headed as—"

Jalas suddenly began coughing, giving me a glare in between hacks.

"I mean persistent as you," I corrected. "Wouldn't just stop for no reason."

Tyra let out a breath. "As soon as I was put to the curb, I set about preparing immediately. I gathered up some supplies, put my arrangements together, and hauled on after you. Took less than a day to catch up to you lot on the road."

"So you've been on our tail this whole time?" I asked.

Tyra nodded. "I was waiting for the right time to ambush the two of you, but the timing was never there. That is, until Hatre. An old ruin with lots of cover, I figured I could split you two up and take you both out alone."

"But then the cultist showed up," I finished.

"That's right," she said. "I was able to slip into one of the houses before they could see me, and I watched you fight those undead off."

"But why help us?" I asked. "It would have been easy to just stand by and watch them tear us apart if that's all you cared about."

Tyra broke her stare with me, choosing to let her eyes roam between her feet and the fire. "That wasn't the kind of revenge I was looking for," she replied. "Too quick, no justice in it. But that isn't the only reason. Let's just say that I'd wipe all of those damned cultists out if I had the chance."

"I got that impression when we first met," I replied.

"Heh, yeah," she said. "I was certain you were mixed up in something when you walked up to the gate. Couldn't explain it, was just a gut feeling."

She turned back to me, the fire a little dimmer in her eyes. "But when I saw you squaring down with that cultist, I knew that we at least shared something, despite our differences. I knew I couldn't stand complicit with that mouth-breather's actions."

"I see," I said, hesitant to continue.

Before the conversation could run flat once again, Jalas spoke up. "So, what now?" he asked as he leaned in closer to the fire. "Are you planning on going back to Corzen?"

Tyra shook her head. "I can't show my face around there, not now at least. Not until I'm able to make amends. I've...never been good about that sort of thing."

"I'm sure no one would care if you went back," J alas said. "A few people who might feel slighted of course, but losing one's job is nothing to be judged over."

"You're right," Tyra replied with a sigh. "Except for me. I just...something inside of me just wouldn't allow for it."

The circle once again grew quiet, the sounds of the surrounding forest spilling into the opening. The occasional hoot of an owl could be heard over the flapping of bat wings just overhead. I began to poke at the fire as it died down, trying my best to roll some of the unsinged logs into the weak flames. Glancing over at Tyra, I let off a few coughs and hacks before speaking up.

"So, if you aren't going back," I said. "Where are you going? From what I've seen, Larafell is a dangerous place. There can't be too many other places out there that are as safe as Corzen."

"I'm not sure," she replied. "I have nowhere else to go. I've spent my entire life in Corzen, it's the only place I know. I've only heard stories of what goes on beyond."

Before I could reply, J alas had already begun to cut in. "Well," he said. "You could always choose to accompany us."

I looked over at J alas, a mix of shock and confusion trying to make itself known. I could tell that Tyra had a similar look on her face.

"I don't think that's a great idea," I said slowly.

"And why not?" J alas replied. "The world's a dangerous place, you've said so yourself. You've already seen that two people traveling alone aren't the best equipped to deal with it. Why not have the extra safety in numbers?"

"We just won't make any more mistakes, we'll be more careful," I said. "We won't have a repeat of back there."

"And what makes you so certain that you can make that happen by yourself?" asked J alas. "As capable as you might be, you can't control the world. If we were to run into trouble, it's better to have numbers on our side."

We looked at each other for a moment, my mind unable to think of a response. Soon, I gave up, resigning myself to look at the fire as I mulled over his proposal. Could we really trust Tyra, even after she had saved us, saved me? Afterall, her motives for coming out here were far less than saintly, she admitted to that much. If the opportunity came for her to win the upper hand, how could I know that she wouldn't betray us?

While I contemplated the situation, J alas took the opportunity to address Tyra. "Well, my companion here is clearly deep in thought, so I'll ask you. What are your thoughts on this matter?"

Tyra sighed, seemingly unsure of how to respond. "What would be in it for me?" she finally asked. "I don't even know where you two are going."

“Well, you said yourself that you’ve never been outside the area of Corzen before,” he replied. “This would be your chance to see what’s out there, maybe even find a new home. Afterall, there are plenty of places to see on the way to the capital.”

Tyra squinted her eyes before responding in a slow, methodical voice. “Have you ever been to the capital before? Seen the city with your own eyes?”

Jalas gave off a chuckle. “Not in nearly 40 years I haven’t. I’m looking forward to seeing how it has changed since my last visit, though I’ve heard it has yet to reach its former glory.”

His response seemed to soothe Tyra a bit, who began to sit a little taller. “Good, that’s good,” she mused to herself before addressing him again. “Though why are you going there then? The days for pilgrimages have long since passed.”

“Well, it may sound odd to someone less versed in the subject,” replied Jalas. “But I’m seeking out a rare book to add to my collection.”

Tyra blinked and stared for a moment before responding, “You’re traveling through cultist held land in the onset of winter...all for a book?”

“As I said, it may sound a bit strange,” said Jalas. “But it has been my life’s work to add to my collection of knowledge. You can see that much merely at a glance.”

Jalas motioned over to his pack propped up next to him, a scroll that had been shoved in the top falling to the ground right on cue. Tyra started a bit more, both at the overflowing pack and at Jalas, before giving her head a shake.

“I’ll admit I don’t understand your reasoning completely, seems a bit daft,” she said. “But I admire your conviction in it. It takes guts to put your life at risk for something like that.”

She turned slightly, her body now facing both Jalas and me. “And it also has me convinced. You’re an odd lot, right pain honestly, but I’m no fool. I know I won’t make it out here alone, at least not long anyway. I wouldn’t mind traveling with you for a distance, that is assuming that you’ll have me.”

She looked at me, waiting for my answer. In truth, I still wasn’t convinced. I had seen how quick tempered Tyra could be, how fiery she could get if pushed in certain ways. Such a steaming head would only burn us out and put us in further danger. However good she was at fighting or holding her own, it wouldn’t matter if she brought us into a situation we couldn’t fight out of.

But I thought of Jalas, and what he was thinking. Of course, I had no idea what that was. It had been his idea to have her along, and I still couldn’t figure out why. It wasn’t just about strength in numbers, there had to be more to it than that. Something he was cooking, which was outside my own area.

It didn’t matter either way, since I realized I was trapped. If Jalas wanted her along, there was no real way for me to refuse. I was already outvoted, and even if I got my way and had her gone, she was a wildcard in the wind. One way or another, she was coming, and that was that. I would just have to mitigate any consequences.

"Alright," I said with a sigh. "I suppose you can come with us, so long as you follow our lead. There's already plenty of danger on the path ahead, the last thing we'll need is infighting to slow us down."

"So long as your lead is smart, that shouldn't be a problem," she said with a nod. That didn't do much to calm my worries, but it would have to do. We both looked over at Jalas, who was wearing a small smile.

"I'm glad we have that all resolved," he said before looking up at the stars. The moon was nearly overhead. "It'll be best if we get to bed and rest, we have a long day of travel ahead of us."

Both Tyra and I nodded, with her and Jalas slowly walking over to the makeshift shelter near the edge of the clearing. I stayed behind to snuff out the remains of the fire, the last of the flames having long petered out. As I did, I could overhear Tyra whispering something to Jalas as they moved away; perhaps something I could ask Jalas about later. The evening had grown too late to stir up further subjects of debate. Turning back to the fire, the embers twinkled like the stars above as the last of the flames died out. I flung some dirt into the pit before retiring to the shelter as well.

Of course, I wouldn't be sleeping just yet. The night still held many dangers that might seek us out. As I reached the shelter, Tyra and I agreed that we would take turns keeping watch of the clearing. Given the evening's conversations, I elected to take the first watch. Tyra seemed to have a similar thought, a frown crossing her face at my suggestion, but Jalas was able to convince her to go after me.

As the two of them settled down under an evergreen roof, I sat with my back to a nearby tree, alone with my thoughts and the sounds of the forest. Even if I hadn't the first watch, I would have never been able to sleep. The events of the day, the town of Hatre, it still clung fresh in my mind.

I had never been a religious man; I rarely saw the inside of the local church in my village. I didn't care for gods and stories, I only cared about what I could see. The rolling fields of grain, my neighbors who helped to tend the fields, the brave wolf that would now and again venture out of the woods. I could see them all, much more than I could say of my local preacher who could only show me words in a book. How trivial I had thought them to be.

But now I had finally seen things, solid moving things that I could not brush off like I had those preacher's words. I could no longer ignore the role of the gods, for denial of their place would only lead to my own suffering at the hands of ignorance. I would not continue on my path unprepared as I had on that day.

That's why I had to put my trust in Tyra, at least for the time being. Despite my uncertainty, her being with us could very well make the difference when it came to our survival. I would just need to hope that she would put the same trust in us. Even with the conversation earlier, it's still hard to believe that someone of her thinking could change so quickly.

I let out a sigh, my breath illuminating the chill of the night. Tomorrow would no doubt bring new challenges and perils. Staring out into the night sky, I prayed to Vintyr for a safe road ahead.

Cities and Provinces: A Wander's Guild to Larafell

By Reika Flakk

The Eastern Wastes, located between Nyrst and The Giltre, hold the unique distinction of being the northernmost desert on the continent. Sealed in by the Millarra mountains to the west and further ranges to the north, the Wastes hold true to their name by being a truly desolate place. Moving away from the mountains, one will find the trees thinning to shrubs, thinning to groundcover, before finally thinning to nothing but sand and rock. In all my travel's, I have never seen a place that was more empty or vast than this.

In a way, the Wastes are the eastern sea of Larafell, with sandstorms and heat standing in for waves and mist. However, despite the scorching sands sometimes stretching on for miles with only the occasional rock pile in sight, that doesn't mean that it isn't host to a plethora of fascinating features. Mt. Eymir is one such place, standing as the lone mountain towering within the Wastes, an island in an endless sea of sand. Being more volcanically active, the sands surrounding the mountain slowly turn from a yellowish orange to a deep red the closer you come. This has earned it the name of the Crimson Peak, though many historians will wrongly differ on this name's origins. It truly is a sight, the red sands leading up to jagged volcanic rock, all ending in a massive crater at its peak. One can see the whole of the desert from such a place.

Other notable places within the Wastes include Vontlan Oasis, a necessary stop for any traveler making their way through the scorching heat. Located near the center of the blustering sands, it is one of the few sources of freshwater in the area, making it a well-known stop for travelers and merchants. If I ever travel through the Wastes again, I will look forward to gazing out upon it once more.

Given the harsh conditions, no towns or cities exist in the Wastes, merely trading posts and military outposts to cull the bandit population. Aside from travelers found at the few landmarks listed, it is unlikely that one will see another person their entire time spent traveling through. As such, you should only travel through the Eastern Wastes if you are sure of your ability. To any lesser person who may attempt it, no one will ever find the place you collapsed in the sand.

The sun had barely scratched the edge of the sky by the time we decided to break camp. I had stayed up the whole night, keeping one eye open as Tyra took my place on watch. The agreement we had forged during the night did little to soothe my mind. Even if it did settle well with me, I wouldn't have been able to sleep either way. Might as well keep an eye out to make sure she wasn't having second thoughts.

It wasn't until Jalas had awoken that I was able to have a break from my own racing mind. As we sat around the remains of the firepit eating breakfast in the morning dawn, we had discussed the path ahead.

Personally, I had wanted to get out of the east as soon as possible, willing to risk crossing the mountains and making it for the west. The less time spent in cultist held territory the better. That, and we would need more supplies before we got to the capital, might as well stock up in an actual city.

Of course, Tyra had objected rather quickly. Leaving to the west would apparently mean traveling into Assembly held lands, something that she wanted to avoid as much as possible. Any mention that we would have to travel there either way to get to the capital fell on deaf ears. It was clear that she held cultists and Assembly members in similar regard.

She wanted to travel through the east to at least have the chance to cut down a few more cultists, rather than being accosted by Assembly faithful. That, and she was quick to point out that the mountain passes would be snowed in by this time of the year either way, making cross-nation travel impossible. I wondered out loud what continuing along the east would accomplish then, the snow only thickening the further north we went.

With both of us tugging in opposite directions, it was up to Jalas to come up with some middle ground. After consulting several weathered maps, he had laid out two routes for us to choose from. Our first option: Continue traveling along the east side of the mountains and through the Eastern Wastes until we reached the northern tip of the continent. From there we could hire a ship out of the outpost known as Durrin, collect supplies in Ranadur, and continue to the capital city of Dyrlega. Our second option: Forgoing the likely to be blocked mountain passes, we could instead travel through some of the long-abandoned, rotted mining systems that wormed their way through the mountains. Traversing through those to the western half of the country, we could then make our way to Ranadur and take a ship to the capital.

Both options seemed less than appealing. The Eastern Wastes and the subsequent northern tip of the nation made no attempt to disguise their true nature. Whether it be the heat, marauding bandits, or storms, there was little left to the imagination regarding the perils that the area was wrought with. If the terrain didn't do us in, the people certainly would. As Jalas had explained, there was a reason why Dausugan cultists had failed to truly take hold of the region after 40 years.

While traveling the Eastern Wastes was a dangerous prospect, you at least had some sense of certainty about what you might find. Trying to penetrate the west through the old mines, despite leading to a safer journey after the fact, would be plagued with unknowns. I was no fan of being trapped underneath a mountain, and the unmapped labyrinth of tunnels that stretched throughout was a near certain way to ensure that outcome. One could at least plan to face an ambush or storm of some kind; it's much harder to prepare for cave-ins and sudden 60-foot drops leading to one's death.

Despite my adversity and desire to avoid any more unfavorable encounters with Dausugan faithful, I conceded to Tyra that the eastern route would suit us better. If Jalas was correct, there would at least be fewer cultists lying in wait than there were in the southeastern regions. Flashing a quick grin, Tyra packed up her belongings, Jalas and I following her example, and headed out for the long road ahead as the sun brushed the treetops.

We didn't dare travel along the main road out of fear of an ambush. Instead, we opted to travel along old hunting trails, bushwhacking our way through the underbrush that had overtaken them. I took the lead, hacking away at bushes while Tyra took up the rear. I would occasionally glance back, only to see her eyes watching me before I turned back around. Despite her agreeing to come with us, she still put up a stony front.

Her confrontational attitude from before hadn't changed much either. At any major turn, she would question the direction I would take, making the argument for the other way. Somehow my chosen path was always more dangerous, took longer, or would take us right into a trap. It wasn't until Jalas took my side that she would drop the issue. After just a few hours, I was already feeling beat down by the constant stream of argument.

It wasn't until halfway through the day, when we stopped at a lake to rest and refill on water, that I had a chance to try and say anything to her. Jalas was busy reorganizing his pack while Tyra and I kneeled by the water and filled our water skins.

"So," I said, still looking down at the shimmering lake. "Do you want to take the front for the next leg?"

"And leave my back open?" she replied dryly. "Not likely."

I furrowed my brow, still focusing on the water. "Well, it just seems that you have a certain idea on the way we should be going," I said. "And I'd be watching your back, that's what the rear person does."

I could hear Tyra let out a quick snort before replying. "As if I could count on you to keep a watch out for me."

I finally turned to look over to her. "Alright, what exactly is your problem with me?" I asked. "Is this still about what happened in Corzen? I thought-"

"Get over yourself," she interrupted. "Do you really think I'm so spiteful and vindictive?"

"Of course," I replied, half taken aback. "Do you need to be reminded of your reasons for coming out here?"

Tyra shifted about a bit, looking away out of realization. She waited a few moments before speaking back up.

"Alright fine, maybe I am," she said. "And maybe I don't think far enough ahead."

She turned back to me, her eyes locking with mine. "But I'm trying to change that, and I can see the way things are perfectly clear in the here and now. It's clear enough to me that I need to watch my own back."

"And how exactly do you figure that?" I asked.

"Any granite-face could tell that you don't trust me," she said bluntly. "The way you always got one eye on me, watching what I do, questioning my every move."

"Can you blame me though?" I replied. "After everything that happened and you showing up without warning, that I wouldn't be concerned for myself?"

Tyra pondered this, before replying. "Maybe you're right, let's say for the rare occasion you are," she said. "It doesn't change the situation. I'm out here because I have no real options back in Corzen, and I respect the old man over there enough to help him out. Dealing with you is just part of the price of traveling along."

She stood up, capping her now full water skins. "I'm going to look out for myself and pull my own weight," she said. "Anything past that is mere coincidence. So long as you don't get in my way, we won't have an issue since I'm trying to get past myself and all. But otherwise, I won't hold back on you."

With that, she walked away from the water's edge, back to where Jalas was finishing up. It appeared to me that even if she were trying, Tyra hadn't really changed. I'd have to do as she was, and watch my own back. By the time I had joined them, Jalas was ready, and we set out further north towards the Wastes.

Not much of note happened for the next few days as we traveled on. We thankfully hadn't run into any cultists, just the odd bear or wild boar. The hardest part had been the terrain, as the flat forest had transformed into a downward slope wrought with sheer cliffs and deep canyons. I nearly lost my grip several times repelling down. It's still a mystery to me how people were able to traverse such landscape, even when the roads had been more usable.

Of course, Tyra continued to be a buzzing gnat, though at least we both had an idea of where the other stood. She kept on taking up the rear, and ever since our conversation she only seemed to talk to Jalas if she could help it. At the very least the arguments had simmered down, and we had managed to have a few professional conversations regarding the way forward. She still didn't sit quite right with me, and I knew that she felt the same, but at least we weren't at each other's throats constantly.

As we kept moving, the general silence let my thoughts drift to my mother. I hadn't really known her, as she died when I was still young, and my father had ended up raising me alone. He would talk about her sometimes, after long days of field work, reminiscing on their first meeting. She had come into town one night, looking worse for wear, nearly collapsing in the fields. It was sheer luck that my father had seen her and taken her in. It was in the coming weeks after taking care of her that she decided to settle down with him in the village.

I rubbed the golden necklace I was wearing. In their time together, my father could never crack her outer shell to piece together the events that lead to her stumbling through that wheat field in the middle of the night. He knew that she was from Larafell, and that's all that I knew as well. I'd exhausted all other sources of information; the capital really was the last place I could look. Somewhere in the archive, the libraries, somewhere, there had to be some shred of information. If there was something, I would find it, even if I had to turn the city upside down.

With my mind filled with other thoughts, I had barely noticed the landscape transition around us until the trees began to disappear. They began to stand a little less tall, sprouting leaves and pine needles in duller shades. Soon, they disappeared altogether, replaced with thorny shrubs and spiky blue grass. Before I knew it, I looked up, greeted not by the lushness of The Giltre, but instead the barren sands of the Eastern Wastes.

Looking out at the desolate landscape before me, I was beginning to wish we had risked the chasms of the mines instead. Now that we were finally standing on the border of the Eastern Wastes, it looked far more formidable than anything I had imagined it to be. No water in sight to drink, and nothing to hide us from danger.

While I looked out at the desert in front of us, J alas set his pack down and began to ruffle through it. Taking that as a cue, Tyra set her own supplies down as well, stretching her back out before grabbing her water skin. As she brought it to her lips, J alas called out to her.

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said, finally pulling a map from his pack.

“And why’s that?” she asked, looking slightly annoyed. “It’s hot and I’m thirsty after all that walking.”

“Look here,” he said, beckoning us both over. We all knelt around the map he had unfurled on the ground, bits of sand already blowing onto its surface. The map showed a closer view of the Wastes, and as expected it was sparsely populated by anything of note. A vast sea of beige, with only one standout color.

“This right here,” he said, pointing to the only speck of blue in the area. “Is Vontlan Oasis. It’s the only real source of water out here, so if we are planning to make it across the Wastes, we have to stop there.”

“And what does that have to do with me drinking now?” asked Tyra.

“We’ll need as much water as we can get,” I replied, looking closer at the map. “How far out is this place? A week’s walk?”

J alas nodded. “Indeed. Normally, it would only be trading caravans coming through here, and they can carry plenty of water for themselves. By ourselves, at a walking pace, we’ll be cutting it close if we don’t ration it out.”

Tyra let out a sigh. “Fine. Can I have my ration now?”

“Just a few sips,” he replied. “And then we’ll head out.”

As Tyra drank, I stood up and looked back out at the Wastes. I could see the wind shuffling the sand back and forth, revealing the odd bit of hard clay hiding underneath. Bragur didn’t have deserts, not really. It was nothing but farmland, forests, and lakes. In all my life, I had never really known anything else. I then turned, looking back behind me. I could see several shrubs, and in the distance even a few stunted trees being battered by the wind. It would be the last vegetation I would likely see for a while. I finished my last glance as Tyra put her water away, and soon enough we were off across the barren wastelands.

We were hardly a hundred paces in, and I could already tell that it would be harder than the previous stretch of the journey. While the way down through The Giltre had cliffs and pitfalls, the Wastes made no attempt to mask how exposed you were. I already felt overdressed as the sun hammered away, and I felt as though I were burning up. I shed my cloak almost immediately, trying my best to keep the hood protecting my head. It did little to help in the end.

The terrain itself wasn’t much better. While there were patches of stone and clay, it mostly consisted of sand, something that clearly wasn’t meant to be walked through. Combined with the wind, it felt like I was sinking backward with every step I took. I gritted my teeth as I dug my feet in and forced my way forward.

Tales from Larafell (Working title)

We traveled on as the sun danced across the sky to shine at us in new and intense angles. I began to learn the landscape, stepping with the flat of my foot rather than the heel to not sink in as much, loosening my clothes to let the wind catch under. All tricks I picked up watching J alas glide across the dunes. I had a feeling that he had been to the desert before, though I kept such thoughts to myself..

At points I could have sworn to see something more than rock and sand in the distance. A wilted tree, some shuffling along animals, all turning out to be mere tricks of the sun as we passed by mounds of mocking stone. I soon learned to ignore such sights, silently cursing at them as we passed.

Looking behind me, I could see Tyra was fairing about the same as I was. She'd taken my cue and had wrapped some cloth around her head in an attempt to shield herself from the sun, but it was clear that the heat was hitting her as well. She had begun to lag behind, though as soon as she saw me glancing back, she picked up the pace, soon catching up to me.

I kept looking at her as she fell into step next to me, giving her an inquisitive look as I did.

"I thought you wanted to be in the back," I said.

"I do," she replied. "But I'm not just going to let you have your way and leave me behind."

"As if I was going to let you out of my sight," I shrugged, silence looming over us as we continued sliding our way through the sand.

It wasn't until the early evening that we got a break from the conditions. As the sun began to set, the heat and wind began to leave with it, finally allowing each step to not feel like a terrible labor. With night falling, we decided to press on, despite our exhaustion from the day. Better to travel without the sun crashing down on our backs.

Soon enough, the sun had set completely, and we were bathed in the light of twilight. Without any trees surrounding us, the night sky grew unobstructed as stars began to shine across it, each one glowing with a certain sharpness under the crescent moon. As more and more appeared, I looked forward to J alas to see how he was faring. He had taken the lead the entire time, the sand and heat seemingly ineffective to his light step. I began to walk a bit faster, until I was walking alongside him.

He was lost in the stars, barely noticing me walking up. I walked alongside him for a time before he acknowledged me.

"You see that up there?" he asked, pointing at a cluster of stars. "That's Uthalf's Spine. It's only fully visible for a quarter of the year."

I looked a bit closer, and the stars did indeed seem to form a rough shape, though it took a leap in logic to call it such a thing.

"Seems a bit of a stretch," I said as I pointed to another star cluster. "You could line up any few stars and call em' a spine with that logic."

"I suppose," replied J alas. "Though that formation is said to have special significance you know, being right in the middle of the night sky when Uthalf was deboned by Hernada."

I gave J alas a bit of an odd look, as though something like that could be said so casually, with him assuring me that it was a gruesome tale for another time.

"You sure do seem to know a lot," I replied.

Jalas nodded. "Ay, but one can always learn more. That's why I've come out this far. The journey for knowledge is never ending."

We walked for a few more minutes in silence, continuing to look at the night sky flash and change before us. A few nagging thoughts finally made me break the silence.

"So, this oasis we're going to," I said, turning toward him. "Have you been there before?"

Jalas nodded, still looking up at the night sky. "Once, many years ago. Much like now, it was the only stopping place to find water in the area, so I had no real option to go through while I was traveling."

"What's it like there then?" I asked. "What should we expect?"

Jalas paused. "I'm not entirely sure."

I gave him a confused look. "That's a bit of a first for you, not knowing something."

Jalas finally took his gaze down from the sky and looked at me. "I wasn't in the best place during that time. I was younger, naïve, and only concerned with the cool water of the oasis and the shade of the surrounding trees. Little else mattered during that time."

"Though for what it's worth," he said as he turned forward. "After a week spent trudging through the desert, I think you'll enjoy your time there. In all my travels the Wastes are one of those places that truly try to sap the soul from you. Any reprieve at all is welcome."

With that we fell silent for a spell, Jalas and I leading through the sands as Tyra followed behind. The moon, while only a quarter full, was plenty in such a barren landscape to light the way forward. As we walked, I thought about what Jalas had said and it got me thinking.

I looked over at him. "Say, Jalas."

Without responding, he glanced over, awaiting what I had to say.

"How long is it you've been traveling for?" I asked

"At this point?" he replied. "Probably more than half my life. It's hard to imagine a time when I wasn't on the road."

"Quite a while that," I continued. "You must have had a reason to take up such a lifestyle."

"Does one really need a reason?" he replied.

"Everyone has a reason for what they do," I said, looking back briefly at Tyra. "Even if they don't know what it is. I wouldn't be out here if I didn't have something to accomplish. It isn't so outlandish to think you started in a similar way."

"Well, you already know why I'm out here," he said, gesturing at the night sky. "The search for knowledge, witnessing new places..."

"But that isn't why you started," I interrupted, looking back up at the stars. "No one chooses to go on such journeys without something deeper driving them."

For the first time in a while, I could see a crack in Jalas's demeanor. A quick frown, followed by a sharper exhale. Returning to looking at the way ahead, he took a moment to wet his dried lips before replying.

"Well, you're half right," he said. "I did indeed start my travels looking for knowledge, but it wasn't entirely my own choice."

"Not something pleasant, I take it" I replied.

"Like I said, it's not a time I like to talk about fondly," he said. "I was living in the capital during that time, at the start of the Resurgence."

"When the cultists came back."

Jalas nodded. "Indeed. Though the cultists growing in power wasn't the cause of my flight nor the Resurgence. Rather, it was the sacking of the Capital."

"You told me about that," I said, thinking back to that night I had first met him. "What happened?"

"I remember that it was just like any other night," Jalas sighed. "The night was clear, and the weather was calm. It was early in the evening and people were going about their business. I was studying in the bottom reaches of the city, when I could see a bright light emanating from the upper quarter."

"It was a fire," he continued. "It engulfed nearly half the upper quarter. Through the flames, I could see other, more horrible things."

"What?" I asked.

"Devouts of all manner," he replied. "Rushing away from the upper quarter and into the lower reaches, fighting and killing at such a rate that we couldn't see the enemy they fought. I barely had time to turn and run before they were upon the area. The last thing I remember of that night was the light of the fire as I sailed out to the mainland."

"I'm sorry," I said after a moment.

"Don't be," he replied. "I'm in a better place now than I was then. If anything, my leaving was for the best. The people there always had such small ideas about how the world should work."

Jalas coughed. "Either way, by the time the Resurgence had begun in full, I had made up my mind," he continued. "I had seen the kind of destruction that such an event could bring, so I made it my life's mission to preserve as much knowledge as I could."

Jalas wore a light smile, but behind that I could see there was also sadness. I wondered about many things, who he had lost, what he had left behind. I couldn't help but think back to my home, rotting away in the countryside.

"How's that worked out for you?" I asked.

"As well as I could hope for," he replied. "At the very least I can say that I've done the best that I could have."

We didn't talk much after that, the swirling wind being the only sound as we trudged through the night. J alas's story had touched me, but I couldn't help but feel that there was something he had left out, some detail that had been kept locked away from prying eyes. Perhaps he was equally a keeper of secrets as well as a collector.

It wasn't until the moon was nearly directly overhead that we stopped. As we crested another of the many dunes, I could make out in the moonlight something other than sand or clay. Rocks, boulders, scattered about in an area not much larger than several small houses. Perhaps the eroded remains of a larger monument.

As we reached the first of the rocks, most of them being about as tall as myself, J alas heaved his pack, so it was leaning right against the nearest.

"We'll rest here," he said as he pulled a blanket from his pack. "The rocks will protect us from the worst of the wind."

"No arguments here," said Tyra. She was clearly tired, practically dropping everything that she was carrying, but looked to be putting up a strong front.

Of course, I had no issue with it either. We had been traveling for a full day and half of the night; I was just as exhausted as Tyra. I had no idea how J alas could look so lively, especially at his age. I had a feeling he was only really resting for the night for our sake.

I set my pack down next to the others, scoping out a spot to sleep. I finally settled on a spot near one of the larger boulders, standing at about twice my own height. It looked to block the wind well, and while it was hard to see in the moonlight, it was slightly carved out near the bottom, providing the perfect little nook to sleep in.

As I made my way over, my mind couldn't help but wander toward ill thoughts. Ones of regret, for leaving my home, for putting any other future aside in favor of sleeping cold in the desert. What a silly idea, I thought to myself, to come out here, to so readily throw my life into disarray. To leave behind all I knew on a hunch, something that wasn't even guaranteed to give answers.

Of course, I also then thought of J alas, and his being out in the desert. What future had I left behind, really? A life of safety, but also of hard labor. Insecurity. Hunger. The life of a homeless working man on the street, begging for any scrap of work. And perhaps that was the life that still awaited me, should I return to Bragur. Perhaps, I thought, it would be better to die on this fool-flung journey than to return with answers.

I unfurled my sleeping pad, letting its full length out before going to clear out the spot of any lesser rocks. But as my hand touched the sand within the crevasse, the ground began to shift and stir. My hand brushed against a hard, scaly surface before a low growling could be heard over the wind.

I quickly back paddled away from the rock, getting onto my feet as the boulder began to rumble. At this point, Tyra and J alas had taken notice and run over next to me. J alas barely had any time to yell out before the boulder was forced over to one side, and something else began to rise from the sand to take its place.

It was as tall as the boulder had been but maybe half as wide. Either way, it was large enough to block out the moon light and cast a shadow over us. Its details were hard to make out in the dim light, but it had scales cascading down its whole body, leading to razor-like claws. Its face was obscured, but I could make out the glint of vicious, sharp fangs.

As it reached its full height, it let out a loud noise somewhere between a growl and a hiss before slamming its front limbs into the sand and charging at me. Its claws dragged up sand as it rumbled towards me, creating a coarse cloud from which it charged. I backed up as I reached for my sword, but the creature was already upon me before I could. It raised one of its claws, and I flung myself into the sand as it brought it down where I had been standing.

It wound up for a second attack, but before it could a loud clanging could be heard, and the beast shifted off balance. As I scrambled to my feet, I could see Tyra, spear in hand, holding a fighting stance. The creature, having shook off the attack with little effort, let out another battle cry at her before charging in on all fours.

Tyra dodged out of the way as it barreled at her, thrusting her spear at the back of the creature. Like last time however, her weapon glanced off its hide, leaving little more than a scuff on its armor. As the beast continued to focus on her, I charged in, bringing my sword down on the back of its neck. This too, however, merely bounced off its scales, only agitating the creature further.

It was clear our current line of attacks wasn't doing anything, so we circled the creature the best we could, dodging its attacks as it struck out. Jalas stood a distance away, observing the creature between a frantic turning of book pages.

"You know what this thing is?" I shouted to him, keeping my eyes on the creature.

He didn't answer, instead mumbling to himself as he scanned through the book. Finally, he looked up. "The stomach!" he yelled. "The scales don't protect the underside!"

If the underbelly was its weakness, the creature would protect it at all costs. No chance of a lucky blow to it. Looking at the beast as I circled it, no real strategies made themselves readily apparent either. Getting it onto its back would leave it exposed, but the creature was too mobile for us to pull off such a maneuver. That just left one, less ideal option.

"Back off!" I yelled to Tyra, just as she dodged another swipe from the beast. "I'll handle it!"

My words did little good, as Tyra went on ignoring them, taking a few stabs at the creature. I gritted my teeth, frustrated, before yelling again.

"Back off already!" I yelled. "I need it focused on me!"

"No way!" she replied. "You ain't got the strength for 'em!"

Then, over the cries of the beast, I could hear Jalas. "Do what he says!" he yelled out. "Give it some space!"

Tyra hesitated for a moment, continuing to round the beast before giving a nod, disengaging from the circle. The beast tried to lunge after her, but I swung my sword against its side. It had little

effect, but it got the creature's attention well enough. It spun around as it hissed, its tail swinging wildly as it prepared itself to charge.

Before it could start moving, I charged first, running headfirst at the beast. The creature followed soon after, its powerful limbs booming against the sand, putting us on a collision course. As we grew near, I could see the first glimpse of its eyes in the pale light; tight slits full of ferocity.

We were only a few paces apart, and as it raised its claw to swing at me, I leaned backward onto my heels. It brought down its claws at me, its sharpened blades barely missing as I fell onto my back with a hardy thud. The sudden drop nearly took the wind out of me, but I had enough strength about me to grab my sword and aim accordingly.

The creature still had momentum pushing it forward as it barreled over me, its movements confused at the loss of its prey. As it passed over, I could see the scaly hide of the beast's back replaced with matted fur, all manner of sand and rock clinging to it. Not missing the opportunity, I thrust my sword forward, piercing through its soft underside.

Immediately, the creature let out a terrible cry, coming to a halt and nearly collapsing on top of me. It squirmed and bucked; its body close to crushing me in its desperate bid to get the blade out. That only served to injure it further as the blade sliced its way down its stomach, blood and guts starting to spill out and stain my clothes red. Realizing what was happening, the creature made a few swipes at me, but it was only able to graze me in the awkward position I was in. Soon, its attempts at attack stopped as the life left the creature's body, its now lifeless corpse nearly crushing me as I slid out from under it.

I stood there for a moment trying to catch my breath, looking down at the creature whose guts I was now covered. Now still, it somehow looked even larger splayed across the ground as its black scales shined in the moonlight. I was lost looking at it when I felt a hand clasp around my shoulder, Jalas looking down at the creature alongside me.

"That was some fine tactics there," he said.

I nodded as I sheathed my sword. "Let's just hope that that's the most danger we'll face out here," I replied.

Jalas nodded, wiping his hand of the blood that had stuck to it. Tyra had little to say on the whole matter, instead choosing to simply shrug it all off and stay silent. With the creature now dead, we all returned to our supplies, watchful of any other surprises that lay hidden in the rocks.

I setup my bedroll against the now overturned boulder, its size still shielding me from the wind. After a day's travel and fighting off whatever beast that was, I cared little about soiling the bedroll with the blood that decorated my clothes. I was ready to collapse.

As I closed my eyes and began to drift off, in the back of my mind I knew that we would still have many more dangers to come. With any luck, that beast would be the worst thing the desert had to throw at us, though I have a gut feeling that wouldn't be the case.

Ch 8

Gods and Worship: The Secrets They Won't Tell You!

By Trurkinn

Dausuga, The Owl: Goddess of Death, Decay, and Myrkur

Not many speak the name Dausuga lightly. Holding dominion over Myrkur, she and she alone holds control over the icy plain of death. Most will have their souls claimed by her, her talons grabbing up vast swaths of the departed to bring to Myrkur, a frozen waste land of shadows and mist.

Dausuga herself is often shown as a giant owl, her feathers as black as obsidian and talons as sharp as swords. Outside of the few cults that worship her, the only shrines of hers to be found are at cemeteries and graveyards where people can be seen praying for the souls of those who have passed on.

Of all the Devouts of the land, Dausuga's are among the most twisted. You won't find any among the Third Assembly, outright devotion to Dausuga being outlawed. Why? One simple concept: Your soul. While Devouts of Dausuga can obtain a whole host of abilities, ranging from soul infusions to void walking, a vast majority of them delve into darker arts: soul-stealing, mental domination, and necromancy. Vile acts so unspeakable that they were outlawed 150 years ago.

Thankfully, due to its criminal nature, not many Devouts who follow Dausuga exist out in the world. They're numbers are scattered to the hills, where the last few cults of Dausuga remain, practicing their wretched powers. Only they know the near forgotten secrets to becoming her Devout, and for the sake of the nation, that is probably for the best.

Of the few worships I have managed to learn, I will share only one. If you ever find yourself passing a graveyard or cemetery, the bodies of the dead resting below the hardened soil, take the time to visit the local shrine that is sure to be near. Pick a few sprigs of rosemary along the way, always abundant near some of the older graves, and light them ablaze. It is said the scent aids in the passage from this world to the next.

The sun was beating down on me like an angry drunk, the hard-packed clay and sand reflecting light into my eyes. The strong wind, while keeping me from overheating, kept a near constant shower of sand pouring into my face. Looking next to me at Tyra, she seemed to be suffering worse than I was, sweat dripping off her brow as she shielded her eyes. City life near a lake hadn't prepared her for such barren wastes, and it showed. The only one of us not suffering was Jalas, as was the usual, a lightness carrying his step as his cloak billowed on the breeze that swept across the empty plain in front of us.

The last week of travel had been a grueling labor. Having to ration out our supplies, we were all running on scraps of food and water, though at the moment water was the thing on my mind. My mouth felt as dry as our surroundings, a dust bowl devoid of even the slightest hint of moisture.

Keeping my eyes pinned forward, I hardened my step, determined to finally reach a place of rest. According to the maps, we were set to reach the oasis by that afternoon, and the sun had already passed its high point. As I walked along the “road” – a loose scattering of sandstorm and hardened clay – Tyra’s voice called out from alongside me.

“You do’n alright there?” she asked me, though her voice carried little concern.

Glancing back over, I replied with a grunt, “I’m fine. Any reason you suddenly care about my wellbeing?”

She shrugged. “Travelers got to look out for one another,” she replied blankly, leaving me unconvinced. “That, and I don’t want to have to drag you along if your body gives out on ya. Would be a real pain for me.”

I chuckled. The past week of travel had at least done something to tighten our working-relationship. When you’re too exhausted to argue with each other, you tend to agree on things more. She was still damn near bull-headed, frustrating at times, but I could at least pick up on what she was saying. “Oh of course. Wouldn’t want to inconvenience you by collapsing from sun stroke. I’d hate if I had to rest and have you carry me the rest of the way,” I replied, eliciting a frown from her.

“Please,” she said. “If it weren’t for the old man, I’d leave you with your sorry mug in the sand while I got myself some of that refreshing oasis water.”

“As if you’d get much further,” I replied, looking her up and down. “You look to be worse off than I am.”

“The sand get in your head then? I could walk the whole length of this desert twice before you even made it halfway,” she said, wiping some of the sweat from her brow. “I’ve trained in heat far worse than this.”

“Oh yeah?” I replied with a raised eyebrow. “I’ve worked the wheat fields surrounding my village in the middle of the day’s heat, dawn to dusk, with barely a break to rest.”

“Farming is no comparison to real military training,” said Tyra, clicking her tongue. “All of that work gave me lasting power. I have the endurance to stay in the fight for as long as I need.”

I turned back to the path ahead. “If you think that reaping grain for 10 hours a day doesn’t grow one’s endurance, you’ve clearly never set foot in a field.”

I could hear Tyra about to reply, but before she could we heard Jalas calling out from up ahead over the whipping winds. He stood atop one of the few dunes we’d seen in the Wastes, the highest point in sight.

“Oi you two, get up here,” he yelled out. “The oasis is just ahead!”

The thought of fresh water was enough to shake us from our shambling, both Tyra and I taking up a light jog to reach the top of the dune. We crested the top of the dune, ready to lay sight on some shining pool of water or whatever an oasis looked like, but were instead met with a different sight.

We all just stood there for a moment, taking it all in. Finally, while not letting the area before me out of my gaze, I said, “That’s a bit more people than I expected to see.”

The oasis was indeed there, its shimmering water glowing brighter than the sand under the sun, a large stretch of trees and shrubs surrounding the pristine blue dot. It truly was the little bit of green in the whole of the region. However, further surrounding the oasis was not just a few buildings and merchant stands, but an entire small town, nearly the size that Hatre had been. From our perch, we could see people milling about, going about their business under the harsh sun.

"No, no. This isn't right," I heard J alas mutter. I moved my gaze from the town toward him, a rare look of confusion spreading across his face. As he muttered to himself, he began to rustle through his pack, pausing occasionally to look at the odd scroll or parchment. Finally, he pulled out a piece of lambskin with several illustrations marking it. They were made in charcoal, the black of it making a sharp contrast to the beige canvas.

"Look, look right here," he said aloud, holding the drawings up to us. "This is a depiction of Vontlan Oasis from no more than 3 years ago. Notice anything, see the difference?"

Both Tyra and I drew closer to look. Indeed, the drawing, while somewhat crude, made it perfectly clear what the difference was. While before us stood a sizable town that surrounded the oasis, the drawing only showed the oasis itself as well as a few small tents.

We looked back up to J alas. "So, there wasn't a town here three years ago," said Tyra. "What of it? It could have easily been built in the time since. I've seen buildings better than those built in only a months' time."

J alas shook his head. "Vontlan Oasis, most of the Eastern Wastes in fact, is incapable of hosting such a settlement," he said. "Look around us, they certainly didn't find the materials to build out here, did they?"

Tyra paused for a moment, waiting for a continuation that never came. "And?"

"And" said J alas, frustration gripping his breath. "It means that these buildings, these people, shouldn't be here! It makes no sense! You can't just stand there and tell me it sits well with you."

"They could have just moved the material here by caravan," I interjected. "There's no reason they couldn't have come here with the supplies they needed. It wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary, I've seen plenty of travelers doing the same."

"And for what reason?" asked J alas. "The oasis itself is not resource enough to justify settling in a land as dangerous and as inhospitable as this. They would have had to go out of their way and pass far more livable land than this to get here."

"They were probably desperate," I said. "If they had nowhere else to go, the oasis is certainly more hospitable than anywhere near here."

I turned back to look at the town, the people going about as if we weren't watching them. "For all we know, they could be refugees, escaping from bandits, cultists..."

"Or from Assembly rule," interjected Tyra.

"Either way," I continued. "There's no reason to assume that something is wrong with this place or these people. It isn't what we expected, but the important thing is that the oasis is still here. We can fill up on water, and maybe even get more supplies from the town."

"Ah, for Peklar's sake," muttered Jalas, rubbing his temple. "How can you two not see what's wrong here?"

"Because there isn't much wrong to see," said Tyra. "You haven't really pointed out anything, just that it isn't what you expected it to be."

"Tyra's right," I said, catching an inquisitive look from her as I did. "I'm willing to entertain a bit more speculation on it if you have some good reason to be suspicious, but otherwise I'm going to start heading down there before I drop from thirst."

"I have plenty of reason to be suspicious," he replied, almost looking relieved.

He stamped his foot on the hard clay beneath us, a hard thwacking sound emanating from it. "Hear that? This land is far too hard to be farmed, at least not efficiently enough to sustain a town that size," he continued. "They would need a constant supply of caravans and merchants traveling through the area, which as you can guess..."

"Is something which is in short supply right now," I finished.

Jalas nodded. "And yet this town persists. So, tell me then, even if these people did have the inane idea to settle out here, how has it not collapsed on itself from shortage of food alone?"

I sighed; he did indeed make a decent point. It had taken several large fields of grain to feed my village back in Bragur, how could this place survive without a single crop insight?

"Alright, you make a fair point," I replied. "But even though it shouldn't be here, there's still clearly a town standing out in front of me. How do you propose that is?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "But it's unlikely that they could survive out here without outside help. It could be a trap for all we know, meant to lure people in."

Now Tyra was looking down at the town, her gaze lazier than ours. "Or it could mean nothing," she said. "All this time speculating is time wasted not restocking and filling our guts. Instead of standing here slack jawed all day guessing at it, I say we head down and see for ourselves. Worst case, we snag some water and leave before anything can happen."

It certainly was a conundrum as they were both right. The situation was certainly strange, but it wasn't as though we could avoid it. If we wanted water, we'd have to pass through the town either way. Any alternative certainly wouldn't be pleasant.

"Alright look," I said. "Jalas is right to be concerned, he's made some good points. But I'm also certain that that town has the only water around here for miles."

I turned to face Tyra. "We'll follow Tyra's plan. If everything turns out to be fine, we'll restock and be on our way. If not, we'll try our best to sneak some water before heading back out."

Tyra gave a nod in response, not giving me her usual glaring eye. I looked over at Jalas, who had turned back to look at the town.

"I suppose it's the best option to be weighed," he finally replied. "Just make sure not to let your guards down. Be ready for anything."

With that, Jalas grabbed his pack and started walking toward the town, Tyra and I making up the gap and walking in front. As we did I thought about the last week, about the creature we had fought when we first entered the Wastes. If something were to go wrong, Jalas would need to be protected. As we walked down the dune toward the buildings, I made sure to make some ground between Tyra and I, and Jalas.

"Alright look," I said as I leaned in toward her. "This last weeks gone alright, but I know you still don't really care for me, and I'll tell you right now that I feel about the same."

Tyra began to reply, but I cut her off. "But if Jalas is right, I'm not about to have either of us die because we don't trust each other," I continued. "It's clear enough that you at least trust the old man back there, as do I. At the very least I know you have a bit of respect."

I paused for a moment, looking to see how she reacted. She gave a quick nod before I continued.

"So can we at least agree that we'll trust each other enough to make sure he doesn't die?" I asked. "Because if we continue on the way we have been, then we'll all be growing moss all too soon."

Tyra looked down for a moment, her eyes shifting around before she responded. "Alright fine," she replied. "For the old man's sake." And that was all I needed to be satisfied.

It wasn't long before we had reached the outskirts of the town. Now that we were up close to it, the place looked visibly bland. There was no wall surrounding the town like in Corzen or Hartre, nor was there any indication of where the desert ended, and the town began. Random shacks and fencing just popped up out of the arid earth as though they had been placed there by someone who had only heard of what a town was through idle chatter.

Many of the sand wasted shacks looked rather amateurish in construction, hastily nailed together wooden boards on slanted posts. I would have been surprised if anyone truly lived in them. Looking forward toward the center of the town, I could see the structures grew in both quality and density the closer toward the oasis you got, with just the single main road connecting everything.

None of the people we had seen from atop the dune seemed to be dwelling in the outskirts, not a single person milling about. We kept on walking ahead, and It wasn't until we made our way closer to the oasis that the town became livelier, with dozens of people walking about the place. At first, there didn't seem to be anything extraordinary about them, just normal townsfolk walking around, conversing, or doing business. Closer inspection soon dispelled that idea.

The main tip off were the clothes. On their own, each individual might warrant a passing glance of interest, but as a whole it was otherworldly. At a merchant stall, a man dressed as a knight was selling food to a sailor. Ahead of us, I could see a nobleman crossing paths with a beggar and farmer. To our right, a scholar in blue robes was smithing a sword, his hammer barely dinging off the blade. No one was where they should have been, and they certainly weren't wearing clothes fit for the desert.

Tales from Larafell (Working title)

The scene had me both curious and on edge. I wanted to know why people were dressed and acted the way they were, but those very things also were nudging at me to make my way back out of the town. Looking over to Jalas, I could tell he felt similar, his eyes darting back and forth and overall looking skittish. The fact he was feeling something didn't but my nerves at ease.

Given the strange garb of the townsfolk, our relatively normal clothing made us standouts. People looked our way as we passed, our names whispers on the sides of the street. As we made our way further into the town, more people looked our way, with one person in particular catching my eye as he waved at us. A young man, wearing sailor's cloth and smiling just a bit wider than one normally would. He called out to us from the porch of a building.

"Hello there, friends" he said as he leaned against the splintered railing. "You all just get into town?"

I was hesitant to answer him, given the unsettling nature of the town, but he had been the first person to talk to us rather than just gossip. We looked at each other briefly before collectively walking over to the man.

"We did," I replied, stopping just in front of the porch. "Wanted to refill at the oasis before continuing on."

"Well it's a good thing you did," he said with a cheery grin. "You lot look dryer than the sand itself, and there isn't another speck of water for miles."

The man extended his arm towards me, his hand open. "Name's Briar, how about you folk?"

"Arni," I said as I grasped his hand. "So, what do you do around here Briar?"

"Oh, not too much," he replied. "Just a few odd jobs here and there 'round town."

"I see," I said. "Why the sailor clothes then? That oasis looks nice but it sure ain't no ocean."

"That's a right good one!" Briar laughed. "See, there isn't much to go around out here, so you take what you can get. One of the last merchant caravans had these clothes here and Poulder, that's my neighbor, real nice man, thought I looked good in em. Bought em on the spot!"

"So, there are merchants coming through here?" Jalas asked. "That's hard to imagine given the state of the region."

"There sure are," said Briar as he adjusted his cap. "They come all the way over from Austur according to them. Apparently, the Wastes offer some protection to them, less cultists lurking about compared to the rest of the area. Makes it a good spot to travel through to Assembly territory."

"Makes enough sense, though it still seems like a mighty risk for them," I said, peering over at Jalas. "My friend here, he was taken aback when he saw the town. Last he heard it was just the oasis out here."

Briar nodded. "Indeed, it was," he said. "They settled this place a few years back, people from all walks of life escaping from cultist attacks. It started off small, but more people have been coming over the years."

"And you're not worried about being attacked here," asked Tyra. "Doesn't look like you have so much as a wall up."

"Not particularly," Briar shrugged. "By the time any of them cultists would get out here, the desert would have taken care of them for us. No need for a wall when the Wastes act as the best deterrent."

Tyra and I nodded, with Jalas holding his gaze. After a moment, the dryness in my throat reminded me why we were here.

"Well, I think we should be heading over to the oasis," I said to Briar. "Thanks for the information."

"Any time," he replied. "Nice talking with any passers through. Maybe I'll see you folks again if you ever decide to come around again."

With that, Tyra, Jalas, and I turned and started to walk closer to the center of town, closer to the oasis. As I turned to go, I thought I could see Briar, for just a moment, lose that wide, happy grin. I could only see for a moment before he turned and walked into the building he'd been next to.

"See?" Tyra said as we walked. "Explanation for everything, just like I said. Nothing nefarious at all."

Jalas kept looking ahead of us, towards the direction of the oasis. He still looked as he did when we had first entered the town, largely on edge. "Maybe," he muttered. "But we should still keep our eyes open."

As we neared the oasis, the town changed further to reflect it. The buildings, while more densely packed, seemed sturdier compared to those on the outskirts. A select few even had stone brick set as a foundation compared to the majority which were primarily made of wood. They also lacked the wear the other buildings showed, their sidings looking practically new compared to the sand swept house's further back.

As the buildings got nicer, the surrounding landscape did as well. The hard clay of the road slowly turned softer under our feet before returning to a fine-grained sand. The vegetation, which up until now had only consisted of the stray husk of a bush, also began to perk up. Starting with a few low-lying bushes, it progressed into several tall trees unlike any I had ever seen before. They looked as though they were made of many different large blades of grass, with thick brown blades making up the trunk and many shorter green blades making up the leaves. They looked almost otherworldly.

Between looking at the surrounding landscape and buildings, I was also able to get a better look at some of the townsfolk. Even this close in, despite being a nicer part of the town, everyone still wore mismatched clothing. However, that wasn't what struck me. Unlike the people in the outer reaches of the town, who had seemed relatively normal despite everything, the people closer in looked, well, off. They were stiff in their movement, and despite there being plenty of them, no one seemed to be talking to one another. They merely went about their work, walking around looking like people who had been working under a hot sun in the fields all day. There was the odd person who seemed to act as you would expect, but they seemed to be the outliers. It gave me an odd feeling, but I cast it to the side. No point in accosting hard-working people who already looked like death.

The buildings finally petered out about 100 paces away from the ring of the thick brush surrounding the oasis, with only the small pathway before us cutting through the trees and bushes. The leaves were surprisingly sharp, several of them slicing against my skin as I passed, one of them managing to draw a sliver of blood. I barely noticed; my mind was clouded with thoughts of fresh water as my throat screamed for relief. I could tell the others felt the same, and we quickened our pace until we burst through the tree line and onto a damp, sandy clearing.

I shielded my eyes, the sudden sunlight almost blinding me as spots danced in my vision. As they cleared, I removed my hand from my face and looked out in front of me.

Still shielding her eyes, I could hear Tyra. "By Vintyr," she muttered.

I nearly said something in kind, as the sight was truly beautiful to someone emerging from the desert. The body of water was large, considering where it was. While nowhere near as big as the lake near Corzen, it was still at least a quarter the size. The shimmering surface was surrounded by the same trees that we walked through to get in, each of them leaning in towards the middle as though they were trying to take a sip.

The water itself was what caught my eye though. It was colored a light blue; much lighter than any body of water I had seen before. Despite its size, it lacked any waves or ripples, the water acting as a giant mirror. It was so still I felt like I could have walked out onto it and my feet wouldn't have pierced the surface.

Aside from us, there were a dozen or so people milling about the edge of the water. Some were scooping out water with wooden buckets and clay jugs, while others either sat down or stood and watched. As we walked closer, one of them turned to look at us. They were a tall, older woman, with her hair tied up in a loose bun. Unlike the others who were dressed in mismatched scraps, she wore something rather concise; fine woolen breeches and a button up shirt dyed a faint lavender. Her face grew a light smile as she saw us approach.

"Well hello there," she said with her hands clasped behind her. "Travelers I take it?"

I nodded as we stopped in front of her, a few dozen paces from the edge of the water, though Jalas seemed to be hiding behind me and Tyra. "That's right," I said. "May I ask who you are? I take it you're no traveler yourself."

"My how observant," she said with a chuckle. "I'm Stela, the caretaker of the oasis."

"Caretaker?" said Tyra inquisitively.

Stela gave a nod. "Indeed. I make sure that the health of the oasis is maintained, whether that be through the cultivation of planets or the observation of water levels. I ensure that our community here survives."

She looked back to the group. "So, what can this old caretaker do for you?"

"We're just passing through to refill our water," I replied. "The desert has drained us dry on that front."

"That's the reason most people pass through," Stela said with a smile. "The oasis here attracts travelers like moths to a flame, it's as predictable as the wind really."

She gestured towards the water's edge, and the nearby people collecting it. Just like the people before, their movements were stiff, and their expressions almost forced.

"As you can see, our whole little community revolves around it," she said. "The water is so pure and calming; some people choose to stay after just a taste!"

"I don't know about that," I replied. "As long as it quenches our thirst, it should be fine."

"Of course," Stela said. "Oh, listen to me go on, I'm sure you three are dying for a taste. Let us fetch some for you."

With that she turned, yelling over to one of the other women near the water. "Oh Tiffany!" she cried out. "Will you bring some water over here for these travelers?"

I could see the woman Stela was talking to nod, grabbing one of the nearby jugs and dunking it into the oasis. As it filled, Stela turned back to us with a smile.

"We'll have that for you right away," she said. "It's always a pleasure to help ailing travelers."

"Thank you," replied Jalas, who had finally stepped forward to meet her. "You're too kind."

Stela widened her smile. "Thank you," she said. "I pride myself on maintaining this place, especially when surrounded by such harsh conditions. The least I can do is share the results."

Jalas continued to walk forward, walking past Stela, and gazing out onto the water. "It certainly is a sight," he said. "Far more vibrant than the last time I was here. Tell me, how long have you been looking after it?"

"Oh, it's been years," she replied. "I've been here ever since there were no more than a few buildings here. I like to think that my efforts are what has grown the town that surrounds us."

"I'm sure it has," replied Jalas. "It still amazes me though that so many people have decided to make lives out here."

"Well, the Great Resurgence has been ongoing for so long," said Stela. "Unfortunately, not many people have too many options left."

As she spoke, I could see Jalas' eyes narrow slightly, before relaxing once more. To my right, I could sense Tyra tensing as well, her movements less subtle.

"I'm just glad that we can act as a refuge for them," Stela finished.

"Indeed," said Jalas, walking back to join us.

Just as he returned to my side, the woman had reached us, her arms full of two large jugs of water. The sound of the water sloshing inside was enough to remind me of how truly thirsty I was. As the women passed the jug over to Stela, Jalas leaned towards me, whispering into my ear.

"Don't drink it," he whispered. "Fill your skin and leave."

Before I could react, Jalas had already leaned away, and Stela was now facing me, presenting us the jug of water. She set it at our feet, looking at us expectantly.

"I hope you enjoy," she said. "The water has a way of rejuvenating even the weariest of travelers."

"I'm sure we will," replied Jalas, stepping forward and kneeling toward the jug.

However, rather than taking a sip, he pulled out his water skin and began to fill it. Stella's smile began to waver into a look of confusion as the water slowly drained into the pouch.

"Are you...not thirsty?" she asked. "Don't you want to drink some of the water?"

"Oh, I certainly do," replied Jalas as he put away a now full water skin before pulling out a new empty one. "But the journey ahead is still long and dry. I'd hate to forget to stock up on water in my haste."

Jalas looked up at Stela. "I've waited this long for a drink; I can wait a moment longer."

With that, Jalas went back to filling up on water, with Stela now looking at him with a reserved smile. I couldn't place it, but it looked as though she was hiding a tinge of annoyance under that smile.

"I suppose you are right," she said, though not with a lot of confidence. "I've just never known one who could resist the oasis's waters after spending a time in the wastes."

Jalas chuckled. "I've had plenty of time to temper my spontaneity in my old age."

As Jalas continued to fill up on water, I thought on what he had told me. *Don't drink it, fill your skin and leave.* What reason would he have for not wanting to drink the water here? I knew that he had to be just as thirsty as I had been. The oasis looked perfectly fine, nothing that would be cause for alarm.

No, it was Stela. Something about her had thrown him off, and Tyra for that matter. They both seemed to have a suspicion of her, which was fair. She was one of the only people in town that seemed to act naturally, which combined with the overall feel of the town to create a sense of unease. She was an outlier, possibly someone dangerous, but without some greater context there was no way for me to know what the threat might be. I would just have to go along with whatever Jalas had planned.

As Jalas finished filling up on water, I took a step forward, grabbing the jug from him.

"I might as well fill up now as well," I said, ignoring my body's cries to bring the jug to my lips. "No reason to rush after all."

As I started to fill my skins, Tyra walked over. "I think I will as well," she said, and began using the other jug.

We sat there, filling our water skins for several minutes, occasionally looking around and making small talk. I was able to catch a few glances at Stela, who had continued to stand nearby and watch us. She had been talking with Jalas, though I wasn't paying too much attention to what they were saying. I only caught the odd question from Jalas regarding the town and oasis, or part of an answer from Stela. All I was focused on was finishing with the water, and evidently so was Tyra, who hadn't looked up since we had started.

Soon enough, we had drained the jugs nearly dry, with only a few mouthfuls of water remaining near the bottom. We gestured to one of the attendants near us, who eagerly took the jugs from us and started walking them back toward the water's edge. Seeing this, Stela abruptly cut off what she had been discussing with Jalas, walking over to us.

"All filled up, are we?" she said, though she clearly didn't expect an answer as she continued. "Well, now that you have plenty of water for your journey, you must surely want some to drink before you leave."

She began to gesture to one of the people near the water, but before she could, Jalas cut her off. "Oh, there's no need," he said. "We've already taken plenty, and we'd hate to impose any more on you and your community."

Stela's smile looked to falter. "Oh no, it's no trouble at all, and surely you must be- "

"Please, we insist," he said, cutting her off. "You've already shown us more kindness than we could ever repay. We wouldn't feel right taking anymore."

Before Stela could reply, I cut myself in, sensing what Jalas was trying to do. "Thank you for your hospitality," I said. "But we have a long way to go, and the day is still young enough. It's best if we start back out."

"I concur," continued Jalas. "Blessings of Pekklar for your generosity."

With that, Jalas turned, walking back to where we had entered the clearing, leaving a bewildered look on Stela's face. Tyra and I quickly joined him, hastily walking away from the water's edge and towards the trees.

We had nearly reached the tree line when a loud clanging rang out. I whipped around, only to see Tyra's spear out, and a knife sticking out of the sand at her feet. My eyes snapped to where Stela had been standing. Any glimpse of a smile had left her face, instead replaced with a silent, simmering anger. Her left arm was outstretched, clearly the location where the knife had come from. Despite her clear anger, she still looked rather calm.

"You should have just drunk the water," she said plainly. "At least then you wouldn't have suffered."

As she said this, the dozen or so people who had been attending to the water had begun to walk in our direction, stopping as they reached Stela. They had an empty look in their eyes, as though there weren't anyone behind them.

"But now," Stela continued, a light purple glare emanating from her eyes. "This will be long, and painful."

She held out her arm, pointing towards us with an outstretched finger. "Get them."

As soon as the words left her mouth, the surrounding people let out a loud, piercing screech. They lurched forward, stiffly running towards us with their arms outstretched. I spun around, grabbing Jalas by the arm and quickly ducking into the cover of the trees. The sounds of those people, if you could even call them that, wasn't far behind us.

We thrashed our way through the foliage, the razor leaves leaving us with scraps and cuts as I hauled J alas through. I shielded him from the worst of it, keeping him behind me as I forged the way. Despite us moving faster, the trees seemed to be thicker than they had been coming in, and it wasn't helping any. As we neared the other side, Tyra caught up, tearing her way through alongside us as the town began to appear.

I turned to her, slowing down slightly. "Stay calm and act casual," I said to her. "The rest of the town might not know anything is wrong yet."

She nodded to me as we emerged from the trees, our run turning to a brisk walk as we began to walk away from the center. The townsfolk still looked as they had before we had entered, with just a few glances coming our way, though there was no chance that we would stick around to see if that would change.

"That way," J alas said, pointing to a path that looked to circumnavigate around the center ring of trees.

"This way will get us out of town faster," I said, pointing straight ahead, back the way we had come in.

"Just follow along," he replied in a hushed tone, now taking the lead, and walking the way he had pointed. "It'll be impossible to sneak around this place later once they find us out, and I'd rather go in the direction we want to be going. Now quit asking questions and move!"

We hadn't gotten far along the road before the loud sound of crashing foliage could be heard. Sure enough, I looked back to see the group of people from before, followed by Stela, bursting through the tree line. Several of the other townsfolk looked over to them, with Stela taking an authoritative stance.

She seemed to close her eyes for a moment, before yelling out in a firm voice, "To me my servants!"

With that, the townsfolk who hadn't been a part of the original group began to coverage on her, with some of the normal looking people beginning to chant, and that was all I needed to see. Turning back in front of me, I picked up the pace, going to a near sprint, which was quickly matched by Tyra. As soon as it was clear that J alas couldn't keep the pace, I picked him up and slung him over my shoulder as we left the growing group of...people behind us.

Houses and trees whipped past us as we rounded the outer circle of the oasis and neared the opposite side, sweat pouring down my face as I was reminded how long we had gone without water. Stela's group had been slow to chase, perhaps due to its size, and we hadn't seen any hint of them since we had begun running. If we were lucky, we would be able to get out of town without any trouble. Unfortunately, as we reached our destination, any hope of a quick exit was dashed by who stood before us.

Blocking the main road stood Briar, his original wide smile now replaced with an uncompromising scowl. He was flanked by several townsfolk; not as many as had been with Stela, but still enough to outnumber us. He stepped forward, lobbing some spit onto the ground as he did.

“Well, well, just look at you lot,” he said coldly. “I should have known Stela wouldn’t be able to handle you, especially one of his powers.”

He pointed at Jalas, who I still had slung over my shoulder.

“What are you talking about?” replied Tyra.

Briar shook his head. “Doesn’t matter either way,” he said. “Just like always, I’m stuck cleaning up her mistakes. Soon enough, you won’t remember why you even came out here.”

With that, Briar raised his hand, pointing at us. “Get them!”

The townsfolk, at least 6 of them, charged towards us. Several of them were armed with various tools and knives, some with nothing at all. However, they all charged with a certain ferocity that would scare even the most hardened soldier. Their stiff limbs were outstretched in unnatural ways, twisted and bent to almost look broken. They seemed unable to smoothly run, instead resorting to a rough shambling as their knees spasmed awkwardly. It all combined to make a truly disturbing sight.

I placed Jalas down behind me, reaching for my sword before reconsidering. These people were clearly being controlled by some Dausugan power. They had no say in this, likely just travelers like us before this fate had befallen them. It wouldn’t be right to just cut them down. Though even if we were able to dispatch them without killing them, would we even be able to get them back to normal? Would they even be alive?

In the end, my decision was made for me. As the first of the townsfolk approached, Tyra lunged forward, thrusting her spear directly through their stomach before slicing it across their abdomen. Blood spurted out of them, their guts laying out along the pole of the spear. They stopped for a moment, the shock of the impact shaking their body as Tyra pulled her spear away, only for them to continue to shamble forward. A look of shock crossed Tyra’s face as she went in for a second thrust. That was all I was able to see before I was beset by several others.

With two of the townsfolk mere feet away from me, I drew my sword, slashing the nearest to me across their chest. At the very least I could try and aim to not kill them. The impact whipped them to the side, putting them off balance and allowing me to put them to the ground with a hit from the butt of my sword, a cloud of sand erupting as they made impact. The other person seemed unaffected by what had happened to his compatriot, continuing to charge me as the first one tried to get back to their feet.

Taking a wider stance, I held my sword at my side as they approached. When they got within striking range, I slashed upward, making contact with their armpit and slicing clear through their arm. The impact sent them reeling back as their arm fell to the ground, allowing for me to kick them back from me. They went stumbling, however despite their lost limb, they righted themselves and came lunging forward. They were joined by the first attacker I had slashed, who was back on their feet despite heavy bleeding from their chest, along with another of the townsfolk making for three people charging at me.

As they grew closer, I knew that any hope of keeping them alive was lost, short of us running away from the battle. As the one I had first slashed stepped forward, a sickle held in their outstretched hand, I thrust my blade forward. Their arm stopped mid-swing as it pierced straight through their

heart. They barely had a chance to cough up any blood before I had removed my blade and they slumped to the ground. I could have sworn that I saw a look of terror in their eyes before they fell.

Across from me, I could see Briar, looking almost bored with the whole situation, begin to chant something as the other two charged me. The first one, who had already lost an arm, was easily managed with a matching swing to their leg. Swinging down, it offered little resistance as I cut through their thigh, the man buckling as he once again fell to the ground. He flayed for a moment, before collapsing entirely. It was a sickening sight; one I wish I hadn't created.

The last one, a woman holding a butcher's knife, lunged as the man fell. Swinging the cleaver downward toward my head, I sidestepped, causing her to stumble forward. As she did, I slashed downward, opening up the back of her neck. She fell to the ground without even a twitch of movement after she landed.

Breathing heavily, I whipped around to look at my surroundings. J alas looked to be unharmed, a familiar dagger in his hand as he plunged it into a body lying on the ground. Tyra looked to be worse off, a gash visible on her left arm, likely created from one of several weapons laying on the ground. Despite this, several bodies laid near her, and she had begun to charge at Briar, who had started to chant familiar sounding words.

"Don't you dare!" she cried out, readying to thrust her spear towards him.

Looking up, Briar stopped chanting for a moment, instead lifting his palm up towards Tyra. A purple mist began to form and swirl, moving faster and faster before shooting out directly at her. Despite her best efforts to avoid it, she was too close and the swirling mass too fast, the purple bolt hitting her directly in the arm. The force of the impact sent her flying back, leaving her dazed and on her back as she cried out.

An annoyed look in his eye, Briar formed another ball of swirling energy aimed directly at Tyra.

"That is enough, worm," he practically spat out.

He pulled his arm back to send the deadly energy at her, but as he did a bellowing cry of "*Losa Um!*" screeched across the battlefield, and whatever mists and energies made up Briar's attack dissipated.

Everyone seemed to be in shock, turning to see the origin of the cry. We all looked at J alas, arm outstretched and fingertips smoking, a determined look in his eye.

Briar on the other hand looked nothing but annoyed.

"Such impudence!" he yelled out. "And to think, that we would have once called you an ally, and yet you turn your powers against us so easily. I won't allow it to stand."

I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but I wasn't about to miss an opportunity. Not wasting another moment, I charged in, my sword out in front. Briar was caught off guard by the sudden rush, but regardless purple mist once again filled his palm. I was prepared. Ducking down low, I could hear the swirling ball of energy hiss as it passed over me. Now only mere feet from Briar, I raised my sword, his face a look of gritted anger as he went to pull something from behind him. Before he could have the chance, I swung down, my sword connecting with his collarbone and getting stuck in his neck.

He was gasping and spurting blood as he went down, the gasping only stopping from the impact when he hit the ground. I quickly unlogged my sword from him before taking another swing at his head. After what happened in Hatre, I wasn't going to leave this to chance. Soon enough, the choking sounds had ceased as Briar laid in a growing mass of red sand.

Sheathing my sword, I attempted to catch my breath. Before I could, J alas was already at my side, tugging on my sleeve.

"Come," he said. "We're not out of danger yet."

Sure enough as he spoke, the bodies around us began to shake. The purple mist had returned, this time swirling through the corpses of those we had slain. Those who laid upright, it could be seen that their eyes had begun to glow a dark shade, not unlike the skeletons of Hatre.

I knew what was coming, and if we didn't leave right then we would be overwhelmed. Taking J alas's lead, we began to run down the main road and out of the town. Tyra was already ahead of us, though we soon caught up as she was running with a limp and holding her left arm. She barely acknowledged us as we ran up alongside her, her teeth gritted, and her eyes locked forward in a determined stare.

It was clear that we had to get out of there before more people arrived, and Tyra would slow us down. Letting J alas continue forward, I moved over to her, quickly grabbing hold of her and slinging her over my shoulder. I didn't bother to waste time asking her, I knew she would have likely refused if I had. Indeed, she initially let out a surprised yelp followed by a few cries to set her down, though she soon quieted down once it was clear I wasn't listening to her. The only thing on my mind was getting out of the city.

Luckily, we finally caught a break and didn't run into any more people as we escaped from the town. They must have been summoned by the other cultists to their sides. I was nearly out of breath as we passed the last of the outskirt buildings, though I didn't dare stop running until we had crested the top of a hill overlooking the town. With that cursed place out of sight, I dropped Tyra into the sand, quickly slumping over next to her.

As a laid down, I could hear J alas saying something in the distance, something spoken shakily, though I couldn't make it out. Soon enough, he appeared over me with a grim face, holding a water skin out towards me.

"Here," he said. "Drink. Then we need to go."

I didn't question him as I grabbed the skin and took a few long gulps from it. I could feel instant relief as the sand and dryness of my mouth was driven away. After letting out a long sigh, I sat up, seeing that J alas had given some water to Tyra as well. Before I could say anything, he grabbed the water from me and started walking off, away from the town.

He turned around towards us. "We'll need to get some distance between us and them in case they try to come after us," he said.

With that, he continued to walk off into the desert hills. Tyra stood up, giving him a long, hard look before finally following him. For the first time, I was the last one, taking up the rear, though I didn't

feel all that good about it. All I could think about was what Briar had said, and getting as far from that town as possible.

And so we fled, away from the cursed oasis, away from the cultists, left only to wonder who it was we had really been traveling with.

Ch 9

War and Unrest: A History of the Resurgence

By Vondor Rith

The sacking and near destruction of Dyrlega alone wasn't cause enough for the Resurgence; it merely signaled to the hiding Dausugan cultists that the opportunity they had been looking for had arrived. While the nobles and clergy had been squabbling over petty matters in the decades prior, cultists planned and prepared, gathering supplies and followers in preparation for their return. 200 years of forcible exile makes for a determined people, and they were quick to act.

The first years of the Resurgence were the bloodiest thus far. Many small towns in the east, such as Sotas and Tilgri, were either captured or destroyed within the first months of fighting. Even cities such as Hatre have fallen despite favorable odds. Few know what has truly happened to these places, as many scouts and trekkers have gone to never return. It is only by the positioning of The Giltre and the resolve of the western cities that the whole nation hasn't been overrun.

Fighting has now grinded to a halt, both sides entrenched in the east and west respectively. The deep snows of the north have kept both sides at bay, while the forces of Corzen in the south have held fast against any advance. It is uncertain when, if ever, this conflict will pass, and the nation will become whole once more.

Much of this bloodshed can be put down to the cruelty of the Dausugan cultists, but that doesn't mean the Forth Assembly is without fault. It has been 10 years since the dissolution of the Third Assembly, but without proper leadership, the Fourth will never be able to reclaim order. Too many of their own rank have jumped ship, and they have little respect outside the northwestern regions. If they wish to regain order, it may be time to rearrange the decaying bureaucracy that has guided the Assemblies for the past thousand years.

Without reform, I fear that we will never again see peace in our time, nor will our descendants.

We traveled for the rest of the day without saying much or taking any rest. Despite our injuries, we were practically racing across the desert, wanting to put as much distance between us and the Oasis

as possible. I personally didn't think that the cultists would leave the safety of their town to go after three people, but there was no sense in taking chances.

Jalas and myself had fared well enough considering the opposition, mere scratches and nicks that did little but sting like a mite's bite. It was Tyra that I was worried about. Whatever the energy was that struck her had sapped near all her strength, leaving a swaying form as she fumbled alongside us. Her arm, while not looking broken or bleeding, still hung limp at her side, a small spider webbing of pulsing purple scars weaving outward from the blast. She thankfully didn't argue when I finally offered to help support her.

The water we had managed to obtain had put the wind back beneath our feet, letting us move unimpeded until the sun began to dip below the dunes in an orange haze. In the dimming light, we had managed to spot a rocky outcrop piercing through the sands, a small formation carved into its side. Jalas wanted to continue on, away from those crazed Devouts, but one look at Tyra's arm convinced him otherwise. Weary from the day's events, we readily made camp; the sharp cold that was beginning to set in convinced us to light one of the few fires our supplies allotted us.

I watched the flames crackle and twist to life, the odd flame licking slightly higher than the rest. While I sat there feeding the fire, I took the occasional look over at Jalas, puzzling the day's events over. We hadn't spoken about it, we hadn't the chance to, but that only made me think harder. I didn't know much about Devouts or their power, but it was clear to me that what Jalas had done was something special. It was clear that he held some kind of devotional power, though to what extent I had no idea, for I had little learning on such topics. But I did know there was something he was holding back, and while I might have had an idea about what that was, it wasn't clear why.

What reason would he have for hiding such things, after everything we've been through, I thought. He had already earned my trust, what left was there? There are things, secret things, that no one tells another if they can help it, but this is different. If he has been holding back who he truly is, then there was no telling what other truths lay below the surface.

While I sat thinking, Jalas was busy looking through his pack, making the appearance as though it were just an ordinary evening on the road making camp. Meanwhile, Tyra was tying down a piece of canvas to act as a buffer from the icy wind, each action eliciting a grunt as she fought against her weak arm. While it had recovered slightly, I could see the grimace in her eye each time she used it. In between knots, she would look over her shoulder for a moment to squint her eyes at us before returning to her work.

As she was about halfway through setting up the barrier, she finally said something to me on one of her glances.

"Oi, you want to help me out over here?" she asked. "Don't want to be at this all night."

I shrugged and headed over; the faster the work was finished the less time I would have to sit babying the flames. That, and I was still concerned for Tyra's state; her arm still glowed with a faint purple, all the more obvious in the growing dark. I walked up next to her, kneeling in the soft sand and holding the canvas firm while she continued to tie it down. We worked in silence, at least for a time, Tyra giving Jalas a few glances before speaking to me in a lowered voice.

"So hey," she said. "I wanted to ask you someth'n."

I looked up at her, merely giving her a curious look and waiting for her to continue. I had a feeling about what she was going to ask.

"How long have you known the old man over there?" she finally asked.

"Not much longer than you," I replied with a grunt as I held the canvas against a particularly strong gust. "I only met him a day before coming into Corzen, somewhere near the border of Bragur."

She didn't seem to like that answer, a frown crossing her face as she forcibly tightened a knot.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

Tyra took another glance over her shoulder before responding. "I'm not sure," she responded. "But something isn't quite sitting right with me, about...all of this. You feel it too, yeah?"

"You mean with what happened at the Oasis," I replied. "The power that he showed."

She gave me a nod. "That, but something more. I just got this feeling about the old man, and it ain't going away till I know a few things for certain. I just want to know you'll have my back is all."

While I still didn't fully trust Tyra, I did agree with her. I was craving for more information, and if that's what Tyra wanted too, I wouldn't argue. I gave her a nod, receiving the same gesture in kind. With that we finished securing the canvas, a ramshackled if not acceptable barrier from the biting wind, and walked back over to the warmth of the fire.

As we sat down, J alas swung around to face us, tattered map in hand. He started talking about the route we would be taking, marching through the rest of the Wastes and climbing the rocky cliffs that sprung up like a bowel encasing them, though I didn't pay much attention to his words. As he spoke, I stole glances over at Tyra, who returned the look to me. As J alas continued to talk, Tyra spoke up, interrupting something about snowfalls in the north, as she leaned in towards the flames.

"That sounds well and good and all," she said, some light dropping from J alas's face. "But I think that we have a few other things to talk about before we think about the road ahead."

"About what happened at the Oasis," he said, looking straight at her. "That's the matter you wish to speak on, am I not correct in saying?"

Tyra looked to be taken aback by his forwardness, eliciting a small sigh from the old man.

"Don't act so surprised, you've been giving me all sorts of looks since we left," he continued. "And at my age you get to know when you're being talked about. So, you may as well ask me whatever is troubling your mind."

Tyra looked over to me, the best I could manage being a shrug and an expression of bewilderment at the situation before she turned back to J alas. The shadows of the fire danced on her face as the breeze blew across us, her gaze now settled in an uncompromising stare.

"Back when that cultist was about to cast something at me," she finally said. "You said something, some incantation, whatever you call it. Am I wrong to think the obvious?"

"It would seem whatever you mean is only obvious to you," replied Jalas. "Speak what you mean rather than assume."

"You know damn well what I mean," said Tyra, irate. "You spoke those garbled words and the energy fizzled out of that cultist's palm. I haven't lived long enough to see Devouts, real Devouts, but I know that only a Devout could pull something like that."

What truth that statement had, I didn't know. All I knew was that the implications of such a thing being true were massive; a full-fledged Devout in our midst. I was briefly reminded of Samson, and of his suspicions, one's that never truly left me. I quickly turned to Jalas, looking to see his response, but he was stone-faced, not an emotion showing outside a look of indifference.

"You assume much," he said. "Which falls in line with how little you know of the world and its workings. Devouts are not the only ones who hold power in this world."

"I may not be as well traveled as you," replied Tyra, her voice raising. "But I know enough, enough to know that you're trying to avoid talking about it with your crafted words."

"I'm more than willing to discuss it," said Jalas. "But I can already tell you are stuck in your own line of reasoning and nothing will pull you from it."

"Spoken like a man with secrets to hide," she replied. "Spoken like someone who isn't who they say they are, right?"

Not waiting for an answer, Tyra continued pressing, her look growing ever fiercer. "So, I think the real question here isn't if you're a Devout, but really, which kind? Cause I'm starting to think I know which god it is you really follow."

Jalas suddenly shot up as briskly as the surrounding winds, pointing a scraggly finger at her. "I'm no follower of Dausuga!" he yelled, a new, ragged, sound emanating from him. "I have no part in the wickedness!"

"Is that so?" she yelled back, standing to match him. "Then how do you explain what happened? By the grace of Smindar, that one said you had been an ally of theirs! So, what left do you have to hide?!"

To that Jalas said nothing, merely standing there and staring like a centuries old statue. Then with a sigh, the simmering anger inside him vanished, and he sat back down, defeated. He looked resigned to the situation in which he had been placed, as though he were carrying some great burden, one which had only grown over time.

"I suppose we are past the point," Jalas said wistfully. "That you'll take me at my word that I mean no harm to befall you and to leave it at that."

"You'd be right in think'n that," said Tyra as I nodded along.

"Very well," he replied, letting out another heavy breath. He motioned to Tyra to sit down, which she tentatively did, her eyes never leaving him. "The truth then."

"As I said, I'm no cultist," he said. "The path of Dausuga is treacherous and not the one that I walk."

"Then tell me, Devout," said Tyra, almost spitting the word at him. "Who is it that you follow?"

"If you claim me to be a Devout," he replied, shifting his gaze toward me. "Then you must have some idea of who I have devoted myself to for more than half my life? Who I have given every sacrifice for."

Before Tyra could respond, the words had already left my mouth, for I knew it with certainty. "Pekklar," I said. "God of Knowledge."

Jalas nodded. "Long ago, back in the time of the Third Assembly, I served as a Devout of Pekklar in the capital. Taken from my home at a young age, I was trained to be both a keeper of knowledge, and a securer of wisdom."

"It was with the start of the Resurgence that I was forced to leave and find myself again," he continued. "I was left with nothing, and I nearly lost my faith. It was only through the knowledge of others that I was able to return to my path, the one I walk now."

Both Tyra and I sat there, taking the information in. It certainly made sense to me, and I was angry that I hadn't seen it sooner. The way he carried himself, the way he spoke, in hindsight it all seemed so obvious. But if he truly was a Devout, that only raised more questions, questions that filled me with an uneasy dread.

While I stewed in my thoughts, Tyra continued with her line of questioning.

"How can I know you're telling the truth?" she asked. "After all, this could all be a ruse, and you really do hold some allegiance with those cultists."

"I would think standing and watching them die," he scoffed. "Would be proof enough that I didn't care for them. But if it's hard proof you are after, so be it."

Jalas closed his eyes for a moment, sitting as still as pine on a windless day. His stillness was broken as his hand shot out from him, his palm open and facing skyward, a whisper of some ancient tongue coming from his lips.

Suddenly his hand illuminated as a swirling ball of light appeared in his palm. It looked much like the energy I had seen used at the oasis, except this was in tones of yellow and white, the energy swooping and swirling in a very calm, listless way. Tyra almost stumbled off where she sat in shock, while I sat there, mesmerized in the same way a child might look at the licking flames of a fire.

It sat there, just hovering, not caring for the world around it as it sat in the air. Wondering how light could move so smoothly through the air. Then, just as it had appeared it vanished, leaving the area to be illuminated by the fire once more. Jalas pulled his hand back, letting out a deep breath.

I was the first to ask, "What was that?"

"A manipulation, of sorts," replied Jalas. "Knowledge is a powerful thing. Knowing the way in which the world works gives you powerful tools, and as a Devout of Pekklar, these tools are freely available to me."

"So defusing that energy..." I muttered.

“And knowing something was wrong with the water,” Tyra finished.

Jalas nodded. “The moment I sensed Stella through her disguise, I knew. I could see the poison which she had used,” he said. “If you had taken a sip of that water without it being purified, you would have suffered the same fate as those people at the oasis.”

So, it had been true, Jalas had saved us from a horrible fate. But I could help but wonder to what end. While Tyra processed what he had said, I continued where she had left off.

“Jalas,” I said. “Why are you out here, with us?”

Jalas shifted in his seat. “I’ve already told you my reasons.”

“Yes yes, for ‘knowledge,’” I replied. “But why with us? I’ve been in enough fights with you to see that you are fully able to take care of yourself, and that’s doubly true if you’re Devout.”

At this point Tyra had stopped musing to herself, now paying full attention to the conversation, her face brimming with realization.

“Which begs the question,” I continued. “Why come with us out here? If not for protection, then why get me out of jail, insist on traveling together? What benefit do you get from that?”

Jalas was silent, his eyes slowly shifting between the two of us. His expression was tired, looking consigned to something.

“Because our paths are linked,” he finally said. “It may not seem like it, but the webs of fate have brought us together. For years, I had thought that my path had stagnated, that I was resigned to carry on my work with no higher calling. But that has all changed.”

“Fate?” I scoffed. “That is the word of ill fated men, seeking some answer. There is no reason for our paths to have crossed.”

“And yet they have,” he replied. “The gods work in ways beyond our comprehension. It is only fitting that our fates are tied, and that my atonement should be to help you find your way.”

I truthfully had no idea what Jalas was talking about, his words meaning nothing. He spoke of such lofty things: fate, destiny. Yet he didn’t seem to mean any of it, dodging around the topic with such carefully plucked words. I was about to continue my line of questions, but Tyra suddenly butted in with her own.

“Atonement?” Tyra asked. “For what?”

“Old regrets,” he replied. “Choices made in the moment that should have been more carefully weighed. A life as long as mine has plenty of those.”

“Then you wouldn’t mind sharing some of them, would you,” said Tyra, demanding rather than asking.

Jalas sat silent for a moment, then another, pondering under Tyra’s watchful gaze.

"I've already spoken of my time spent after the Resurgence," he said, his gaze never meeting either of ours. "And the kind of state I was in. I was so...angry, so hate filled during that time. It made me blind to my own actions, the ways I hurt people."

My eyes were locked on Jalas, but I could also sense Tyra stirring to my side, though I paid her no mind for the moment. I could feel the weight in Jalas's words.

"Jalas," I said. "What did you do?"

Jalas took a last glance at Tyra before replying. "I was traveling in the East, debating whether I should stay in Larafell at all, when I was captured. I should have seen them, but I was blind."

"To who?" I asked.

"Cultists," he replied. "They saw me for what I was, a Devout of Pekklar. They debated what to do with me for a time, whether to kill or enslave me, before I decided to make a case for my life. I told them that I would serve their needs so long as I was used to make the Third Assembly suffer, for both them and I shared a common hatred for them. They readily agreed to my proposition."

Jalas paused. He no longer tried to hide the pain in his expressions, his face becoming ever smaller and tightened.

"At that point I could have ran," he continued. "Fled far away, away from Larafell, and continued on with my life. But there was a part of me that wanted, needed, revenge. In my rage, I could only see things as a means to an end, as a way to right the wrongs that had befallen myself."

"So when they asked for help in capturing Hatre, I agreed. I opened the gate for them, and could only stand and watch as the whole town burned."

The words had barely left Jalas's lips before Tyra had made her move. She lunged forward at him, nearly toppling into the fire as I held her back, careful to not yank on her damaged arm. She thrashed around in my grasp like a caged bear.

"You bastard!" she spat at him. "The people of Corzen trusted you! I trusted you! But you're the same as the rest of those filth!"

"It was the only option I had," Jalas whispered in reply.

"To work with cultists?!" yelled Tyra, nearly squirming away from me. "To watch people burn alive? That was your only option?"

Jalas suddenly stood; a new fire lit inside him. "The Third Assembly, those heretics, took everything from me!" he yelled. "And I was offered a choice, between wasting away the rest of my life or getting revenge. I choose the latter and have regretted it every day since I saw those buildings burn! Since all those people died..."

His anger had already left him as he returned to his seat, staring back at the fire. Tyra had stopped struggling, and I tentatively let her go despite the fury I could still see within her.

"I was so blinded by revenge," J alas continued. "That I couldn't see what I had become, an agent for a god I held in no regard. I've spent my time trying to make up for those mistakes. That is the path that I walk."

His words seemed to do little to calm Tyra. "I'm no supporter of the Assembly by any stretch, their kind are a spineless, corrupt lot," she said. "But to work with followers of Dausuga, a people who only wish to bring about our destruction? Such an act is irredeemable, no matter how long you've sought to right it. You ought to have burned in Hatre, like the rat you are."

With that Tyra stepped away from the group, letting herself get battered by the wind as she took her place outside the shelter. I turned back to J alas, who watched her for a moment before turning down to face the sand we stood on. I looked down at him for a moment, almost out of pity, before deciding to join Tyra. The sharpness of the wind hit me as I stepped out, sitting down next to her as the howling of the night blocked the rest of the world.

Nothing was said between us, for a time. We merely gazed out at the silver-lit dunes as they shifted and swayed, Tyra giving the occasional glance back to the safety of the fire. I'd never seen the ocean before, but I imagined that it looked something similar. A vast nothingness to which the only safety is what you've brought with you.

My mind was wrapped around the previous conversation, and to what J alas had said. I realized that, in the heat of the moment, J alas hadn't answered my question, at least not in any meaningful way. He sought atonement, forgiveness for his actions, though I failed to see how he could accomplish such a thing with us. Helping a fellow traveler certainly speaks to goodwill, but as Tyra had said, there is little one can do to repent after aiding genocide.

He had seemed genuinely regretful, at least to my eyes, though that did little to give me hope. If he had kept such things from us, there was no telling what else he could be hiding, how many masks he was truly wearing. What he really had planned once we landed in the capital.

The whole situation brought me back to my own journey, why I had decided to leave my home and to travel. How everything had become far beyond my own scope. I was no warrior, no leader, and yet I had been thrust into the fray without much warning of it all. Even if I found what I was after, it would be hard to go back to what once was. I looked over to Tyra, her hard stare still cast upon the desert.

"I was thinking about something you said, some time ago" I told her over the blustering wind. "How you said you don't have anywhere else to go. Well, I don't have much choice either."

Tyra gave me an inquisitive look, openly wondering where I was going. "Once this is all done," I said with a sigh. "I'm not sure what I'll be doing. I have no home to go back to, my village is all but deserted after the failed harvests. I don't have anything left besides this."

I paused, looking out at the shifting dunes. I could feel Tyra Looking at me.

"I'm sure you had other options," she said. "Gotten work, moved on. I know I could have. Why come out here all the way from Bragur? From what I've heard, it's much safer than here."

I kept looking out at the dunes. "This might be my only chance," I replied. "The longer I wait, the more likely that I lose any hope of finding what I'm looking for."

"And what is that?" she asked. "I know why the old man is out here, or... at least I thought I did. But I still don't know why you are."

I let out another sigh. At this point, I thought, I might as well tell her. I took out the golden necklace hidden by my cloak, a bit of moonlight shining off it, and held it up to her. "You see this?" I said, gesturing toward the ornate pendant. "It belonged to my mother, at least that's what I've been told. It's the last thing I have of hers."

Tyra didn't respond, only giving me a bothered look as her brow lowered.

"I never really knew her, though neither did my father," I continued with a slight chuckle. "He always talked about her like you would a summer breeze, pleasant to the touch but never able to catch. I'm out here trying to find out more about her. Who she was, what she did, before leaving for Bragur. I was hoping the capital kept archives and notes about such things."

I tucked the necklace back behind the layers of cloth that it resided in. "After she died, my father always wanted to try and figure it out, for my sake. I just want to finish what he started."

Tyra didn't reply, instead choosing to stand up, gesturing to me to do the same. We stood there for a moment, not doing much of anything, before she finally said something.

"I know that I haven't been the most agreeable person," she said. "But I'd like to help you see that through."

Her statement caught me a bit off guard. In all honesty, I had expected her to want to go her own way after the confrontation with Jalas.

"Don't act too surprised," she said, reading my expression. "Like you said, I don't have a lot of options left, especially since we are all the way out here. And let's be honest, you've had plenty of opportunities to leave me behind when you should've, and in a way I want to make up for before. I figure why not put a bit more trust in you and finish the way on."

I gave her a quick smile, though it quickly receded as I remembered the situation at hand.

"What about Jalas?" I asked. "What do we do about him?"

"Honestly, if it were a few weeks ago, he'd already be dead," she replied with a sigh. "But now I figure we just cut him loose. I won't work with the kind of filth who helped those cultists. I assume you feel the same."

I thought about it for a moment, but eventually gave a nod.

"I'm not as inclined to distrust him solely on that," I said. "But there is no telling what his true intentions are. There's no point in continuing to take such a risk with him."

"Good," she said, turning to go back to the shelter. "You do the talking, if I do I'll end up yelling again and nothing 'll get done."

With both of us on the same page, we walked back to the fire, leaving behind the sand and wind for sand and heat. J alas still had his face clasped between his hands and knees, his body entirely still. He lazily looked up as we approached.

I opened my mouth to say something to him, but I was quickly interrupted.

“There is no need to say anything,” said J alas. “I know that you wish to be rid of me.”

Both Tyra and I looked at each other, taken aback by his bluntness. J alas let out a sigh as he continued to speak.

“Eye of Pekklar,” he said, tapping his finger against his head. “There are no real secrets that can be kept from me, though even without it I could see such a thing coming. I’ll tell you now that it is a mistake.”

Regaining my composure, I responded, “There’s no way that we can trust you now. Not after everything that has been said.”

“And everything that hasn’t,” Tyra chimed in.

“You’re right, I should have told you those things sooner,” replied J alas. “But to part ways now, at the most dangerous leg of our journey? Such a decision is foolhardy.”

“You’ve already shown yourself to be plenty capable of yourself,” I replied. “As are we. You’ll be fine, just as we will.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. You may very well make it out of the east, but to not think past that makes you a fool,” replied J alas. “For there is more to this life than just strength and survival.”

As he spoke, he began to rummage through his pack, pulling out a torn, burned scroll. He tossed the tattered piece of cloth to me, the burned edges almost flaking away in my hands. I looked the parchment over, a sudden heaviness in my gut as I read its contents.

“Wha...what is this?” I stuttered.

“Census data,” he replied. “For one Holfa Prestur. I wouldn’t be surprised if you don’t recognize the first name, she likely changed it when she fled. It’s interesting that she kept the last name though, since that is the one that truly means something.”

I could only stare down at the document, my hand clenching around the edges.

“I...how did you get this?!” I almost yelled. “How long have you had it?”

“I’ve had it for a time,” he replied. “But once I met you I knew it was something special.”

I was ignoring him now, looking the document over, looking for any piece of information I could find. Aside from a name, age, and several miscellaneous tidbits, it was all too damaged to really gleam anything from it.

“Now, I’m sure you can make it to the capital, just the two of you,” he continued. “But do you really think you’ll be able to find any of the information you want without my help?”

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I could only stare at the charred edges of the cloth, a great anger burning within me as I imagined what it would have read.

"You must surely remember our deal," J alas continued. "That I would be your guide. The wilderness and ruins of this region are treacherous, but the nobles of Dyrlega? They'll eat you alive without me."

Tyra was looking at me now, having finally shifted her gaze away from J alas. She looked concerned.

"We may have a fault in trust at the moment, one I hope we can mend, even if it's not something I deserve. But until that time comes you must at least recognize the value of my presence, the mutual benefit of us staying as one. If there is one thing I know you recognize, it's--"

The words coming from his mouth landed on my ears like fire; I couldn't bear them a moment longer. I looked up at J alas, a low guttural growl escaping from me.

"You need to leave," I hissed out. "Now."

"Don't be so hasty," J alas began to say. "Calm yourself and --"

"There clearly is a difference between knowledge and wisdom," I said, cutting him off as I raised my voice. "For you clearly lack the latter! Now if you know what's good for you, you'll leave without another word."

J alas stared in my direction for a moment, looking both Tyra and I over with tired, disappointed eyes. Finally, he turned towards his pack, hoisting it over his shoulder with a grunt as it pried loose from the sand's grasp. As he left the safety of the shelter, he turned one last time as he stood on the edge of the yellow cast light.

"I'll leave, for now," he said. "But you'll soon find the mistake you have made. You shall be bare and desperate, calling for help, but it will, not, come."

With his final piece falling on ears that would not heed them, J alas set off, away from the shelter, away from the only light and warmth for miles. It wasn't long before he crested one of the many surrounding dunes, and he was completely lost from sight.

Despite losing sight of him, I could only stare off into the distance, my eyes burning. I was only vaguely aware that Tyra had walked up alongside me, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"I suppose you were right," she said bitterly. "His true intentions really are a secret."

The rest of the night went as it should, Tyra and I taking turns at watch to make sure that J alas wouldn't make his way back. I had a sneaking suspicion that we hadn't seen the last of him, he wasn't the type to just leave things be. We didn't talk much about what had happened, for there were no words left to say. Our only true interaction was when I was jostled awake to take my turn staring out at the swirling sands.

I was left alone with my thoughts, though even then I didn't think of much. Trying to think of J alas, why he had done the things he had done, only left me with more questions that I didn't want to try and answer. I would occasionally look down at the fragment of parchment he had given me, its singe

edges hiding anything useful, before stuffing it back in my cloak. I was left to stew in anger and confusion until the heat and the light of the fire died down, being replaced with the budding light of a new day.

We ate what breakfast we had, a few rations of dried meat, before collapsing the few pieces of the shelter we could take. As we did, Tyra finally spoke up, calling the old man a bastard and leaving it at that. Nothing else had to be said, no more words could express how either of us felt. We both knew, and after everything that had happened, that knowledge was enough to fill me with a little hope.

From there we followed the same route that we would have before, hiking our way out of the wastes and further into the north. We discussed the possibilities of trying a different way, lest the old man shadow our journey, but we had no real other options. The south held cultists, and any other direction besides north meant becoming a skeleton to be picked clean.

So we dragged on for another week, through the sand, through the heat, exhausting ourselves until the heat turned cold and the sands turned solid. Each night as we camped we talked, trying to distract ourselves from the hardships of life. Tyra shared stories of hunting in the woods, breaking up fights, nearly losing her eye on a friend's dare. I shared with her my old life, of plowing the fields, of the festivals we held and the songs we played. In a sense, despite the hardship of losing one we had once relied on, we had come to understand each other closer.

I almost felt relief as we neared the other end of the Wastes, but the great rim that separated the Wastes from the north was all that greeted us as we crested a final dune. With little choice, we approached the sloping cliff, the rocks rising high above the desert and lording over us. It was as though they were trying to keep us in, to separate us from the rest of the world. Undeterred, we marched up, unwavering, as we left the last pieces of sand behind, the solid rock taking us higher, further away from the pit that we had left.

The surface of the cliff turned from smooth to jagged as we climbed higher, the sandstone making way for a more familiar, mountainous stone. We trekked on higher, nearly crawling, every muscle in my body crying out to an unhearing mind. I would not yield, despite the terrain's best efforts. The cliff grew steeper still, the rocks nearly sheer, but we continued climbing, until the ground suddenly leveled out and the landscape before us lay bare.

The colors I had been accustomed to for weeks had left us, replaced with a dirty white that covered the area ahead of us and nearly blinded me as I crawled up from the cliff. As my eyes adjusted, I could see it for what it was, a new kind of desert made up of the cold and bleak. Looking up to my left, I could see that we had merely peaked at a lower point, a daunting mountain swaying high above us. Down to my right, a lightly packed forest stood still in the haunting absence of wind. In front of us, nothing but snow and rock.

Tyra started forward into this new region, but as she did I turned back, back at the waves of sand that crashed below us. I stared at it for a moment, taking in a last, longing look.

I thought about what Jalas had said. *'You won't find what you seek without me.'*

Shaking my head, I turned back to the white void of the mountains, running to catch up with Tyra as anger simmered within me. Try as I might, those words would haunt my every step.

Ch 10

Fear The Call of The North

By Lotsid

Fear the call of the north traveler. That siren call, that shrieking wail, it has no place in your heart, in your soul. For no matter the strength of the call, no matter its promises of wealth and plunder, you must resist. The north is a cruel mistress, her touch cold and her fury a harbinger of pain and death. No man can tame it, no man can claim it, so why throw your life away so eagerly to attempt what can't be done?

I've seen many men, young and old, meek and proud, travel the northern coast and venture inward to the snow fields to seek their prize. They can't name it, can't explain it, but they do as the call guides them. It sings to them so sweetly, pulls them from their senses, before taking them to never be seen again.

My brother, sweet brother, Tholik. Why did you have to play the fool and venture out so far? I warned you, how I warned you, not to stray off the path. We were but simple traders, and yet you could never be content with that life, not content with what was yours. So you followed that call, to find your prize and claim it as your own. How foolish, how brazen, how...selfish.

Fear the call traveler. Turn and never come back, lest you find your end as my brother has. Lest you find your end as I will.

The wind howled and whipped through the thin tree line, leaving no room for the fresh snow to grow on the pine needles. Such flimsy trees offered little protection from the elements either way. Rather, the snow was building up on our bodies, a new layer of snow being added as another was stripped off, each flake a reminder of the harsh cold.

We had been making our way through the northern reaches of Nyrst for the past few days, navigating the endless snowfields, rocky overhangs, and shieldless forests. Each day had brought more snow than the previous, leaving large depths of fresh powder to trudge through which hid any hazard. The map had shown the area being a fraction of the size that the Wastes had been, but that didn't mean it took any less time to navigate. If it wasn't for the cold icing it all over during the night, it would be nearly impossible to pass through.

This storm that had hit us had come unexpectedly. It only took a moment for the clear, crisp skies to be filled with churning clouds and for snow to begin pelting away at us. I would have pitched a shelter at the first sign of the weather turning, but the snow field which we crossed offered no suitable area to hide from the elements and seemed to stretch on in an endless ocean of white.

All of it made finding where we were going that much harder. We had settled on the same route that Jalas had wanted to take us, heading to the northern outpost of Durrin and buying passage from there to Ranadur, the major trading port of the west. The issue came from finding the outpost at all. Between the near whiteout we were facing and Durrin not being on my map, it was near impossible to tell how close we actually were. It was as if we were trying to find a specific mouse in a wheat field.

As we battled our way through this most recent storm, being pummeled on all sides by ice and snow, I couldn't help but think of something Jalas had said. Part of the reason we had avoided going to the west immediately was that the mountains would be near impossible to pass over during the winter, but how was this any more doable? Perhaps he knew something more, a certain pathway, or would have used some of his power to create heat from nothing.

It almost made me regret not letting him stay, but I immediately forced down any such thoughts. Even after all we had been through, his actions spoke louder than any tale he could weave, and it left me simmering. That I was blind to his own agenda, whatever it is that may be, only made me feel the fool. I knew that any further dealings with him would come at some cost, eventually. Though those thoughts didn't do much to keep me warm.

I was broken from my thoughts as I heard Tyra shouting over the wind. Despite walking nearly next to each other, we could barely make ourselves heard. I looked at her snow covered form, ice starting to form at the edges of her hair, to see her pointing off at what looked like a drop in the distance.

"Over there," she yelled. "Maybe shelter?"

I followed where she pointed, squinting through the blustering flakes that surrounded us as I looked for what she meant. I couldn't see anything other than a sharp drop - or what could have been a hill or snow dune for all we knew - but perhaps we would be able to see something from there? I gave her a nod and immediately made a line for the spot, desperate to get relief from the weather.

We marched forward, the wind growing stronger the closer we got to the apex, until it was nearly pushing us onto our backs. Battling on, we finally reached the edge, trying our best to look out through the snow. At the very least, I could tell that the spot had indeed been a cliff, and a very sheer one at that. It dived down 50 feet before it was lost in the flakes. If the wind hadn't been pushing us away from it, I would have been scared of plummeting over.

Of the wind, I could barely hear anything else, the force so strong that my ears were filled with the howl of a thousand leaves being torn off their branches. But there was another sound, one of a force with even more power behind it. I could hear water, not that of rain pattering or rivers trickling, but that of waves crashing against the rocks. That of an angry, powerful mass seeking to engulf even the tallest of peaks. I could hear the ocean, in all its rage, battering the coast below us.

I grew alive with a bit of hope, looking around despite the whiteout. While Durrin wasn't on my map, I at the very least knew that it had to be on the coast, how else were we to sail out of it? I gazed down what I thought to be the coast line, looking for any indication of civilization, when Tyra shook my shoulder, pointing outward into the pale void.

At first, I couldn't see anything, not in a storm so fierce. But then, as though a needle were poking through the cloth, I could see a thin dot of light breaking through. It glowed dim, a sickly pale

yellow, but it was there, hanging below the height of our cliff somewhere down the coast. It filled me with enough warmth to kick off the cold that had been clutching at me, and I started to carefully make my way along the edge of the cliff towards it, with Tyra shuffling along after me.

It was slow going, the cliffside proving unstable and rugged, bits and pieces of snow and rock careening over the side at a wrong step. In my haste, I would have stumbled down the cliffside myself if Tyra hadn't caught me, pulling me back as a large chunk of rock tumbled out of sight.

Tyra was one of the few things that I was still thankful to J alas for. He had been able to see past things neither of us were willing to, and now we were better for it. His departure had only strengthened the idea that I didn't wish to travel alone.

As we grew closer, the storm seemed to let up, the snow becoming less thick and the wind blowing less readily. I could actually look out and see the ocean below us, the waves climbing up 30 feet as they crashed against the rock below. Putting my eyes onto the light, I could make out several fainter ones dotting what looked to be a fort, the outpost for sure. It looked as though the cliff would slop down right toward it, curving along the coastline.

With the snow now longer taking up as much of the sky as before, I could also see what had caused the storm to let up. Right next us, likely no more than a few dozen paces from the cliffside, was an enormous outcropping of rock that pillared into the sky. It must have been the base of a mountain, as the upper reaches of it were lost high above in the clouds. It easily blocked the wind and snow that had been pelting us to that point, acting as a giant shield from the outward winds.

The clearer weather that the mountain allowed also let me see it in greater detail. The side that was facing us was beyond sheer, reaching out over us before continuing its climb upward. The side of it was littered with caves and crevices, dark little pits that marked an otherwise gray surface, though they were too high up to really see anything. For a moment though, through the snow, I thought I could see something, a flicker of movement, a shuffling of snow. I shook my head and strained my eyes once more to find nothing there.

As the cliff curved to match the coastline, we slowly drew away from the mountain and towards the fort, though the hefty cliffs still acted as a shield. The cold was still nearly unbearable, each step forward becoming ever more stiff, a numbing pain creeping up from my toes to my shins. I'd never felt such cold in my entire life, not even in the deepest winters of Bragur. But warmth was nearly within reach.

The blistering wind had finally let down to a cold breeze, the sounds of the ocean ever more prominent as they raged down below. But with the wind gone, I could hear another sound, that of a faint flapping, coming from somewhere above us. I looked up, but was met by only clouds and the face of the mountain, not a thing in sight.

Wearily, I turned to carry on, but my vision suddenly went dark as I was tackled headfirst into the snow. I pushed myself up, the pressure that had been on my back going away as Tyra rolled off me to my side. I didn't bother asking her anything, instead choosing to look around wildly for any sort of threat. I didn't have to look long, as a terrible hissing screech pierced the air before a pair of talons came diving out of the sky toward us.

I dived out of the way, the ends of the talons nearly grazing me as our attacker soared back up above us. I quickly got to my feet, pulling my sword as I trained myself onto the threat. Circling above us, it was too large to be a bird, but not so large as to be something more noticeable. I nearly lost it as its white, silvery feathers blended in with the clouds above. It wasn't until I caught a glimpse of its upper body that I knew what it was.

"A demantas!" I yelled.

The creature was larger than it had seemed merely looking at pictures of it; were it to stand next to me without attacking, it would surely stand a good head above me if not more. Its talons were as long as the sharpest butcher knives, and the few fangs I could see when it opened its mouth weren't much smaller.

Then of course there was its body. Its legs were that of a regular bird, scaly and taloned at the end. The upper body however looked nearly like that of any normal person, minus the wings sprouting from its elbows, making the creature look all the more unsettling as it circled over us.

"I should have figured," replied Tyra, standing firm alongside me. "I've heard of diamond wings, fierce little garmurs."

The demantas, or diamond wing as Tyra called it, didn't give us much time to gain our footing, as it let out another horrible screech before dive bombing straight at us. As it pierced through the air, it opened its steel filled mouth, each fang glistening as it pulled its head back and hucked a glistening mass right at us. The mass was almost indescribable, dancing and shimmering in all manner of color and shape as it fell towards us.

I dove to my left, but I wasn't quite quick enough as the crystalline goo had connected with my right hand, oozing over it as well as the hilt of my sword. Kneeling up, I sliced at the demantas as it dove at me, my sword connecting with its underside. While the demantas was brushed to the side, the slice seemed to do very little as the creature merely flew it off as it began to circle back. While it made for its next attack, I went to work on the goo that held my hand. Despite my efforts, the strange material held fast, forcing my hand to grip around my sword. At the very least I wouldn't be dropping it.

Tyra thrust her spear at the creature as it came back in for another pass at us, causing it to let out a screech as it climbed back up above us. I could see Tyra grimace at the action, her arm still hindered. I kept a close watch on it as it circled, waiting for when it would dive at us again, but before it did I could see a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye. I dove forward just in time as the talons of a second demantas barely missed piercing my chest.

I rolled onto my back, only to see a third demantas slicing a talon across Tyra's head, sending her down into the snow and staining it an awful shade of red. I jumped to my feet, swinging around only to see that these two new creature's had joined their sister in circling above.

There was no hope for the fight, one demantas had been difficult to handle alone, three was infeasible. I pulled Tyra to her feet, and quickly yelled at her to run for the fort.

She nodded as blood dribbled down her brow, and we broke out sprinting as fast as we could down the slopes of the cliff towards the now bright lights of the fort. There was no fighting these monsters, not in this weather and not when we were outnumbered; the fort was our best hope. We

crashed our way through the snow, dodging rocks and fumbling through drifts, mad dashing like we had back at the oasis. However, any hope that the diamond wings wouldn't follow us were quickly dashed as several loud screeches could be heard over the wind alongside several retching sounds.

I turned, slashing at a glob that had been launched at us. As my sword connected, it splattered the material all over me, sticking to me wherever it landed. I fumbled, slashing at one of the creatures that had swooped in at me, only for another shot to connect with my chest, sending me down to the ground. The wind was knocked from me, and as I tried to rise two more globs hit my arms and acted as webbing, pinning me to the ground.

A demantas touched down over me, its talons threatening to pierce my arms as it let out a horrible hissing as it bared its fangs. Its wings were extended as though it were ready to take flight once more, but I knew that it wouldn't be going anywhere fast as it eyed me. Somewhere behind me I could hear the sounds of Tyra fighting off the other two, and while I couldn't see her it seemed as though she were on her last legs as well, her ragged breathing and pained cries making it evident.

I looked at the beast lording over me, the fight resurging within me as its fangs grew closer. Any struggle only tightened its talons around me and the goo still held me fast, but I couldn't die here without a fight. After everything that had happened, I wouldn't die on an unnamed cliff on foreign soil to a random beast. I continued to struggle as the demantas flung its head forward, its fangs aimed squarely at my neck. In a way I knew it was pointless, and while part of me fought, the other part waited for the inevitable strike.

But that strike never came. Instead, all I saw was a flash of movement strike across the demantas, the creature letting out a pained cry as it slammed into the snow next to me. I looked over to see the demantas rising, the pressure being taken off my limbs as it staggered backwards, blood dripping from its forehead. It let out another cry before taking off, narrowly dodging an arrow that flew straight through where it had been standing.

With the demantas now gone, I renewed my efforts, finally breaking the webbing around my arms from the ground. I scrambled to my feet the best I could, the webbing still restricting my movement in places, and turned to where the arrow had come from. Immediately through the snow, I could see maybe 5 or 6 people, all dressed the part of soldiers. Each of them were wearing varying degrees of armor, some light and some heavy, all of them having their weapons drawn. Among them, several wielded bows, all of them already notched with arrows.

From the group, a call came out, a woman's voice whose owner I couldn't see, who cried, "Drive them off!"

With that, those who had swords or spears ran towards us, weapons raised, while the archers let loose their arrows and quickly grabbed for new ones. I turned as I watched the arrows soar toward their targets, all three of the creatures now darting around overhead as they dodged the arrows that sailed by. Before long, whether it had been through skill or luck, an arrow hit its mark, embedding itself in the shoulder of one of the creatures. It let out a pained cry before swooping down, landing a short distance from us.

As the soldiers ran past me towards the demantas, I still felt I had some fight left and moved to follow, but a hand clamped down on me after just a few steps. Swinging around, I was face to face with

one of the soldiers, a woman who stood at roughly my own height. Unlike the others, she looked rather calm, giving off an air of assurance despite the situation at hand.

“Whoa there,” she said, holding up her other hand defensively. “You may not feel it but you’re in some rough shape, friend. Look about ready to drop in the snow.”

I tried to say something, but I couldn’t find my voice. The women helped me stand fully, before pointing towards the fort.

“You just focus on getting off the field and we’ll take it from here. Einar over there will escort you to the fort.”

I looked past her to see another soldier standing with Tyra, trying fruitlessly to help chip off the webbing that had clung to her arm. It didn’t help that Tyra kept yelling and pulling away from him, despite having little strength to do so. Looking at her seemed to remind my body how spent it truly was, and I could feel myself starting to slip away.

I turned back to the soldier with me, the only thing that I could think to say being, “Thank you.”

She gave me a slight smile, giving me a nod before running in to join the other soldiers in the fight. Taking her cue, I hobbled the opposite way toward Tyra, who had stood up and was beginning to walk forward despite the soldier's protests.

Fighting against my own fatigue, I bent down as I reached her, letting her arm wrap around my back as I took on most of her weight. She seemed to let out a few more token protests before her injuries finally caught up with her, and she went along with it without any more trouble. Alongside the soldier, Einar, we carried her away from the battlefield, shrieking cries and grinding metal on the wind, towards the light of the outpost.

The sounds of the battle soon faded into the background, and before long we were upon the walls of the outpost. Now that we were finally up close to it, I could finally give it a good look. Unlike the cities and towns we had passed through, the wall was made of large wooden posts that were sharpened into a point at the top. It looked quickly made, yet also sturdy, with guards posts rising above both sides of the entrance.

We passed through the wall, the guards waving us through with Einar escorting us, and we were brought into the heart of the camp, where I was taken aback by the scale of the place. Perhaps it had been the snow obstructing my view, but the outpost had looked much smaller from a distance than it was in person.

The wall we had entered through stretched what must be a hundred paces to either side of us, stopping only when they met the cliffs that surrounded the camp. The buildings were densely packed, with little more than a pebble’s width between some of them. Most looked to be living quarters, with soldiers milling about them or moving supplies around, but there was also a smithy, an armory, and several training grounds scattered about the place.

It would have been a sight, all those soldiers moving about the way they did, had I not been so weary. In my addled haze, a brief thought came to me; it hadn’t occurred to me that Durrin might very

well be a military outpost, but that seemed to be the case. I grew concerned, if for a moment, if there would be passage out of the fort afterall.

I didn't ponder it long, as Einar motioned for us to follow. We walked around the outpost, darting around soldiers and the odd merchant, moving towards the cliffside facing the east. As we walked closer, I could see that the outpost was situated right in the middle of a crescent-shaped bay, the cliffs curving outward away from us. We were soon walking along the cliffside, and looking down I could see stairs leading to a dock far below, the waves battering up against it.

It was a curious if not frightening sight, the roaring ocean below. Assuming that we would be granted passage, it would be my first time sailing on such vast waters. The thought of being trapped in the churning depths of it didn't do much to put me at ease.

I took my eyes away from the ocean and back to the camp. We had gathered a few sets of wandering eyes, soldiers with nothing better to do than watch the beaten and weary trudge about, wondering if they might face something similar. I wondered if Tyra could relate to such a thought.

Looking back ahead of us, I could see what I assumed to be our destination, a larger building than the rest, this being one of the few with a stone foundation and a second floor to it. It both overlooked the cliffside as well as the rest of the camp, casting an imposing presence over us. Two guards stood watch at the entrance, but after talking with them a moment, Einar led us past them inside the hall.

The moment we stepped in, I was immediately greeted by a warmth I didn't realize I had needed until that moment. Right ahead of us was a raging fire that finally seemed to pierce the chill that had set into my bones. In front of the fire sat a large table that was home to many different parchments and several men arguing over one thing or another, attendants taking and bringing scrolls to them. The whole room was a bustle of activity.

We were quickly taken from the crowds of the main room, heading off through several doors and hallways which were stuffed with supplies. After a few minutes of squeezing our way through, we finally arrived in a smaller side room. It contained two beds, which took up most of the space of the room, and not much else. Einar and I set Tyra down on one of the two beds, and I quickly took a long needed seat on the other.

Turning back towards the door, Einar said to us, "Make yourselves comfortable, the captain will talk with you once she gets back."

He went to leave, before stopping himself in the middle of the doorway. "Oh, and I'll send someone in to patch you up, maybe get that crystal off you."

With that he closed the door behind him, and we were left alone to sit in the room. Even though we were promised a healer of some kind, I went to work myself patching the both of us up. With my hand still glued to my sword, it was cumbersome work as we tried our best to chisel the material off ourselves. However it held fast and felt as though we were chipping at solid stone, with only a few flakes coming off..

After a few more minutes of tiresome work, we gave up on it, choosing instead to wait for whoever it was they would send. Tyra chose to collapse, while I stayed sat up; the beds were just about as comfortable as a bedroll either way.

“Well, we made it,” I finally said.

“Just barely,” Tyra replied, her voice weary and quiet. “We both got pretty torn up back there.”

“The important thing is that we’re still in one piece,” I replied.

“That’s true enough,” she said, inching herself up against the wall. “Hopefully they have some healers here that know their stuff.”

“With all the soldiers they have here, they better,” I said with a chuckle, before giving a quick pause to think, to worry. “I don’t think I liked the way this has turned out.”

Tyra groaned as she sat up more fully, leaning against the back wall. “What, with the diamond wings?” she asked. “I agree, I’m no fan of getting kicked in by a bunch of overgrown birds, right bit embarrassing, but we got out of it with all the important bits intact.”

“And if those soldiers hadn’t showed up we wouldn’t have,” I said. “I just... can’t help but feel that we’ve made a mistake.”

Tyra shifted in place, looking at me more head on. “You mean leaving the old man behind, yeah?”

I only gave a nod in response.

“Well don’t take this the wrong way, but that’s some daft thinking right there,” she said. I started to say something in return, but she hushed me before I could say anything.

“Sure he was a help,” she continued. “But the reason we’ve made it out here and haven’t died so far is on us. If I remember correctly, we killed more cultists along the way than he ever did.”

She did have a point, up until the night we departed, Jalas had never really done anything with his powers, at least to what we had seen. But he had also saved us, and I couldn’t make up my mind about the whole situation. He had been useful to us, and for a time maybe even a friend, but those days were behind us. Having those regrets would only slow us down.

While I had been thinking to myself, Tyra had laid herself back down, resting her head on one of the flat pillows.

“The point is,” she said. “We’re plenty fine on our own without that garmur. And hey, praise be to Vintyr, it seems like the hardest leg of the journey is over, even if that means we’ll be dealing with some cowardly Assembly faithful the rest of the way.”

It was odd, but I couldn’t help but smile. Somehow, her brash words had taken most of the worries out of my mind.

We spent some time speculating back and forth about our way ahead, though soon enough the healer that Einar had promised interrupted us. She came in with a single knock on the door, carrying a

heavy toolkit and looking very, very tired. Her clothes were rather ragged, and several splotches of dried blood decorated them. Walking over, she set the bag down with a heavy thud and began to pull supplies from it.

She started on me without a word, taking a needle and cloth to patch up several of the talon slashes and tears that dotted my body. As she worked on me, I tried asking her a few questions about the fort and the Assembly in general, though I got very little. All of her answers were very curt yes-and-no's, and before long I decided to just be quiet and let her work.

She soon moved onto Tyra, who was so tired that the healer had to forcefully move her and tear her shirt in several places to get to her wounds. As she applied some ointment and a bandage to a particularly nasty cut, she took notice of the mark left by Briar back at the Oasis. It had healed about as well as it could, the skin still stained with thick black marks splintering out from where the bolt had landed, a sickening tattoo that decorated the upper arm.

"Been fighting cultists," she remarked, getting a simple nod from Tyra in response. "You're lucky, I've seen far worse. You normally see necrosis when untreated like this, but the worst you'll have is a scar. Feeling alright?"

"A bit sore," replied Tyra. "Or, I guess fuzzy if that makes sense. But I can still swing a blade if that's what you're asking."

"If that's how you feel," the healer replied, changing her focus to the crystal goo that still lingered on us. "Let's deal with this gunk then."

Going through her bag, the healer pulled out a bottle filled with a bubbly, orange liquid, along with several rags. Uncorking the bottle, she carefully began to pour it out onto the areas where Tyra had been hit. It seeped over the crystal, before melding into it and disappearing all together. Before long, the crystal began to change, turning almost into a mush before melting right off of the skin. The healer brought the rag over, wiping it over where the goo had been, revealing there to be nothing left when she moved it away.

Soon, all the crystal had been removed from Tyra, and just as the healer began to work on me, the door flew open. I looked up as the goo on my hand began to melt, to see the soldier I had met on the battlefield before. She looked a bit ragged, though alongside her armor she now also wore several items more befitting of a higher rank. I went to stand, before remembering the annoyed healer to my side, returning to my seat to address the soldier.

"I take it you must be the captain, then," I said. "I'd like to thank you for saving us back there, I don't think we'd be sitting here otherwise."

"No thanks is needed," she said, fully stepping into the room. "We're out here to help and protect people."

Stopping in front of us, she gave both of us a look over. I could tell that Tyra felt uncomfortable under her gaze, stiffening a bit and holding sight on her.

"Though I must know," she continued, her tone shifting to that of a disappointed mother. "What possessed the two of you to travel along the northern coast during winter. The weather and hungry demantases make any such journey rather foolhardy."

Before responding, I glanced over at Tyra for a moment. She gave me a very serious look, if only for a second, something that told me to watch my words carefully.

"We're traveling to the capital," I replied. "Not so familiar with the area you see. We took a few wrong turns and ended up going up the east instead of the west, and by the time we knew it we figured we'd just keep on going."

"A few wrong turns..." repeated the captain. "Where are you lot from then?"

"Bragur," cut in Tyra. "We're both from Bragur."

"Bragur huh," replied the captain, changing her focus to look at Tyra. "You fight pretty well for a farmer. Let me guess, military, local militia?"

"Something like that," replied Tyra. "City guard."

The captain seemed to like that, giving Tyra a smile which missed several teeth.

"It's always nice to meet a fellow soldier," she said. "Which city though? I've been to Bragur, once, and haven't seen the guards there fight quite like you did."

At this point I could see it in the captain's eye, she was digging for something, and Tyra was beginning to sweat under her gaze. Why lie though in the first place? Of course Corzen didn't have the best views of the Assembly from what I saw, but surely it wasn't something large enough to cause trouble here. Either way, Tyra had already dug herself a pit, and there was no point in me interceding. I'd seen enough talking-down-to's to know that the captain only wanted to hear from her.

After enough time, and a bit of hemming and hawing from Tyra, the captain continued, cutting her off.

"Can't remember where you're from, can you?" the captain asked. "Either that attack really rattled you, or maybe you aren't from where you say you are."

Tyra, with all her stubbornness, didn't say anything, instead looking away from the captain at the ceiling. I was quickly being reminded of a similar situation back in the desert, except the roles here were reversed. She was quickly making the situation worse, and while I hadn't said anything before, I had to speak up now.

"Why don't you go ahead and say what you're thinking," I told the captain. "And save us all the time and trouble of dancing about it."

"Well," she replied, now focusing on me. "Two travelers showing up out of the blue in the middle of winter, coming up the east side? The only kinds of people who would do that are fools, or cultists."

As the last word left her mouth, I could see her put her hand on the hilt of her sword for emphasis.

"I can assure you," I said, talking quickly. "That we are no such thing."

"Then who are you?" she asked. "And you better speak quickly."

"I truthfully am from Bragur," I replied. "From the village of Baenda in the central plains. We traveled up the east side for I knew nothing of this land or its current conflicts at my start."

Looking over to Tyra, I continued. "As for her, she is a guard from Corzen. I don't know why she chose to lie to you, but I can assure you she's no cultist. I think the several that she's killed in front of me are proof enough of that."

The captain seemed to ponder this for a moment, giving Tyra another look over before letting out a small snarky chuckle.

"Well, I should have guessed that I suppose," she said. "You people of Corzen, always so brash, so very difficult to deal with."

She waited to see if Tyra would say anything, and when she didn't the captain continued.

"But you have nothing to worry about," she said. "Unlike you, the Assembly doesn't hold the same kind of grudges."

The room was filled with a thick tension as the two of them looked at each other, but it was suddenly cut with a large metallic sound. The goo around my hand had finally softened, and my grip had become weak, allowing my sword to fall clanging to the ground. I figured it was as good a time as any to speak up.

"If I may ask," I said. "Is there any way we could get passage out from here? Seems this is the only real settlement for miles around."

"Normally I'd say no. This ain't exactly a major thoroughway, not many ships coming in," the captain said. "But you're in luck. Our latest shipment of supplies just came in and the boat will be heading out early tomorrow to Ranadur. I won't bother asking you lot for any coin, will be cheaper to ship you out then to feed and house you till spring."

I thanked her, promising that we would take her up on that offer. The captain went to leave, almost passing through the door before turning to look back at Tyra.

"I know you may think all too highly of us," she said. "But while you're in the capital you should stop by our headquarters near the Shrine of Hernada. We could always use more capable fighters."

With that, she left, closing the door behind her. A moment after she left, the healer finished up as well, who hurried to leave as well. Before she left, she told us that we were free to grab a hot meal over at the mess hall.

With them gone, we finally had a moment alone to collect our thoughts, though not many were shared. Rather, we took inventory of our belongings and planned out the following day, before our stomachs decided to take up the offer of food. We left the small room, making our way through the large hall and weaving through the camp until we came upon the mess, a wide, stout building full of people. As we made our way inside, I could see that Tyra still looked forward with a deep, empty stare, as though she were contemplating something.

A rather large man, both in weight and height, stood with a ladle pouring out dinner for soldiers. We stood in line with our bowls, eagerly taking the potato and carrot stew that was given to us, and quickly scarfed the whole bit down. While I focused on eating, several soldiers took seats near us, trying their best to strike up conversation with the new faces. While Tyra was initially withdrawn, she seemed to light up as one of the soldiers regaled her with a tale of defeating five cultists by his lonesome, with another soldier striking him across the head as she remarked that she had been there as well. They spent the rest of our time there talking about battles and tactics and other things which I had no real knowledge of.

Soon enough, we had finished our meals and retired back to the living quarters of the main hall. The sky had grown dark and we would have to wake early to catch the ship in the morning. I climbed into one of the beds, as did Tyra, and tried to go to sleep under the thin woven blankets. But I just layed there for a while in the small bed, looking at the wooden ceiling as my thoughts ran wild. So many things had happened in the last few weeks, things I still couldn't fully grasp.

As my thoughts swirled around, I could hear a shift to my left, and I turned over to see Tyra looking at me. "What do you think he was doing out here, really? Jalas?"

I looked at her, giving a look between confusion and intrigue.

"I'm just asking, in case we see him again," she continued. "I don't want to be played a fool and be caught off guard with him. People like that, who play both sides, aren't so easy to figure out."

I hadn't really given it much thought, for even after the distance time provides, I was still hurt by what had happened. I would have rather forgotten that I had ever met the man, much less give him any more time in my thoughts. But he had also given me a name, one he only saved for his time of desperation. Jalas had kept me from what I was after, and he clearly knew more. He sought to make himself useful, only so far as to keep me by his side. That knowledge didn't make me any less desperate to know what more he knew.

"I don't know," I finally replied, turning back to the ceiling. "Though I get the feeling that he cares about who I am just as much as I care about who my mother was. That there is some kind of connection that only he can see."

"All the more reason to get to the capitol," Tyra said with a nod. "Get inside his head and all."

We both layed there in silence for a moment, before Tyra spoke up again.

"But if we do see him before that," she continued. "We can take turns wringing his neck for information."

With that, we both fell silent once more, and I could feel the grasp of sleep clawing at me. My thoughts finally went quiet, and my eyes began to fall under the veil. The final thing that crossed my mind were thoughts of the Assembly, and if the road ahead would be any easier then the paths we had already walked.

Chp 11

Cities and Provinces: A Wanderer's Guide to Larafell

By Reika Flakk

It is no secret that Ranadur is one of the crown jewels of Larafell. Taking in hundreds of traders, travelers, merchants, and all other manner of people every day through its ports, Ranadur is the trading capital of the nation. It's home to the many headquarters of the different trading guilds, and has a long, rich history that stretches back to the First Assembly. Of course, were it a real gem, Ranadur may not shine as brightly as you may think.

You needn't travel far from the ports and trading halls to come about the slums and squalor that most of the city lives in. While the nobles and merchant elite can afford proper housing, most dock workers and sailors are forced into the tightly-packed Pauler and Smithson Quarters of the city. Places where the streets run red and brown, and where the light of the Gods doesn't shine. Muggings and theft are a daily happening, and it isn't uncommon to find bodies just off the major roads, dumped in some alleyway.

The city is so polluted, one might even consider it a blight on the very landscape, for wilderness and nature have no place within the city bounds. I myself contracted joint rot of the foot on my visit, having to sludge my way through the septic streets, nary a healer in sight. I shan't be returning unless absolutely necessary.

Should you find yourself traveling through the city, perhaps on a stop to Dyrlega or against your own will, there are but few places that I would recommend visiting. First is the Prin Quarter, with its many gardens and walkways that stand apart from the rest of the city. Located in the northern reaches of the city on high, it is one of the few places which haven't the stench nor the practices of the slums, making it an ideal place for travelers to stay should they have the coin and also value their lives.

The other is the Storkirk Cathedral, who's home is in the heart of the Smithson Quarter. Outside of Fyrsta Musteri in Dyrlega, Storkirk Cathedral is the largest building of its kind, and regularly attracts faithful from other nations by the hundreds. Inside you will find large arching ceilings, along with paintings and statues depicting the entire pantheon. Despite making its home in the slums, it is relatively safe to visit, for not even the lowest sewer rats would dare to desecrate such a holy place.

While the city may have its many problems and eye sores, Ranadur is still a key asset to Larafell. Whether it be the trade goods it brings in or the connection it makes to Dyrlega, Ranadur has put its mark on the northern shores.

Tales from Larafell (Working title)

The sun had yet to breach the horizon when a soldier had come knocking on our door to wake us. By the time we had put together our things and carefully shimmied down the winding stairs to the dock, I could still only make out the first few trickles of light over the waves. The storm which had battered us had calmed over the night, with the sky clear and the waves calm, though the wind still blew fiercely in defiance.

At a glance, the ship was nothing special as we boarded. Neither large nor small, it was a modest cargo ship, devoid of the luxuries a private, wealthy merchant fleet may have. It held a low profile, holding close to the water, ideal for a speedy trip, so I was told by a crewmate. It was exactly what I would expect of a purely utilitarian, nationally held ship.

We said our last thank you to the captain, who had been there to see us off, Tyra still choosing to avert her eyes as we boarded. At the last moment, I thought to ask her her name, to which she simply replied Stjori.

“Have a safe passage,” she said to me, pulling me in a little closer. “And keep an eye on your friend there.”

With that we set sail, going out into the frigid waters of the north sea. By the time the sun had actually risen high enough to be clear of the horizon, we were long out of port, Durrin Outpost and the cliffs it resided on nothing more than a speck in the distance. Though with the clouds gone, I could finally see the mountain that had shielded us from the storm before. It rose perhaps to be eight times the height that Durrin had sat at, with a gnarled, crooked peak. As the day went on though, it too soon became a speck on the horizon, and had fallen out of sight as dusk set in.

While we had been promised passage on the ship, that didn't mean that it came without any cost. We were both quickly put to work around the deck. I spent most of my time cleaning the top side, occasionally being asked to help row against the chopping waves when the wind wasn't with us. Tyra spent most of her time below, making sure that cargo wouldn't tumble with the rocking of the ship and hauling supplies as people needed them.

The crew were mostly Larafell natives, living their lives under the Assembly, though there were a few members that hailed from neighboring nations. There was much talking while we worked, the crew members interested in hearing about other places and people besides their own. Apparently ships like their's rarely left Larafell, being directed by the Assembly to patrol the waters and supply the people.

I told them about farm life and the great fields of Bragur, while they told me about sea life and the rule of the Assembly. They were all too young to speak about life under the Third Assembly, so when they said that times were good, there was little to compare it to. None of them had seen a Dausugan follower; they had only heard stories. I added a few of my own encounters to their collection, which they readily took in.

That wasn't to say there was no complaining, far from it. Despite how young many of them were, they all were tired, a certain long gaze and apathy gripping them. They were tired of the ongoing war, tired of the inaction of the Fourth Assembly; not just on the war, but on all manner of issues, from lack of Devouts to rampant crime. They salivated for a more peaceful existence. From what they said, Ranadur would be a whole new mess to deal with when we made port.

And so life went on, day in and day out. Between the hard work and restless nights on the ocean, time seemed to stagnate as we followed our way along the rocky coastline. Soon enough we had spent a week on the ship, despite it feeling like a month, but thankfully according to the ship's captain, we would be making port at Ranadur before the sun set. I leaned against the railing of the upper deck while on break, looking out at the rocky shore as it intermingled with sandy beaches, all the while the sun beating down from overhead. Ranadur still wasn't in sight, but with any luck it would soon fall into view.

I hadn't been leaning there long before someone had come up and joined in right alongside me. Tyra was looking out at the same view that I was, releasing a long sigh before settling into a back-cramping hunch.

For all our time on the ship, we hadn't spoken much in the last week, our plates too full. "So how have things been below deck?" I asked. "Have barely been seeing you."

"Probably as well as it has been up here," she replied as she rolled one of her shoulders. "Labor is labor after all."

"Ain't that the truth," I said, pausing for a moment as I watched a seagull in the distance dive in towards the waves. "We should be coming into Ranadur by the day's end."

"So I've heard," she replied, a frown crossing her face. "I can't wait to be off this ship."

"What, are you too good for the work?" I asked jokingly.

Tyra shook her head. "I let slip to some of the crew that I was from Corzen," she said. "Ever since then it's been nothing but stupid questions and remarks, namely about heresy. As if they would know better."

The tired look that she had from before was now bordering on straight anger. "You going to be alright?" I asked. "First time heading into Assembly land and all."

"It's a first for you too," countered Tyra.

"True enough," I replied. "Though I wasn't brought up in a place that didn't care much for them."

That seemed to get Tyra for a bit, giving her some pause before responding. "I don't know. In truth, I don't know much about the modern day Assembly or what they practice. Back in Corzen, we hate them on the principle that they left us to die back during the Resurgence, we tend to focus on that."

"You seemed to get along with the soldiers back in Durrin just fine," I said. "What will make Ranadur any different?"

"It was never about the people," she said, shaking her head. "Though they can be a right pain with the way they carry themselves, and this lot sure isn't doing that image any favors. Overzealous herd followers from what I've seen at times."

"No, it was always about the people in charge," she continued. "Any group that can choose to just let people die like they did deserves nothing. And Ranadur is one of their main strongholds, sure to have a heavy presence of Assembly rule."

"We'll see," I said. "Though from what I've heard around the ship, Ranadur isn't some beacon of Assembly rule. Plenty of ruffraff to shake things up. Plenty of stabbings too."

"Let's hope so," she replied. "I'd love to get into a good scrap with some of them."

"Just try to keep your head on," I said. "No matter what happens in Ranadur, we'll be shipping out to the capital soon after. No escaping Assembly rule there."

Tyra didn't say anything, instead choosing to look out at the coast.

"I just want you to be prepared," I continued. "Should we run into anything that might get to you. And who knows? Maybe things have changed since the Third Assembly."

Tyra kept looking out at the waves. "Don't worry," she said. "I'll try and keep it under wraps."

With that our conversation sailed away on the wind, and we carried on with the work of the day. The sun remained strong overhead as I scrubbed at the deck, the heat beating back the chill of the wind. Each bob of the bow had me catch myself, shift my footing against the gentle rocking. I couldn't count the number of times I had fallen on my ass since we had set sail; a week out, I had grown used to the movements of the ship.

As the day reached into the late afternoon, one of the crew, a well built lad with a beard to match, came up to me and shook me from the work. "We'll be making port soon," he said, pointing somewhere over the bow. "Best get ready."

Sure enough, coming quickly into view over the deep blue waves, was the largest city that I had ever seen. Dropping my mop, I sidestepped to the bow of the ship to gain a better view. I nearly leaned over the edge and plummeted into the ocean below as I gazed out upon it.

The city was truly massive. From the angle at which I stood, you couldn't even see the end of the place, buildings stretching as far as one could see down the coastline, blurring into each other. Buildings of all manner, whether they be short, rundown warehouses or tall, strong-built halls all decorated the coast and the inner lands which I could see. It was a mismatched framework that saw all manner of living intersect, larger than any city I had seen in Bragur, and likely twice the size Corzen had been.

There was one building in particular, tucked further inland, that stood out from the rest, namely for it stood above the rest. Towering high above the next highest rooftop, it had large, arching supports and an imposing front face. Even from that distance, I could tell that it was well made, and likely older than those surrounding structures. A large, imposing building for a large, imposing city.

Tearing my gaze from the clustered buildings, I looked out at the bay which it butted against. The waters were a flurry of activity, with dozens of other ships littering the ocean, either leaving the city or just docking. Many flew the flag of Larafell, with a scant few bearing the flags of other places far more distant. We soon began to pass some of them by, whether it be fishermen hauling in a catch or merchant ships who's crews eyed us with suspicion.

I went down below to gather my things, soon finding and joining Tyra on the upper deck as we came into port. Her lowered brow and rapping of fingers against her forearm told me she was far less excited than I was.

Looking around, the docks seemed to stretch on forever; long wooden tendrils breaking off from the main pier to greet ships coming in. While the docks in Corzen had been impressive, Ranadur made them look like a rotting log set forth in a puddle. The ship came to rest at the end of a particularly large pier, with multiple other vessels anchored down it and the planks filled with people and cargo.

Soon enough, the gang plank was lowered with a hearty thud, and we departed from the ship in a hurry. The docks were large and the city larger, it would take time to secure passage to Dyrlega. We made our way towards the city proper, weaving around dockworkers and cargo as everything around us moved with a certain haste only found in a city. People yelled over each other, trying their best to be heard over the crowds as they shouted orders to workers. I could feel several people glower and scowl at us as we passed, if but for a moment, as we clumsily dodged and ducked our way through the crowds.

After some doing, we finally squeezed our way out from the piers and onto the docks proper, right up against the city. Hundreds of people darted around, carrying all manner of objects to and fro, ranging from tools and weapons made of the finest steel, to fresh caught fish nearly the length of a person. Others stood huddled in circles or under tarps, discussing business in loud yells which came across as hushed whispers in the bustle of the place. Others still were haggling and trading, a long line of stalls and booths propped up alongside the buildings of more established trading halls.

It was all a chaotic flurry of movement, yet something which we would have to navigate. We spent a good part of the day weaving up and down the stones and planks of the docks, dodging cargo and turning away all manner of hucksters that shoved items in our faces. I had to stop Tyra from throwing a particularly persistent seller of trinkets into the water. We talked with every other person we met near a ship to see if we could buy passage, from those with large trading vessels to those with ships no bigger than a plank. Most turned us away, for either our money wasn't good enough or their destination was not our own.

As the sun began to draw ever closer to the waves, we finally were able to find a ship willing to take us on. A light merchant vessel with little cargo or crew, the captain was willing to accept scant pay for passage to the island city the next morning. He was an older man, though solidly built, who had made the journey between ports more times than he could count. Shaking his hand, I gave him half the coin then, promising the other half on departure.

Before leaving for the labyrinth of the inner city, I asked for any recommendations on a place to bunk for the night. He scoffed, saying very plainly that with the coin we had, we'd have to search off in the eastern quarter's of the city, near the slums. He warned us about the muggings and killings of the area, how he only ever slept on his ship while docked in the city, though it wasn't anything I hadn't heard on the voyage in. With that, I thanked our future captain and we left, finally able to get away from the bustle of the dock and into the city proper.

As we left the docks behind us, I couldn't help but smile and feel a bit proud of myself. There I was in Ranadur, far away from the zealots of the east and ever closer to my destination. All without Jalas. In a few days time I would be in the capital and find what I was looking for. My mind flashed briefly to Jalas's last words, and my smile widened, as they haunted me far less then they had when they first tempted my ear.

Though not as crowded, the streets and alleys of the city were far more maze-like than the docks. Buildings towered up three stories minimum, with many others reaching much higher, casting the whole area in shadows, beams of light cutting through the odd opening in the sky. Clothes were hung out to dry on wire spanning the gaps between buildings, and the occasional person stuck their head out of a window, only to peek at some commotion down below, shout at some passerby, or throw trash onto the street.

Speaking of, the streets were littered with the stuff. If it wasn't trash or animal waste, it was rotting crates or any item that could be discarded at a moments notice which blocked the way and forced you to side step or take a different back-alley route. The smell alone, that of spoiled food and sun-baked carcasses, was nearly enough to make me consider finding a spot on the docks to sleep.

Unlike those people at the docks, who had a hurry in their step and a place to be, the people walking the streets in the interior seemed rather listless. Save for the workers and movers who hurriedly traveled along the main streets, nearly every person looked to lack any life behind their eyes, sitting on stoops or leaning against walls without much care. There were a few that had a spark in their movement, though I immediately distrusted them, for their quickness of step likely meant a quickness to drain another's pockets.

Several of these people attempted to approach us, a smile on their face and a hand in their pocket, though a quick hand on the hilt of my sword or Tyra's spear quickly dissuaded them and sent them back to the alley they had emerged from. One man who wore the rags of a richer man didn't get the hint and was unfortunate enough to start his pitch before he was cut off with the butt of a spear in his gut. He laid there groaning in the street as we continued walking.

"Why'd you go and have to do that?" I asked. "Now he might just come back, with more people at that."

"People like that won't listen to anything else," she replied, glaring at several people leaning against a passing building. "Besides, I don't think he'll want to cross us again."

I briefly looked back to see the man collecting himself from the ground, still stumbling from the blow. Our eyes met for a moment, and I could see a menacing glint in his eye as he shuffled back into the alley way.

After navigating our way through the heaps of filth and keeping to the main streets, we reached the city center, or at least what I assumed it to be. The streets were a little nicer, the people a little cleaner, and the buildings a bit more sturdy. But chief among the reasons was the large building in front of me. It was the same one I had managed to glimpse while on the boat, and it was far larger in person.

Towering above the next highest building, it was as long as it was tall, covering nearly a dozen smaller houses, with grounds around it filled with bushes, trees, and all manner of hardy plants. The front facing side went up into a spire, whose pointed tip pierced up at the sky, while its lower roofs arched over what must have been a grand hall for all its size.

No amount of strength could tear me from standing there, taking in the sheer presence. After a moment, I muttered, "Could house my whole village there for how large it is. What do you reckon it's for?"

“Church or cathedral I’d bet,” Tyra said pointing to the front face. Indeed, amongst the arched windows and intricate designs, hung the symbols of the gods. Even from a distance, I could make out the rough edges of Smindar’s hammer and swooping curves of Vintyr’s staff. “Though I will agree with you, never seen one like this. Don’t quite figure why you’d need it.”

We fell silent once again, and I couldn’t help but to keep looking up at the cathedral that lorded over us. Perhaps it was the distant murmur of the docks, the stillness in the air, but I could almost hear a voice in the wind, a whisper beckoning me forward into the shadow of the structure.

I had already taken a step forward before I caught myself, tightening my cloak before turning to Tyra. “Want to head in, take a look around?” I asked.

Tyra gave me an odd look, confusion crossed with disgust, as though I had stepped in a dead animal. “Wha - why would you want to step foot in a place like that?”

“Well,” I said. “We’re in Assembly land now, it wouldn’t hurt to pick up on some of the customs before we land in the capital, especially in your case.”

“Egh,” Tyra spat out, looking back at the building. “Assembly worship is so strange and backward, I don’t understand it. All sorts of kneeling and ritual and other garbage that doesn’t matter. Why make a show of something when simple prayer is all we are asked to do?”

“All the more reason we should go,” I countered. “You might just grow an appreciation for the whole deal.”

Tyra was quick to respond, but stopped herself as the first ‘well’ passed her lips. She grew an inquisitive look in her eye, squinting and looking me in the face for a moment before saying, “There’s something else to this, isn’t there. We ain’t some slack-jawed travelers with wanderlust here you know. So come on, out with it.”

I let out a sigh, looking down at the cobbled street. “I don’t know. I’m just feeling this kinda pull, you know? Ever since J alas left, I’ve been trying to think of what to do with the name he gave me. It’s far more than I’ve ever found, but it’s also still so little.”

My gaze turned back up to the cathedral. “I’ve just been feeling...lost is all. It’s such a small chance, but the way I see it, if anyone has more information about it, the church would be the one of the few to have it. They pretty much run the Assembly, and I need to start somewhere.”

I started to think of more things to say, but before I could Tyra had put a hand on my shoulder and had begun marching us forward. “Alright,” she said. “Let’s get going then.”

The entrance of the cathedral was as tall as a building itself, with wooden doors a story high meeting the arching stone which encased them. Thankfully they were already ajar, or I would struggle to think of how they were properly opened. Taking our first steps into the main hall, the place somehow seemed even larger than it had on the outside as our footsteps echoed off the smooth stone floor. Tall, white pillars engraved with all sorts of runes and symbols towered upward to meet the arched ceiling, each wooden beam longer than any tree I had ever seen. The hall itself was lined with all manner of things, from candles, to incense, to statues and shrines for each and every god.

Walking past the flickering lights and cluttered shrines, taking in the sights and smells of the place, I could overhear one person praying to Uthalf for safe passage across the ocean. Further along, a woman offering a few gold coins to Ceara in thanks for a strong and healthy baby.

Most of the shrines we passed seemed well tended in this way, with prayer and offerings being plentiful. There was one however that gave me pause as we passed, for the statue had been removed and the shrine was barren and empty save for the few offerings of years long past: long-dried sprigs of rosemary and several coins overlooked by less observant eyes. It was the one part of the cathedral that wasn't lit, long dormant candles draping the area in a gray curtain. I did not recognize the symbol of the god, that of an owl's talon, grasping for something, but I could guess at who it belonged to.

On the far end, past the shrines and trinkets, was a large stained glass window which took up most of the back wall. It was made up of colors and shapes that I didn't even know glass could be forged into, from dark blues to bright oranges. It seemed to depict a single scene, that of someone high above looking down on a harvest of grain, people toiling in the soil.

Sat below this window, reading a large tome, was a man dressed in ornate clothing; a most spectacular and deep purple robe, with a simple, short stout hat to match. He was old, far too old to even seem real, for his movement was stiff and his skin sagging, the hair on his head a thin white that trailed down his back.

Others who looked to be priests moved about him, but he was by far the eldest, and age was what I was after. He was so deep in his tome that he barely noticed us as we stepped up in front of him. After clearing my voice a bit, he finally took a glance up with his eyes barely open, closing the book and putting on a very simple smile.

"Ah, hello," he said, putting the book aside and standing up to greet us, shaking as he did. His voice was raspy, a near whisper that struggled to flow out. "Welcome to Storkirk, may I ask who you are?"

"Just travelers," I said, greeting him in turn. "Who are looking for a little guidance, if you're willing."

The old man seemed to smile at that. "Everyone needs a little guidance in their lives. I'm the elder of this cathedral," he said. "Charged with the keeping of all texts and traditions. What is it you are hoping to find?"

There was a sudden warmth in my chest as he spoke, and I stepped forward with eagerness. "I was actually hoping that you could tell me about someone," I said, pulling the burnt paper out from my pocket. "There's someone we've been...trying to find for a good while now, but just haven't had any luck."

I held the paper up, showing it to him. "They left the area a while back," I continued. "I know it's a stretch, but would you have any records for people who have come through?"

The old man took the paper in his hand, carefully touching it around its singed edges, squinting and moving the page about as he tried to read it. He looked at it for a moment before finally shaking his head. "Not here I'm afraid," he said. "All those kinds of documents are back in the capital, in the central archives."

I let out a sigh, the heat of the moment leaving me. It wasn't nothing, but I had been hoping for something more. A sign that we were at least on the right track. In any case, I would know where to look once we arrived in the capital. I was ready to thank the old man for the little information he had and leave, but he continued on talking, pointing at the paper.

"But that name right there," he continued, his finger tracing the blotched writing. "Don't need any records to remember that one."

"You met her?" I stammered out, trying to contain myself in front of the old man. "When?"

"Oh I never met her," he replied. "Not sure I even know who she is exactly. But anyone who served back in the era of the Third Assembly knows that family name."

I looked at the name on the paper again. Prestur, the same name that I shared. Was that what he was talking about?

"What business do you have with House Prestur?" he asked, squinting in such a way that his face wrinkled even more. "You're not some sell-swords trying to collect are you?"

"She's missing," Tyra cut in. "Nothing nefarious, we just need to find her. Retrace her steps is all."

I gave a solemn nod, and the old man seemed to relax.

"Back when I had just joined the church," he said. "Everybody knew the name Prestur. One of the most prestigious and powerful families in the Assembly."

"Why's that?" I asked, the new information already tumbling around in my head.

"Well they are one of the Long Noble Houses," he replied. "Each house has its own claims to nobility, most tracing their lines back to the founders of the First Assembly. Lots of power held up in that tradition."

"Either way, House Prestur," he continued. "Had some of the most important claims. They could trace their line back to the Devout Jhorda and the king Mydrel; you can imagine the kind of respect that such a connection can bring."

I nodded my head, despite not knowing the names which he spoke. Pretending to know might keep him talking, and it was the best lead I had. After talking for a time about the history of the early Assembly and a few other nobles, the old man looked at the burnt paper once more.

"I must ask though," he said as he looked at it. "Why are you searching for this person, given the circumstances of her family?"

I gave him a confused glance. "Why do you mean?"

"Oh well I just assumed you knew," he replied. "Given the Resurgence and all."

"I'm afraid I don't follow what you mean," I said.

"Typical of you younger folks," he said. "House Prestur, along with many other Long Houses, haven't held power since that time. Haven't been seen much either. No, there are very few left who

currently take charge in the Fourth Assembly. This person you're looking for, whoever they are, might not want to be found at all."

He handed me the paper back, putting it carefully in my palm before returning to his seat.

"I wish I could be of more help," he said. "But information flows slowly these days. As I said, you should visit the archives in Dyrlega if you want more information."

"We were already planning on it," I said. "But thank you, you've been a great help."

With that, Tyra and I turned to leave, walking back through the decorated hall, though I barely paid our surroundings any mind. Part of me thought that there was no way for the old man's story to be true. Certainly the nobles he spoke of, that was real, but for my mother to be a part of that, it must simply be a coincidence or mistake. Nobles don't degrade themselves to common folk.

And yet what if it wasn't a mistake? What if, I thought, there was a real connection between her and the nobility, the very members of the Assembly itself? That only worried me further. For a noble to flee, that could only mean a stretch of ill intent left behind them. Something they fear, which could strip them not just of their title, but their life. What would that mean for myself if I were to come across someone who had meant her harm?

Suddenly all other thoughts stopped. It hadn't occurred to me while I had been speaking, but it suddenly hit me. If the old man was right, if my mother truly had been a part of some noble house, then what was I? I would be a part of that house too, surely, however removed from it I was. And that was something I just couldn't fathom.

Growing up nearly everyday had been work; work in the fields, work in the home, work in the village. There was nothing else outside that world that I truly knew. To be presented with such a connection to another life, to one without the plow or the labor, it almost sickened me. Not for what I was brought up without, but what that made me. Who that made me. I kept on pondering that question, always circling back to thinking if the priest had been wrong.

I was so caught up with my thoughts, that I didn't notice my steps slowing, until I finally came to a complete stop. Shaking my head from my pondering, we had stopped in front of one of the many shrines adorning the church. More specifically, I was face to face with a wood carved deer head, the antlers adorned with all manner of plants and vines. A shrine to Ceara, no doubt.

Rather than turning for the exit, there was something about the shrine that beckoned me in, inviting me to look closer. I stepped into the shrine while Tyra held back, half confused and half curious. Aside from the carving, the shrine was littered with a large variety of offerings, with plants and herbs, even coins and valuable looking necklaces and trinkets, piling up in every corner.

Once I was in front of the shrine, no more than a few paces away, I almost instinctively knelt down. I wasn't a praying man, never had been; the few times I did had been to Ceara during the harvest back in Bragur, in years when the weather was blighted and the yields looked to be few. Something about that moment though, it seemed to compel me to linger there.

Kneeling upright and placing my hands on my knees, I felt awkward and stiff, yet I was still compelled to close my eyes, trying my best to remember the words of the songs I was taught as a child. I

knew very little of them, and when I had exhausted all thought I turned my mind to silence, hoping against all other judgment that help would arrive for me. That all these travels wouldn't be in vain.

I sat there for a while, and after a time I finally opened my eyes to the world. Looking to my right, another man had joined in kneeling next to me, though he was clearly more well practiced, soft words escaping his lips as he prayed. I silently stood up, leaving the small alcove only to find Tyra nowhere in sight. I remembered her distrust of the place and figured she had already moved on, and I made to follow her, though I was stopped once more. Close to the entrance, another shrine, that of boar tusks and metal, sat in its own alcove.

Unlike the shrine to Ceara, this one was more densely populated with people, with all manner of folk praying or giving offerings. Along the edge, I spotted Tyra, neither praying nor doing much of anything. Simply watching, looking as people came and went, knelt and avowed. Her expression was stern, though despite that people nodded at her as they left, perhaps confusing her for another.

I didn't bother to talk to her, rather waiting until she saw me, quickly stepping her way over and joining me in exiting the building once she had.

As we walked away from the imposing cathedral and down the main street once more, I looked over to Tyra, whose face was blank, yet also deep in thought.

"So, what were you doing in there?" I asked.

"I could ask you the same thing," she replied defensively.

I didn't say anything, not initially, for I didn't truly know what I had been doing either, what forces had come over me.

"I'm not sure," I finally said. "Something about it just seemed right. I don't know how else to describe it."

I looked at Tyra expectantly, and soon enough she answered. "I'm not quite sure either," she said. "You were taking your time at the shrine, so I figured I'd take a look around myself. A lot of that place was nonsense, a bunch of garmurs singing the wrong songs and making a fool of themselves."

She stopped talking for a moment, looking down at the cobble before continuing. "Course' then I saw that one shrine," she said. "Shrine of Hernada. Lot of people there so I figured I'd listen in, see what was being said."

There was another long pause. "Most of them were just normal people," she said. "Normal people saying simple prayers, just wanting their sons and daughters to come back safe to them. Same kind of things that we would say back in Corzen. I guess... I just knew how they felt, related a bit to it is all."

We kept on walking, the cathedral ducking out of sight as the buildings of the street took their place in the sky once more. As we made our way, my mind wandered its way back to what the priest had said about my mother. Something must have happened during the Resurgence, I figured, to make her stay away. What that was, I couldn't say.

The sun was nearly down by the time we found a place to lodge for the night, a rundown bunk house off the main stretch. The wall boards were rotting and the stench was that of human waste and filth, but slim choices meant little choice for comfort.

We had barely spent any time in our closet-sized room before we found our spots to sleep, myself on the thin layered bed and Tyra in a bed roll on the floor. Of the two, the bed roll was probably the more comfortable option. Despite the late hour, the street below was still loud, with carts and animals making their way along while people yelled. The boat for Dyrlega would be leaving early, so despite the noise, we wasted no time in dozing off.

All through the night I slept restlessly, blinking in and out of sleep. My dreams and reality shifted into a single plane, becoming one and leaving me disoriented as I rose and slept. Men and creatures appeared before me, unlike those I had seen before, yet still oddly familiar.

It was the middle of the night when I woke once more, snapping out of the tired trance of the last few hours. Shifting my body toward the door, I closed my heavy eyes, my mind still playing tricks on me as a pair of shoes appeared in the open doorway.

Ch. 12

Bondage and Slavery: A Short History of Larafell

By Vondor Rith

Throughout the many early periods of the First and Second Assemblies, Larafell was no stranger to the practice of forced labor to meet her end goals. Whether they be indebted into bondage or kidnapped and sold, slaves made up a key portion of the population that could be used for work that was seen as dangerous or unsuited for others.

While other nations, such as Bragur, had outlawed the practice long before Larafell even unified, it took until the end of the Second Assembly for slavery to end. Led by a Devout of Skendir, a mass slave uprising in Ranadur crippled the nation's economy and production. Fractured and unable to deal with such a crisis, the Second Assembly dissolved, leading to a period of fighting known as the Red Winter. It was only with the creation of the Third Assembly and pressure from the Long House's Vatn and Prestur that slavery was outlawed in its entirety, and that the violence was able to be curtailed.

That was many years ago, and while slavery is no longer legal within the bounds of Larafell, the Third Assembly still faces problems with it. Kidnapping and human smuggling are still rampant, as the neighboring nation of Austur is always looking to purchase more slaves, an issue that has caused strain between the two powers. While these traffickers are regularly caught, many more crop up to take their place.

Ironically, it is Ranadur, the place of Larafell's most important slave uprising, that is the heart of this trade. With the city the size that it is, keeping track of everyone who comes and leaves is nearly

impossible, and leads to many people falling through the cracks. As the Assembly is set to meet again on the full moon on this matter, it is my hope that more will be done to punish these criminals, and that we will see an end to this practice in our lifetimes.

Pain. That was all that I could feel. My head was splitting open, my body groaned even while laying down, and my mouth tasted of iron, as though I had been wasting away at a tavern all night. My groggy eyes opened to a world made of agony and sorrow, the very act causing my body to recoil. At first I thought it to be a result of the bed, which had been difficult to fall asleep in and poorly crafted at even a glance. But as light flooded in and my eyes adjusted to the morning glare, I could see that I was no longer in the bunkhouse; the floor was far to clean. Rather, I layed on hard stone, with neither bed nor blanket in sight, and but a few streams of light piercing their way in.

It took every effort to shoulder myself up from the ground, fighting my body's attempts to keep me laying down. My eyes adjusted from the haze of sleep to see the rather bare room I was in: merely floors and walls, with the rest of my view blocked by piles of crates that towered nearly to the ceiling.

The whole area around me had been cleared out, with all the crates and barrels stacked far beyond my reach. Aside from that, the only other thing of note was a table off to the side; some kind of work bench with all manner of tools crowding it.

As the last bits of sleep left me, I turned my attention from the room to myself, finally noticing how bare I felt. My clothes were completely stripped from my body, leaving me as cold and exposed as the day I was born, save for the set of irons that I found wrapped around my wrists. Followly the chains they were linked to, sprawled along the floor, they were attached to the cobbled wall, leaving me stuck within a few paces of it despite a few frantic tugs. I tried to stand, but I was hit with a sharp pain and a bout of dizziness, leaving me to stumble about before I had to sit down again.

Even through my fuzzy, clouded mind, I could feel a panic begin to set in as the situation finally began to grab hold. I could suddenly remember that moment from the night before, that man I had seen in the dark of the room. With new energy coursing through me, I tried again at the chain, pulling and straining against it with everything I could muster, but it held fast.

I was becoming more aware of myself, how cold the air was on my skin, how exposed I felt. My bare feet bloodying against the stone floor, the cool, rough metal on my wrists. I wanted to scream, to cry out, to get out of there. But there was nothing within reach, nothing that I could do. In a fit, I slammed my fists against the wall, the chains rattling and pinching hard against my skin before I slid down to my knees.

My chest was exploding and burdened, I was nowhere near in control of my breathing as thin vapors crowded around my mouth. I tried my best to ignore my headache, to ignore my constantly moving chest and think. What was this place? Surely there was a reason that I was brought here of all places. Taking in a few shaky gulps of air, I finally slowed my breathing, if only a little bit, to get a more careful look around the room. It was rather large, likely a warehouse with its tall ceiling and filled floor space.

No place guards would keep you, I thought. Though that wasn't much comfort. Whatever reasons my captors had for leaving me in the state I was in, that wasn't something I wanted to stick around for. Slowly standing up again, I tested the length of the chain. At its furthest, I could almost reach one of the nearest crates, but no further. The table of tools to my left was all so alluring, but also just painfully out of reach, and whoever had taken me had been smart in leaving nothing within my little area.

I put my attention back on the chain and irons themselves. The chain itself looked rather weak, with rust coating large sections of it. With time, it could probably be worn down, though I guessed I didn't have much time before someone showed up. Looking over to the irons, they were in a similar condition, and the locking mechanism was rather simple. It wouldn't take much to have it come undone.

As I toyed with the idea of simply bashing the locking mechanism against the floor, I heard sounds on the far end of the warehouse, a door creaking open and men talking. I quickly sat back down where I had woken up and waited.

Soon enough, four men emerged from the piles of crates, giving me a look over as they surrounded me. I immediately recognized one of them, the same man that Tyra had jabbed in the gut the day before. He had a long scar trailing down his face, and wore mostly the same rags as before; a cheap piece of holed noble ware and a patched hat. He grabbed a rickety chair as he moved closer, the worn wood screeching against the floor until it came to a rest in front of me, the man taking a seat with his elbows resting on his knees.

The other men held back away from us. Giving them a quick glance, two of them looked roughly the same, both twig armed hunch overs that probably couldn't carry their own weight. The only difference was that one had a sword to his side, while the other seemed to not hold a weapon I could see. Looking closer, I could tell it was no ordinary sword, but my sword, the sheath and hilt designs making it undeniable.

The final man with them on the other hand was much larger, standing a good head above the tallest of them, with muscle to match. He didn't carry a weapon, but it seemed he wasn't the kind of person that needed one.

As the man in front of me sat, I chose not to say anything, instead staring him down and waiting. He in turn did the same, looking down at me as the other men leaned in and watched us. Finally, my anger and curiosity couldn't take the silence any more.

"Who are you?" I asked. "What do you want with me?"

The man didn't say anything at first, instead leaning in closer until he was hunched over.

"That's a right stupid question," he finally said, looking back at the other men. "Don't you think lads?"

The other men gave vague nods and grunts of approval.

"Who are you," he said mockingly. "I'm the man who's got you chained, and that's all you need to worry about!"

"I'm surprised you got through life with such a head on you," he continued. "You may not know much, but you know what you've done. Such disrespect, splaying me out on the street like some common fink!"

The men around us once again sang out a few grunts and jeers in affirmation, as though the man were putting on a show.

"I never even touched you," I retorted.

"If ya want to get into the weeds sure," he replied. "But your lady friend sure didn't mind giving me a wallop. But don't you worry, she'll get hers soon enough."

A new dread filled me. I hadn't even thought about Tyra, but if they had gotten me they had surely taken her as well.

"Where is she?" I cried as a new anger came over me. "What have you done?"

"Oh nothing much yet," he replied. "But soon enough the both of you will be taking a long trip east. I'm sure the crack of a whip and a yoke on your necks will teach you some respect and fetch me enough coin for my trouble. We're in the business of acquiring merchandise you see, and I think you'll sell just fine."

Back east, back into Dausugan land and away from the capital; never mind that I was so transparently being sold into slavery before my eyes. Every part of me wanted to stand, to fight, to curse them with every name under Skijah's sky, but I fought that urge. A belligerent mouth would only end in them restraining me further. I needed them to feel confident and in control.

"Nothing to say?" the man asked mockingly. "Good, means you'll learn quick."

He got up from his seat and motioned to the rest of the men. They muttered to each other for a moment before they all made for the exit, save for one, the large man who was big in every way and who wore a sullen face as he left their little group. As the others walked away, the man who had spoken to me yelled out, "Be at the boat in a few, I'm not waiting around again cause of you!"

Soon they were out of sight, and I could hear the door to the warehouse open and shut swiftly. Putting my attention back on the man towering over me, he let out a grunt before walking his way over to where the chain connected to the building. He produced a rusted key from his pocket, undoing the lock that kept me bound to the wall, though he quickly scooped up the chain in his hand, keeping me on a metal leash.

"Come on then," he said, pulling up on the chain to get me to stand. "Move!"

The sudden pull yanked me to my feet, the force nearly pulling my arms out of their sockets. As I stumbled back, the man pushed me forward, causing me to trip over my feet until I finally found my footing. He let out a low, throaty grumble, barking at me to walk. He was tired, impatient, stuck doing a job he didn't want to be doing. Good, I thought, I could use that.

I walked a few paces before I stumbled forward on purpose, pulling on the chain as I fell to the ground, my back to him. The man let out a frustrated grunt, pulling on the chain once more to get me to

rise. I drew up to stand, but purposefully slammed against the ground once again. The man let out a curse about weak willed men, and I could hear him stepping forward toward me.

His thick fingers came down around my neck, pulling me up to my feet himself. They stayed locked around me as he pointed me in the direction he wanted me to go.

“You will walk!” he yelled. “Move!”

As he finished, his grip on my neck relaxed, and I took my one opportunity. The man had been leaning down to reach my level, so I took the chance to duck down and side step behind him. As I came around, I brought my hands up and caught the irons around his neck, pulling as hard as I could, using his very back as a brace.

He let out a wheeze as the chains came down on his windpipe, quickly reaching up to try and pull against them. Before he could I crossed my hands, locking the chain in place as he desperately tried to pry the metal loose. Despite his bulk, the chains held against his attempts to pull them free from his neck. He quickly took his attention off them and onto me, trying his best to bat me away with his meaty hands, though with the poor angle and his size he could do little other than graze me.

His stance soon began to wobble, and he became more desperate as the lack of air began to take its toll. He took to violently thrashing, trying his best to buck me loose, and when that failed to move me he attempted to walk forward toward the table with the tools. He only made it a few steps, grasping for a long metal shaft propped up against the wood, before he fell forward, unmoving. I kept the pressure up on the chains until I was sure he was out before climbing off from him.

It took all I had to slow my breathing from the scuffle, to bring my mind to some kind of sense. I searched the man, rolling him over with some effort and turning his pockets out until I found what I was looking for. Taking the key he had used for the other lock, the irons slid from my wrists, and I stood there completely naked, searching the area for something, anything I could dress myself with.

Thankfully, it didn't take long to find my clothes. The slavers had left them and my other belongings practically out in the open, flung behind a crate near the workbench. Soon I was dressed, angry that I would have to try and face the men without my sword, before I noticed one other thing that was missing; the gold necklace. My mother's necklace. Its absence sent me into a panicked scramble on the floor as I searched, and then into a blind rage as I figured where it had gone. Taking the last of my things, I grabbed a rusted knife off of the tool table as a weapon and ran for the door, determined to rend my kidnappers clean through.

The door rattled in its frame as I burst through it, greeted with surprised looks from passersby, one so startled by the deranged man she saw that they fell clean off the platform into the icy water below. The water, the wind, the crisp smell of salt and seaweed, I was already on the docks! Surely the smuggler's boat, along with Tyra, wouldn't be far away. The docks blurred together as I ran towards the piers, the large crowds making a wide berth when they saw me, determined not to draw the attention of a man with crazed eyes.

The piers were no less maze-like than the first time I had been there, and it all seemed to blend together. Ships, people, and the wood beneath my feet all looked the same, and after what seemed like

too much time running up and down the waterlogged planks, I began to give up hope of ever finding the right boat.

It was pure chance that I saw them out of the corner of my eye. Down the next pier over, at the far end, was a small, rickety looking vessel that looked to be barely even seaworthy. As it bobbed up and down with the shallow waves, I could see the face of one of my capturs making their way below deck.

I shoved my way to the next pier, nearly sending someone into the harbor as I neared it, and without really thinking of what I would do next, I boarded the ship. There was no one above deck, and between the sounds of the sea and the city, I couldn't hear anyone below either. My heart was in my throat. Not knowing what to expect, I took the rusty knife in hand, and opened the hatch to the lower deck.

Dim lantern light was all that greeted me as I landed in a thin puddle of sea water, splashing and soaking my shoes. There was nothing but the hull behind me, and a door left slightly ajar in front of me. From there I could hear voices, and those voices had clearly also heard me.

"What did I say about being late Ketill?" said the voice, the man who had mocked me. "You got the goods at least?"

I didn't say anything, instead creeping my way toward the door, trying to steady my hand. The man called out Ketill's name once more, and without a response, I could hear him unsheath a blade and walk in my direction. My palms were laced with sweat and my eyes trained on the doorway as I pressed myself against the hull, each creaking step I heard causing my heart to beat faster. The moment his putrid face slid into view and the glint of a knife shone off the lantern, I leaped toward him.

With one swift move I swung around, smacking him in the face with the butt of my knife. He clung to his nose and yelled several curses as blood gushed out, his own knife dropping to the floor. Before he could recover, I grabbed him by the jacket and pulled him around, having the both of us face into the room as I brought my rusted blade to his neck.

There wasn't much to the room. The two other men were standing around a small table, and off in the corner, laying on her side, was Tyra. She was battered and bruised, her lip swollen and face stained red. She was in a similar state to what I had been, tied and chained, though she still retained some rags of clothing. Her eyes perked up as she saw me, and in the tension of the moment she tried her best to be unseen as she backed further into the corner, trying to brace herself and stand.

The men had drawn their own weapons at the commotion, though they hesitated to move forward on us as my knife danced right along their boss's neck. For his part, the man I had under the watch of my blade had stopped focusing on his broke nose and was now sweating about the more immediate threat that was posed to him.

Leaning in, I spoke to him loud enough that the whole room could hear, "Now here's what's going to happen. Your two men over there, they're going to drop their weapons and head up to get off the ship, my ship, now. Nod if you understand."

He gave a quick, careful nod, as to not brush himself against the edge of the knife.

"After that," I continued. "We'll be leaving port, and if you act real good, I'll shove you into the sea with your neck intact and the pier still in sight. You got all that?"

"Yes, yes!" the man sputtered out, looking at the other two. "You heard him! Drop your weapons and clear out!"

With a bit of hesitation, the men finally set their weapons carefully on the table, and slowly made their way toward the door. I backed from the doorway into the other room, giving them plenty of space to pass as I kept the knife raised.

As they passed, one of them must have had a stupid thought cross his mind, as the moment he stepped in front of us, he lunged for me. His hands grabbed for the knife as he impacted with his boss, causing the both of us to be thrown against the hull of the ship. It happened so quickly and with such force, that nothing could stop my blade from slicing across my captive's neck, spilling his blood over the hull.

With the man choking on his own blood, I flung him aside, pushing myself off the hull to face the others, knife still in hand. The one that had shoved me was still recovering from the tackle, pulling himself up to his feet as the boat swayed. The other ran back to the room, no doubt trying to get one of the weapons they had left there.

Before the man in front of me could properly right himself, I took little time to thrust into him, stabbing him in the stomach and spilling his guts before racing after the other. I had just gotten to the doorway in time to see him pick up a blade, my own sword, which he held wearily. We looked at each other, both of us waiting to see who would move first, but he was so focused on me that he didn't notice Tyra bringing down her irons behind him.

The chains came down around his neck, causing the sword to drop as Tyra dragged his gasping body down to the floor. I was too stunned to do anything as she pinned him on his stomach and pushed him into the floor, pulling up on the chains the entire time. He fought against it, his thrashing form bucking and swaying, but it wasn't long before he began to drift off under the tension of the chains. Before he could though, Tyra gave the chains some slack, unlooping them from his neck and picking up the sword he had dropped.

She raised the sword above her head, holding the grip with both hands, before bringing it down, piercing his back before yanking it out and stabbing him again. The man gasped as the blade pierced his lung, those gaps quickly turning to gurgles as Tyra continued to use him as a pincushion. Before long the man wasn't moving and nothing more than a bloody heap, though Tyra continued to stab him, crying out and becoming clumsier with every thrust. Her screams were guttural, filled with nothing but rage as spit flew from her mouth and tears began to well in her eyes. Her arms were shaking. I wasn't sure what to do, but I finally walked over to her and knelt down to steady her hand, with her finally dropping the sword to her side. I tried to say something, but I couldn't find the words, instead just kneeling there with her for a time.

Without saying a word, Tyra rolled the body over so that we could see his face, mouth agape and eyes dull, unable to stare back. I could imagine what she was feeling; anger, perhaps weakness, for that was how I felt waking that morning. But she had gotten the worst of it, her battered body proof of that,

and I knew that looking down at her former captor would do her no good. With some prodding, I got her to stand and look away from the remains of the pathetic man.

We searched the bodies, first finding the key for Tyra's irons on the man she had killed and my mother's necklace on the body of their leader. I held it close to me for a moment, letting out a long, wet sigh, before slinking it away back into my pockets. We didn't speak as Tyra's chains dropped to the floor and she collected her things, not of what had just happened nor of our plans. It was quietly decided to throw the bodies of the men in the far corner of the room, leaving them in a heap before cleaning the blood from ourselves. Tyra gave the pile a long, empty stare before closing the door to the room

Coming back out onto the top deck, I scanned the area as Tyra went off to sit at the bow. Everyone seemed to be going about their business, unaware that anything had just happened. It almost didn't seem right, for things to be so normal; it meant that the outcome hadn't mattered. At least the guards wouldn't be poking around, I thought.

I decided to join Tyra at the bow, simply sitting there for a time and looking out at the harbor. When I turned to face her she had a deep, disturbed look in her eye, though she quickly shook it off when she noticed me looking and asked me what we should do from there.

Once again, I thought about saying something, anything really. To ask if she was okay, to see if she needed to talk about what had happened, but the words wouldn't come. Perhaps it was because I wasn't ready to face those kinds of questions either. To face my own weakness. I shoved those feelings down and did my best to try and answer her question.

Looking into the sky, it was already close to mid-day, no doubt that the ship we hired had already set sail for Drylega. Of course, with the owner's of the ship we stood on dead, it quickly became clear the solution to that problem.

The other issue was the bodies themselves. There would be no dealing with them in port, fresh corpses not being standard cargo, and we couldn't risk having them on board when we docked at the capital. We finally decided that we would dump them overboard inroute, letting the ocean do to them as it would.

With our plans made, we quickly oriented ourselves with the vessel. It was in dire need of repair, with rotting planks and a tattered sail. It was also rather small, only having a single, small mast and measuring not much longer than certain fishing boats. I was uncertain on how the bodies down below had planned on sailing it in the rough waves of the north.

Neither of us had any sailing experience. I had never seen the ocean until a week prior and was still getting used to not being on solid ground. Tyra, while never really sailing, had at least grown up in a city with a major port, making her the most knowledgeable between the two of us. She reckoned so long as we kept course, there wouldn't be much sailwork to be done, we'd merely have to prep the ship.

It only took a few minutes of walking the docks and coming up with a story to tell before I got us some help on that front. There were a few kind souls who were willing to help us prepare the rigging after hearing we were scammed into buying the vessel, now stranded at port without money to get us to the capital.

Soon enough the sails were ready, the hole-filled sheets ready to catch the wind and make way. I thanked the men who had helped us, promising to return the favor if I ever returned to such an ill-fated city, to which we all had a quick laugh. With the anchor line removed, we set off, nearly hitting a small row boat as we left port.

It felt awkward to steer the vessel, as though the very ship were battling me for control of where it went. With several other near misses and angry shouts directed at us, I merely prayed that we would get onto open water. It was maybe ten minutes until the ships of the port finally began to thin out; my tight grip on the wheel and thumping heart made it seem like hours. Soon enough, the boats behind us turned into specs on the horizon, and the only sight were waves and where the ocean met the sky.

The journey itself would take three days, with the ocean thankfully remaining calm for the whole length. There's no telling if we would have made it if a storm had risen against us, if the rigging had decided to veer us from our course. We took turns manning the wheel, though with the calm seas the only pressing matter was keeping us on course. I was no dead reckoner, though thankfully in the times we raided the storage, we had found a compass and other navigational tools.

It was on the second day of sailing that we had decided to dump the bodies overboard. Being half way through the journey, it was unlikely anyone would find them out there. As they laid in a heap on the deck, Tyra took a long, deep look at them before helping me to toss them from the vessel. The rest of that day was uneventful, though Tyra spent most of it looking off the bow at the sheet of blue in front of us. Undoubtedly thinking about what had happened.

It wasn't though I hadn't thought about it myself in the days after. In those few moments I had felt so vulnerable, unlike anything I had ever felt, and yet so full of rage. The only moment that came close was that of my father's passing, that feeling of emptiness. It only added to the sense that I was out of my depth.

When it was time for us to switch off once again at the wheel, I decided to stick around the area, despite my better judgment. Tyra gave me an odd look as I stood there, leaning against one of the railings.

"What are you sticking around for?" she asked. "I'd think you'd want to head down and rest."

"I wanted to talk," I replied. "About what happened, back in Ranadur."

Tyra didn't reply, instead staring hard at the horizon. The day was as calm as ever, the boat rocking gently in the waves. Finally, she said, "There's nothing to talk about. It's all sorted."

"I'm not saying it's easy," I said. "It certainly isn't for me. But do you think I haven't noticed the way you've been since then? It's fine to let your emotions spill, to be angry--"

"Do you think I'm not angry at them?!" Tyra snapped, her hands tightening around the wheel. "Of course I'm mad at those scum for what they did to me, did to us! I'd have them brought back just so they could be killed again!"

She stopped herself, regaining composure before continuing. "But I can't stop..." she said, trailing off. "I can't stop thinking about it. How I could fail to stop such filth. Everytime I close my eyes I'm back there, tied up. It won't go away."

"That would make the both of us," I sighed. "I felt no different, waking up naked and chained. The anger I felt. There was no other way it could have ended any differently, though."

Tyra shook her head. "You see this," she said, pointing to her broken lip, the split still open. "I don't know how much you remember about that night, but I woke up before they could get the drop on me. The moment I saw them I went all out, gave them a real hard time, almost had em."

She rubbed the mark, any kind of pride leaving her. "But the one, the rat looking one, he got me right here. I went down, and the next thing I knew I was waking up on the ship."

"The whole time until you showed up," she continued, her voice starting to choke up. "They beat me, and the entire time I was too weak to stop them. I've trained my whole life, but it still wasn't enough."

"No one would think any less of you for losing a fight like that," I replied. "It doesn't mean you're weak to lose the way we did."

"That's easy for you to say!" said Tyra, raising her voice. "Look at you, a farmer from the low-country, fighting things that took me a lifetime of training to face myself. There's no shame in losing if you weren't prepared in the first place."

Bits of anger began to simmer within me, but I tried my best to keep them down. "You're right. In truth, I have no business trying to make it out here," I replied. "Which is all the more showing of how strong you are. There have been so many times in the past where you decided a fight that I couldn't win on my own."

"But those weren't real fights, were they," Tyra countered, almost deflated. "Because of him."

"Jalas," I replied knowingly.

Tyra nodded. "All those times with him by our side, we were never in any real danger," she said. "He's a Devout afterall, what foe couldn't he slay if he didn't put his mind to it?"

"He could have stepped in," I replied. "But he didn't, all of those times, because he knew that we were strong enough to take those challenges on. His strength is not our weakness. What happened in Ranadur isn't who we are."

"It's not just that!" Tyra said. "Ever since the oasis, I couldn't hold my own against that cultist, I couldn't fend off the diamond wings, and now this. What good am I if I can't fight, if I can't protect myself?"

"I've seen you fight," I replied. "And you are plenty capable. No normal person could have won those fights by themselves. I know I couldn't."

As I said that, Tyra looked back out at the sea before us. "Yeah," she muttered. "No normal person."

Her stance told me that the conversation was over, and I finally went below deck to rest. We didn't talk about the kidnapping any more after that, and the last day of travel went on without event as we grew ever closer to the capital.

That final night, wheel in hand, I knew deep down that things had changed. Like it or not, I was a different person, though I wasn't sure who that was. Yet the goal remained the same. A goal that was close within reach, just waiting for me to reach out a little further, if I still could at all. For all that had changed, Jalas leaving, Tyra joining, there was still something I was unsure of: how much I had changed.

Standing there, pondering such a question, I paused to finally see something other than water and passing ships appearing before me. Far on the horizon, nearly cutting off the setting sun, rose a rocky mound from the ocean. The closer we got, the taller and more dominant it stood, casting itself over the sky until it was lost in the darkness of dusk. While its features were gone, its outline was still made known by the surrounding stars, a clear mountain as tall as any on the mainland, looking out far over both land and sea.

Looking out through the darkness of the early evening, following the thin outline to the base, I thought for a moment that I saw more stars glittering below it. I shook my head, looking again to realize they were not stars, but lights of a city in the distance. Lights of Dyrlega.

As we sailed toward the lights, I once again thought of the journey up to that point, and what we had gone through. It would all be worth it in the end, I thought. All of the hardship, for this moment. For on the horizon lay the answers which I had sought for all those months. I only had to wait just a bit longer.

Ch 13

Fragments of the Great Fire

Reconstructed by Sogov Ordur

The Great Fire of the archives is one of the modern tragedies that we now face. After the senseless, barbaric attack on the capitol by Dusguan cultists, much of the material housed there was burnt beyond repair. The central archives of course held knowledge spanning back centuries, and was irreplaceable. This collection is but a small effort to try and place the fragments of knowledge back together, the best we can.

What pieces of books and manuscripts that have been found so far have been copied word for word. We have made no alterations where it can be helped. However, some material has been more damaged than others. In these cases, we have attempted to fill in gaps by consulting experts on these topics and using context clues to guess at the original text. Please note our mark for these sections, [...], which indicate sections too damaged to reconstruct.

[Thought to be a description of Dyrlega by Holfman]

Of all the lands near and far, Dyrlega is perhaps [the most prosperous] and [resilient]. For in no other place can you find [...] as the mountain slopes down to the sea. [...] supply from the mainland keeps her well, and her mighty walls and surrounding [cliffs? hills?] keep her safe from any attack. It would take the strongest navy, the [...] to even put her under siege.

In the center of the island, lies the great mountain [likely referencing Mt. Einma, the only mountain on the island] to which snow and frost is no stranger. It is unknown when she was [discovered? found?], but experts claim it to be [Page burned beyond repair].

[The Master and the Apprentice Act 1 by Fafnir Ivarsson]

Upon a hill, settled on the outskirts of the capital city of Dyrlega, sits Fyrsta Musteri. Built nearly a thousand years prior to the capital, its white spires and lapis outlines [...] glistening whites of the building covered the capital, bringing with it a certain [beauty], as well as the start of a new day. Already, the lights had triggered a slight bustling and gentle waking as shopkeepers and traders began [...].

But the light not only [shined, glowed?] on the capital, as the temple itself was alight as well. Within its walls, the domed hallways [sparkled?] as the morning sun pierced the temple's windows. The normally white pillars and dark wooden doors swayed like [...] temple residents awoke to a new day. Yes, soon the priests and the seers would begin the [rituals], praising those above and enlightening those below.

[...] one had still yet to emerge from the depths of their slumber. Past the grand halls, study rooms, and [...] were [back rooms?] of the temple, where the apprentices stayed during their learnings. A single small room laid covered in darkness, the numerous [tomes] covering the floor providing a tripping hazard for any who [enter?]. A plain bed sat empty in the corner as the young apprentice who the room belonged to slept unaware at the desk next to it, their face [buried] in the pages of a thick tome.

Their sleep was soon interrupted though, as [light? Section longer than that] sliced through the curtains barring the window, creeping its way across the room until it came to rest on [apprentice]. Squinting their eyes shut even further, the apprentice slowly pushed himself from his hunching position over the desk and began to stretch his arms out, letting out [...].

As he opened his eyes for the first time, he could finally see how dark the room was as he looked around. Being careful to not step or trip over anything that was hidden away in the dark, the young man made his way [...], letting the light of the morning sun fill the room once more as he opened it. As the light flooded in, a single potted flower perked up to meet it as the apprentice slowly gazed outside at the capital below him. [Section burned past this point]

[Transcript of trial of the accursed]

The minutes of this joint meeting of the houses of the [Third Assembly], taken by [...] with members of all [fourteen? It is unclear if they are referring to Long or minor houses here] present.

[Section damaged beyond reconstruction]

Nara, House [Lyn? Myri? Multiple people with this name on record] - "And so the subject of today's hearing. The topic of [...] We shall vote, both on the sentence for those accused, as well as the entirety of the Dausugan faith."

[Name unclear], House Himin - "That is not [what was decided? Agreed?]. This trial is for those accused, not of [likely Dausugn faithful].

Nara - "The crimes [...] bring into question this whole section of the faith, and so I motion to [...].
[...]

..."of these groups, none are more dangerous than the followers of Dausuga. Some may cry heresy, but I believe[...]and so while some cling to noble professions, we must cast them all down and remove them from our faith, so is my recommendation."

...."Who are we to cast judgment that would directly forsake the gods? The events presented before us are ghastly, but [...] and so we must show restraint. My recommendation is against exile."

[Medical Herbs and Healing Practices, by Devout Grensu]

Of course the foundation of any good poultice is the right herbs; no [healer] can do his job without knowing where to find the right [...] lest you end up with a brew that harms rather than heals.

A quick example is rot foot. Rot foot is one of the most common of ailments to inflict those in [Ranadur, possibly Riddara], and is also one of the easiest to cure, should you know the right ingredients. All that is needed is garlic and [thistle? Several other words are missing]. Unlike other mixtures, you needn't go hunting in the wild, but you still need to know what a good specimen looks like.

The best way to tell whether [Page is torn, nothing further]

[Source unknown]

...."Of all noble houses, the Long Houses are to blame! For who else are more pompous than those who have ruled a thousand years? It is their fault that we are all [...] without any hope of recovery. They will regret their decision, make the words of my ancestors and those who will follow after me."

...."And so we shall cast them down, down from their pedestals, down from their thrones. For too long has House Lyn and House Prestur, and all Long Houses decreed[...]No longer! A great purge shall take place, here in[...]. We will see the dawn of a new age!"

Based on the position of the moon, it was near midnight when we landed in Dyrlega. I had gone below deck to rouse Tyra the moment the lights of the city had appeared, and we both stood on deck as the grand city grew closer. The lights weren't enough to make out the details of most buildings, but you could tell that it was a large city, orbs of light stretching all the way from the sea up to the base of the mountain.

The docks of Dyrlega were much smaller and far less crowded than they had been at Ranadur. Perhaps it was the time, the moon being directly overhead, but I also got the feeling that the port didn't get nearly as much traffic. Maybe in the past it had, but looking out on the piers as we pulled into port, I was surprised to see half of them were devoid of any vessel, the shining wood host to nobody.

As we drew into port and docked, scrapping the hull against the pier in the process, I immediately felt out of place. Our rotting little nothing of a ship was a stark contrast to the freshly scrubbed planks of the pier. In fact, the whole of the dock looked almost new, with neither barnacles growing on the wood posts nor cracks slinking their way through the stonework. It looked cleaner and more well kept than the grandest noble houses in Bragur.

It was a first impression that felt like I was stepping foot someplace grand, someplace that threatened to drown me in its depth.

One of the few men on the dock approached while we stood around gawking. A tall, thin man, wearing a thick leather jacket and matching hat, smelling largely of turpentine. In his hands, he held a rather large book, a ledger at closer inspection, and a quill.

"Rather late to be docking, ain't it?" he said as he stopped in front of us, head deep in the ledger. His eyelids were sagging; I wondered if our arrival had roused him, wishing we weren't there.

"Which one's your's?" he asked.

I pointed down to the end of the pier, with the man writing something down.

"Fee will be two mynt per day," he said. "Can either pay now or when you leave."

I handed the man the two silver coins, not intending to pay anymore past that. They could take the ship for all I cared, the sagging wreck probably wouldn't make it back to the mainland anyway. As the man jotted a few more notes down, I asked him if there was any lodging in the area. He halfheartedly raised his hand and pointed lazily up toward the level of housing above us, saying there were places in the lower quarter that would still have a few open rooms.

I thanked the man, who replied with a few grumbles before returning to the dock house he had emerged from. We picked up the few things we had, leaving the docks and making our way up the stone stairs into the city proper.

While it was still too dark out to see the whole of the city, the difference between it and the other cities we had been to became clear. The streets were nicer, each stone brick interlocking perfectly, the buildings, almost all a brilliant egg-white hue, showed no cracks or blemishes on their surface. Like the docks, it all looked freshly built, as though the city had been made the day prior just for us.

For the first time in a while, I felt a sense of calm wash over me. Ranadur had been loud and busy no matter the hour. Corzen was always on edge. Dyrlega felt different. I could close my eyes and be back in Bragur, the wind light, the air crisp. It was almost enough to forget all my other feelings, good and bad, walking along those streets.

Along the main stretch, plenty of buildings had their blinds shuttered and doors locked. Even on such a main road, there wasn't a single person in sight. It took some time, though not as long as I thought, to find a place with the lights still on. A comparatively modest building to its surroundings, one

of the few with wood showing on the outside. We didn't waste any time entering; I could feel sleep riding on my back.

The inside was made of the same white stone as the outside, though the wooden furniture and other decor helped to mellow it out. We approached a man nearly sleeping at the front desk, who held the same disinterested look as the person at the docks. After talking for a bit, we secured a room for a decent price, leaving the man to rest as we made to do the same.

We were both tired from the journey, the boat not offering a true, rejuvenating sleep, and we were ready to rest. The room was nothing fancy, though it was leagues better than the room we had in Ranadur, for this one at least had two beds. We were soon in bed, not wasting any time in getting undressed, and sleep took us.

That night I had nightmares, dreams of kidnapping and torture, of slow deaths and pain. One moment stuck in the sands of the east, the next drowning in the ocean. It was finally a sunbeam streaking in through the window that woke me from that torture, leaving me feeling no better rested than when I had fallen asleep.

My limbs cracked and popped as I got out of bed and stretched. I went over to the window which the sunbeam had shone through, opening the heavy curtains to a large burst of light. Furiously blinking away the spots in my eyes, I finally opened them up fully, looking out at the city before me.

Now under the full encompassment of the sun's warmth rather than the chill of the moon, I could truly see how grand of a city Dyrlega actually was. Just as I saw the night before, the buildings were almost all made of a white stone, but in the light they shone brilliantly, reflecting the sun and making the whole city glow blindingly bright. This was slightly dulled by the sea of wooden rooftops, though occasionally a bright lapis blue covering would spring out as a beacon amongst the crowd.

Something about it bothered me, reminding me of the docks the night prior. The colors were too bright, the shades too deep. Except for areas of construction, almost none of the buildings showed any sign of wear, each shingle and brick looking freshly placed. Taking a deep breath of the air, I caught a whiff of pine followed by rosemary. A rather pleasant set of scents compared to the usual city fair of garbage and filth, and for the life of me I couldn't pin down a source of it. The whole image in front of me, it was almost too perfect.

Leaning out the window further, I looked further inland up toward the mountain, which to my further unease was very bare and lacked snow despite the season. It was a rocky crag of a mountain, with few features and a scraggly peak made up of nothing but shale. Further up, past the peak, there wasn't a cloud above to block the blue sky, though a ring of clouds surrounded the island. It was an almost perfect circle, the clouds looking like they were afraid to come too close to the city.

Back on the ground, the city truly was very vertical, with houses and buildings making their way up the mountain side until it truly became too steep or uneven to even consider building. Many of the houses higher up were a less pure white, looking dusty, almost black in some sections. Seeing such an imperfection brought me a bit of comfort.

Following the ridgeline that sloped down from the mountain, many of the buildings seemed to hold to it as the ridge wrapped around the city, meeting at the ocean with a sharp, acute cliff that looked

ready to crack off into the water below. My gaze however didn't focus on it long, as my eyes were drawn back to a building situated right in the middle of the ridge.

Wrapped in the same pure whites and deep blues of the lower districts, the building, which I knew had to be a church or temple by its grandeur, stood high above all others. While not as large as the one I had seen in Ranadur, its sheer presence, dominating and looking down over the city, left a far grander impact. At that distance, it was hard to see any more detail, but one could still see the many domed roofs and arching corridors as it balanced along the ridge.

I was so caught up in looking at the city that I didn't even notice Tyra behind me, causing me to jump slightly when she spoke.

"You going to spend all day looking out there?" she asked.

Turning from the view, I could see her standing there, already dressed, spear and pack secured to her back. It looked like she had already been awake for some time.

"I'll be ready in a minute," I replied. "Just need to get dressed and then we can get moving on the day."

I started to move toward my pack, but Tyra stopped me. "Don't bother," she said. "I'm going to go on ahead. By myself."

"What do you mean?" I asked, cocking my head slightly. "Go ahead where?"

For a moment, Tyra didn't look at me, staring out toward the window and lightly brushing her lips.

"I've been giving it some thought," she said, walking over to one of the beds and sitting down. "And I think I need to go out and see the city on my own. Find some things out for myself."

I sat down next to her. "This is about what we talked about on the ship, isn't it," I said. "You don't need to face that alone, you know. We can do it together."

"It isn't just that, despite what you may think," she said, shaking her head. "I'm just...I'm so far from home, so far from what I set out to do. A month ago I was in Corzen, now I'm here. I have no idea what I'm doing or where I'm going."

We sat there for a moment more, before she continued. "On the voyage over, I kept thinking about what that soldier in Durrin told me," she said with a sigh.

I had to scratch my brain for a moment to remember what she was talking about, but it soon came back to me. That captain, Stjori, who had saved our lives. How she was a follower of Hernada.

"You want to go visit the Shrine of Hernada?" I asked.

Tyra nodded. "I can't explain it, but the more I've thought about it the more I've felt drawn to go there. Maybe it's because of what I saw in Ranadur, I'm not sure. It might be the place that has answers for me."

Now that was a surprise to me. Stjori had been strong; a capable fighter and leader. It wouldn't surprise me if I learned she was a Devout of Hernada for all she was capable of. Tyra, perhaps in a bid to grow stronger, would certainly want to follow after such an example. But it was hard to believe she would be influenced by a captain of the Assembly.

"I thought that you still hated the Assembly," I replied. "Not quite sure this is exactly in line with that."

"Oh I still think that the Assembly is detestable," Tyra replied. "But ... they're not all bad people. Back in Ranadur, in that church, something clicked with me. I felt as though I finally understood ... something that was kept from me. I'm not sure what."

She let out another sigh. "I don't even know what I think I'll find there," she continued. "But I feel like I just need to go and see. See if I can find some ... direction."

As she spoke, I recognized what she was saying, and in that moment I didn't need to hear anything more. I waited for a moment, before resting a hand on her shoulder. "If you feel that is what's best," I said. "Then you have my full support."

Tyra smiled at that, a look I hadn't seen in some time, before giving me a quick hug. I was surprised at first, not knowing where to place my arms, before returning it. We talked briefly after that, agreeing to meet back at our room that night once we had finished up in the city. Gathering the last of our things we would need, we made our way down and exited the building, taking in the bustle of the streets before going our separate ways. I gave her a wave as she disappeared behind the corner of a building, crowds of people taking her place.

I turned to be on my way, before realizing that I had no idea where I was heading. Most of my thoughts had been preoccupied by the journey; surviving the east, fending off monsters. Now that I was in the capital, I wasn't truly aware of where I should go looking.

My gaze turned back up toward the mountain, toward the church on the ridge. I thought back to the priest we'd met at Ranadur; he had said the central archives held the kind of information I wanted. Perhaps they were housed in the grand building that looked out over me. It was the best place to start, at the least, so I made a path through the crowds toward the imposing structure.

Making my way there was no easy task. The steepness of the streets astounded me, as locals easily passed me as I crawled my way up the sharp inclines and many stairs. The air was unnaturally thick for the altitude, but hills were still hills. I liked to think that a lifetime of farmwork had built me up well, but I was no match to those who had been climbing up and down those streets for years. I stopped and gave praise the few times I came across flat ground.

It also didn't help that the city itself was quite labyrinthian. No main street cut through the buildings, merely short, skinny alleyways and passages of stairs connected everything. Most of the buildings cut out the sky in such tight corridors, leaving me lost and directionless for large stretches, save for the occasional open plaza that allowed me to glance at my destination once more. Despite walking for what seemed like miles, everytime the church peeked out, I looked to be no closer than when I started.

While I wandered the streets of the capital, I was able to get a good look at the people who made it up. Most seemed to be well dressed, wearing well threaded tunics and doublets, though the occasional laborer in a stained working man's clothes mingled about them. Some discussed business, others were engaged in idle chatter, though some clearly had places to go.

However there were those select few people I noticed that stood out among the rest, and even the other locals looked to make way for them. Some of these people wore large, billowing robes; others wore more practical wear. No matter what they looked like though, they all radiated power, a sense of presence I had felt seldomly until then. I had no doubt that they were Devouts as they passed by me and caused the same shiver within me that I had felt facing those cultists in the east.

While I was climbing up a particularly steep hill, I saw one of them at work. He was a stout man, standing before a garden plaza in which the trees lacked leaves and the flower beds were empty. Even the rosemary seemed to droop. As I stood there catching my breath, I could hear him mutter something under his breath, before making a sweeping motion across the space.

Within moments, the garden came alive, with fresh green leaves and multicolored flowers sprouting up in the beds. A few of the people in the square gave excited claps, but I quickly made for the next set of stairs to climb. I saw perhaps twelve or so more of them while I walked, most engaged in various feats, from shifting the earth below then to directing the flow of the wind.

It amazed me the sense of dread it filled me with to be surrounded by so much power. Had I been dropped in the city a year prior, there surely wouldn't have been any limit to the awe I'd have felt. But I had witnessed enough devotional feats in the east. I made a point to avoid those that radiated the divine spark as they passed.

It wasn't until the sun was on the cusp of bringing in the afternoon that I finally decided to ask one of the locals for directions. In one of the many plazas I spotted a younger man walking his way through, face deep in a tome as he navigated around the small fountain in the center and skipped down several steps. Surely a local for how little he tripped while blinded by words.

The man almost didn't notice me at first when I walked up to him, giving me a startled look as he bumped into me, interrupting his usual course.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'm rather lost, looking to get up to the church on the hill. Can you tell me the way?"

The man gave me a confused look as he collected himself, before having a moment of realization. "You mean the central church, Fyrsta Musteri?" he asked, before pointing over behind himself. "You see this street? You follow it up till you reach the Shrine of Vintyr..."

From there the man gave very detailed instructions, perhaps too detailed, and I tried my best to remember the turns and directions at the very least. The man finished up and looked back to me, seeming very proud of himself. I was about to thank him and leave, when a thought crossed my mind.

"Say, you seem to know the city well," I said, which made the man smile a bit more. "Could you tell me how it looks the way it does? I've never seen such brilliant colors on buildings before, or roofs that aren't covered with snow in winter."

"You must be coming from a long way then," the man replied. "It's the work of the Devouts of course."

Devouts, of course, though that still didn't really answer my question. "What do you mean?" I asked. "What do they do?"

"Well all sorts of things!" the man replied with some enthusiasm. "Powerful blessings, cast across the whole city. I'm not sure of them all, though I know Devouts of Ulthalf keep the storm clouds away. That's why we don't get snow."

I thought back to what J alas had said in the desert. That his power was a manipulation of the natural world, all you must do is know the tools to do so. Though even there in the capital, which seemed to have such a large amount of Devouts, could they really hold such power over nature itself? For all I had seen, it must be true.

"I'd be envious if I lived anywhere else," he continued. "Not every place is so fortunate to have Devouts tending the city."

"It does certainly seem...convenient," I said in an attempt to speak kindly. "I suppose not every place is somewhere that a Devout wishes to make their home."

"They wish they could attract them!" the man said with a snickering laugh. "Most all Devouts who aren't out on business are kept here in the capital; have to protect us from those damnable Dusaugan zealots after all. How fortunate for us!"

He gave me a nudge, and I half-heartedly laughed along with him. I thought it odd for so much power to be concentrated in a single place, and the man's conversation had begun to overstay its welcome. With a quick handshake and thank you, I left him and the plaza behind me.

At the very least his directions were dependable, as I finally looked to be on the right trail. There was a fair bit of backtracking and stair climbing, but soon enough I popped out onto a plateau, where the ground was finally flat and I could turn around to see large swaths of the city below me. I could make out the docks far below, which seemed so small as to be insignificant in the city's scale.

With the sun glaring overhead, I made my way along the flattened street, which in fact ran along the ridgeline, my legs thankful for the rest. There were far fewer houses, and as I approached the church they thinned out even more and allowed for the street to widen. Soon enough, the houses were completely gone, replaced with gardens and trees as I came about the church grounds.

It was hard to tell when looking up at it from below, but standing up on its level, the church was much grander than it initially seemed. It was a large complex, made up of many different, interconnected buildings, all featuring the same white and blue colors. Along the many walls, large tinted windows allowed one to peer inside and see people shuffling around the halls, locked in conversation or moving somewhere in a hurry.

I briefly remembered that this church was far more than just a religious site, some place for people to gather and pray; it was also the seat of government for Larafell. Looking at the people walking the halls, I wondered if my mother had been amongst them, talking the way they likely were about politics and religion. What would she have said?

I shook my head. Such thoughts were unbecoming. There was no need for speculation like that; soon I would have the facts laid out before me.

The grounds surrounding the buildings were just as mesmerizing as the complex itself. They were largely made up of gardens, with colorful flowers of all shades and variety, many of which I couldn't place, growing along the pathways. There was a faint, sweet smell on the breeze, the many different flowers and plants all blending together. A small stream made its way through, forming several ponds that were surrounded by benches and shaded with large willow trees that drooped over them. It looked like the perfect spot to sit and let the world pass by without you.

Before long, I was approaching the main entrance on the complex; a tall, arching building, though nowhere near the tallest, which was watched over by four guards. Two were traditional soldiers, dressed in the way I had come to expect, while the other two were large stone statues that flanked the large, reinforced doors. Each statue was easily 20 feet tall, depicting men whose identity I couldn't place, holding a sword and staff respectively. I felt as though they were watching me, staring down from on high as I grew closer.

One of the guards, a larger man, held up his hand, making me stop a few feet from him. He asked me in a rough voice what business I had in the temple, while his partner stood stoic next to him. I began to tell him that I wanted access to the archives, but he soon interrupted me.

"No one enters unless they are an Assembly member, on Assembly business, or has had a member sponsor them," he said curtly. "Fyrsta Musteri is not open for public use."

"Surely there is some way you can let me in," I began to say. "I need to see..."

The guard cut me off. "The temple is not open to the public. Move along."

I wanted to argue with the man further, but I thought better of it, not wanting to end up in a cell somewhere. Dejected, and perhaps fuming from the ears, I stepped away from the entrance, slowly walking back the way I had come. The lush gardens I had passed before now seemed to be mocking me, knowing I couldn't enter them.

What now, I thought. The archives had been the one place I could think of for definitive answers, and unless I could convince someone to let me in, I was barred from it. Any optimism from the start of the day had evaporated, and I was stuck fuming to myself. Once I was out of view from the guards, I picked up a loose stone from the road, feeling its rough edges before chucking it as hard as I could into the gardens with a sharp cry. I didn't care about the glances I got from the few passersby that saw me.

I sat down on one of the benches along the road, people passing by as I thought. For all my hopes and ambition, I had no idea how the Assembly worked. Even if I could find a member, there was little chance I could convince them to sponsor me. Breaking in was no real option either, the chair of Larafell's government likely had adequate security.

Suddenly, I couldn't think anymore. My mind grew clouded as my lungs began to tighten, and all I could focus on was the dread that had come over me. It was all I could do to stop my teeth from clenching as I became overwhelmed by the very act of sitting there, angry tears welling in my eyes.

My hand was trembling, my whole forearm twisting back and forth. The noise of the street, the smells of the gardens, it all felt overstimulating and I put my head in my hands to block it all out. I need to calm down, I thought. Think cool thoughts. But that was easier said than done, my every thought was a spiraling force of negativity. To come so far for nothing, I wanted to curse the Assembly, curse the gods, act in such a way that would make them suffer as I was.

And just as I was about to break down, to become a frothing madman right there on the street, a single thought parted the way and leveled my mind. A memory, the last thing I had heard Jalas say.

"You shall be bare and desperate, calling for help, but it will, not, come."

For whatever reason, I was suddenly calm. Looking down, my hand had stopped trembling, and the sounds of the city were peaceful once more. The memory echoed itself again, but this time I silenced it before it could finish. The very thought of Jalas having been right, of needing him there in that moment, filled me with a defiant urge. I wouldn't let his last words be right.

As I sat there thinking, pondering how I would make that so, a woman in a yellow tunic passed by my view. She was in a hurry, her hands full of writing supplies, her every step teetering as she jogged past. I was able to make out a small symbol pinned to her tunic, that of a winged person in stride. It was a familiar symbol that, alongside the color, marked her as a follower of Vintyr.

A new thought came to me as I watched her round a corner and disappear down another road. The main church was barred to the public, but this was the capital, a holy city. There would be many different shrines to the gods dotted around, likely open for people to pray at.

I wasn't under any illusions that they would have the information I sought. Perhaps they did and my journey would be short. But there was always the chance that some compassionate soul would take pity on my cause and sponsor my entrance into the archives. Remembering the shrine of Vintyr I had passed on the way up, I hurried my way along the cobbled roads.

Traveling toward the ocean was far quicker than battling upward, and I soon arrived at the relatively small building, at least compared to that of Fyrsta Muster, no larger than the village church back home. It was relatively plain, its distinguishing feature being the symbol of Vintyr displayed above the entrance, with a simple, open wooden door inviting people in.

The shrine was just as quaint on the inside as it had been on the outside, with a few places set aside for offerings and a statue on the back wall. The statue depicted what I assumed to be Vintyr, though this one showed her as a plain, regular woman rather than that of one with a mouse's head. I paid it little mind as I walked further in.

The room was mostly empty to match the few offerings I could see, with only myself and one follower who was cleaning around the statue. I recognized them as the woman that had passed by me earlier. Now that she wasn't running, I could see her a little better.

She was younger, much younger than I was, moving around with a quick, nervous energy. In her haste, she occasionally had to correct the large lensed glasses she wore, her quick movements causing them to constantly slide down her nose.

She barely noticed me as I walked up to her, the greeting I gave causing her to jump slightly and drop the rag she had been holding.

"Oh, sorry if I surprised you there," I said as I leaned down to pick the cloth up.

She took a moment to reorient herself, clasping her chest and taking a deep breath. "It's alright," she replied, taking the rag from my hand. "So few people have been in lately, I've just been lost in my own thoughts."

We exchanged a few more pleasantries, talking about the lack of visitors and the busy work involved with handling the shrine, before she finally asked, "Oh, well I suppose you had a reason for coming in, what can I do for you?"

I explained to her the situation, about looking for information on the Prestur family, careful to avoid mentioning my connection to them, and saying how I had been barred from the central archives.

"I was just wanting to see if you had any information here that might be helpful," I finished.

She gave me a sympathetic look before replying, "I'm sorry, I don't think we have anything like that here. I'm pretty new to this shrine, just recently assigned actually, so I wouldn't even know where to look."

"That's alright," I said with a sigh. "I didn't expect much anyway."

I thought better then to ask if she could sponsor my entrance to the archives; I didn't want to impose on such a frazzled person, and being a newer member she likely couldn't. I was about to ask her where I might find another shrine to ask around at, but when looking down at her, something caught my eye. The symbol she wore, that of Vintyr, which upon closer inspection featured the familiar image of a dashing mouse rather than that of a person.

"If you don't mind my asking," I said. "Where did you get that pin? It reminds me a lot of the shrines in Bragur."

"You have a sharp eye," she replied, her eyes lighting up as she played with the pin. "I got this on a pilgrimage to Bragur! We were in the Ruglen region, sacredest area in Bragur I'm sure you know, and we were passing through a village..."

She continued on for a time, enthusiastically talking about her travels and occasionally asking me questions about Bragur, which I did my best to answer. She seemed to know her stuff, talking about the origins of certain beliefs and the places they are connected to. She even knew the Wayfarer's prayer, something I had only heard in passing on the roads of Bragur. She almost remind me of Jalas for all she knew.

"It's rather interesting," she continued, turning to look at the statue. "The lowlands tend to lean much further into the animal epithet than we do here. That's why you can often find such a stark contrast between regions."

"Do you know where they come from?" I asked. "Those differences, I mean."

“Oh, there’s no real way of telling unfortunately,” she replied. “Likely regional variations growing and changing overtime, but the current depictions you see around have been like that for centuries. It’s as though they’ve always had them...”

She trailed off, lost in thought before looking away and turning to the papers and books she had been carrying. I looked at her quizzically as she rummaged through them, flinging paper and scrolls aside before finally producing a book and mumbling to herself as she paged through it. She let out an excited, shrill exclamation, turning back to me.

“You’re in a bit of luck! When you said the name Prestur I thought it sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it. I’ve done a bit of research into the subject, about worship and all,” she said. “And I remembered that in my research the name Prestur had come up.”

She turned the book toward me. I looked down to see a very wordy page, densely packed with notes about all sorts of things regarding gods and worship. Though on the left hand side, an image jumped out at me, practically leaping off the page; that of a goat, bounding from one rock to another.

“From what I’ve read, the symbol of the goat was one often used by House Prestur,” she said. “The same symbol that is used to depict Skijah.”

“God of the sky,” I finished.

She gave me a nod. “Apparently their house and that section of the clergy were very close in certain matters,” she said, reading from the book. “Perhaps you should visit the shrine they have here in the city. You might be able to find out more about what you want to know, more than here at least.”

The very thought had me brimming with more hope than I had had in days. We talked a moment longer, with her giving me directions to the shrine of Skijah. I thanked her profusely, shaking her hand and giving her a wave as I left the shrine, getting a last glance as she returned to her work with a smile on her face.

Unfortunately, the followers at the shrine of Skijah were far less helpful. Unlike the shrine of Vintyr, there were believers and worshippers in abundance; congregants spilling out into the street, hucksters selling some valueless garbage to whoever may listen, the whole mass of people filling the building despite it looking double the size of the other shrine.

When I had finally been able to wade through the people knelt down at statues or offering up trinkets, the priests and followers gave me very little time. They held little concern for the odd requests of a person off the street, for they had little thought outside their duty and preferred to take questions which had pre-rehearsed answers. The few of them that bothered to listen to me were far too young to know of families that ruled 40 years prior, and suggested that I look in the central archives for what I was looking for. I left rather dejectedly after that.

I wandered almost aimlessly after that, stopping at shrines and other places of note that I passed along the way. All of them had similar answers for me to the others, that being a void of any information. Many claimed to have never even heard the name Prestur, though the few nervous glances and squinted looks suggested they knew more. I didn’t press them, out of fear for why those looks were given to begin with.

Finally, I came across the place that I had dreaded coming to. Off the larger roads, in what could only be described as back alleys, standing in an alcove of an alcove. In front of me, almost hiding away, stood a rather modest shrine, not as small as that of Vintyr but not as large and full as the more popular ones. Above the doorway rested the symbol of the shrine, a hawk's feather. The symbol of Pekklar.

The god of knowledge, one would think that it would have been one of the first places to visit on such a search, and it had crossed my mind at the start. The truth was, I wanted to avoid it at all costs, but I was out of any other real option. Looking at the feather only reminded me of Jalas, of how in a certain way, I was proving him right. My emotions were all muddled like a soup mixed with goat's milk, unsure of what they meant and making my stomach hurt.

I let out a heavy sigh, wrestling with the jammed door for a moment before slowly stepping into the shrine.

There wasn't a single soul inside, at least within the main chamber, my footsteps echoing ever so slightly. Even the shrine of Vintyr, for its lack of visitors, still had a follower present. I called out to see if anyone would answer, but the only response was the soft flicker of candle light.

The room was mostly lost in clutter, with books and scrolls and tanned sheepskin littering the many shelves on the walls and spilling out onto the floor. It seemed more akin to a library after a windstorm than a shrine to a god. There seemed to be neither a place to leave offerings, nor a place to pray.

After shuffling around the room, looking around and careful not to slip on the loose pages that populated the floor, I made my way over to a statue on the back wall. Its features were hard to make out, with singed blotches decorating the stonework, but the feathery features and sense of presence made it clear to be a statue of Pekklar.

I stood there, looking at the figure for a time. What a thing to be, a god of knowledge, I thought. To know everything in the world, to have it all only be a thought away. Such knowledge would likely weigh on any mortal man, to know what was and what was to be, the only power in it being the knowing of it. But what I wouldn't give to have that knowledge, to merely think a thought and know it. Not knowing was worse than any of the horrors one would be forced to learn.

But perhaps I would be stuck not knowing, I thought further. Not knowing about my mother, not knowing who she was, or how I fit into all of it. The city, I felt so detached from it all, an outsider peering in, yet I knew that the connection was still there. It wasn't my life; mine was out in fields of grain, working the land and looking out for one another. Yet I couldn't help but be pulled in closer, to wonder what life would have been, had things been different. It wasn't something I could just let go of.

I let out a sigh, letting my thoughts rumble around some more and settle down. It was getting late in the day, close to the time when I was supposed to meet up with Tyra. Perhaps she would have found something, something that would allow us access to the central archives, I thought. We could start again the next day, together, refreshed and with a new plan.

I was still so caught in my thoughts, that the sound of a familiar voice behind me made me jump out of instinct.

"You're a bit lost, aren't you?"

I whipped around, just in time to see a familiar form, Jalas, step out from the shadows, a blank look on his face and a book in hand. I went through a thousand emotions within a second, and wasted no time in lunging at him.

Ch 14

Dissenting Views on the Trial of the Accursed

By Kel'ras the Seer

It is my firm belief that on this day, the final moon of Manui in the year 1293, the Third Assembly has sealed its fate. We as a body will no longer be able to claim to rule in the name of justice or morality, for we have gone beyond our own means to act as arbiters in matters that are far beyond us. Today will be looked back upon as a regression to a time without gods and without faith, before the great coming and uniting of Larafell. The same fate that befell the First and Second Assemblies will soon come for us.

By forcing the followers of Duasuga into exile, we have not only denied the positive, good works of that corner of the faith, we also deny a god herself. This can be seen as nothing more than a grand heresy upon which the faithful populace will not stand, rightfully so. And for what? A select few cases of misusing power? I only need to look at the faiths of Hernada or Skendir, or at this very council to find such similar faults, and yet they still stand within city walls.

The arguments for outlawing and exile have no bearing on what was brought before us, merely arguments to serve as a mist in which to hide those supporters true intentions. To elevate their power, to elevate their standing in which they can feel so empowered as to continue along this line of heresy. Neither I, nor the gods, will stand for such a faithless grab at power.

I have looked upon the stars, upon the signs, and they all point to ruin. Perhaps not in our lifetimes, but we have condemned those who will come after us to an era of unrest and faithlessness. It is my firm belief that we must rescind this order of exile, and make the faith whole once more. Only then can we once again rule in the god's names. I shall do everything in my power to see it so.

I couldn't remember when I threw the first punch, only that I did. My memory only began once Jalas and I were already on the floor, brawling alongside piles of books and parchment as I tried to land a blow on him. Any previous thoughts of longing were gone, I could only feel anger as I tussled with him. For his part, Jalas managed to dodge whatever meaningful attacks came his way, weaving his way out from under me, clawing himself up to his feet and backing away from me.

In that moment, I didn't care what fate befell either of us. For all his postulating, he had dared to show his face once more, find me somehow. I couldn't let him triumph over me any longer.

Spinning around toward him, my sword was out in an instant flash of steel, only to be met by light dancing in Jalas's hands as he stood defensively. Perhaps he could blow me away with whatever

powers he wielded, or I could run him through before that; there was no way to really know, even with all the knowledge of the world. So we both stood there, catching our breaths, unsure of what to do.

Finally, Jalas spoke. "Let's not be hasty now," he spoke between breaths. "There isn't much time and still plenty left to do. I just want to talk."

"Talk? I think I've already heard you talk plenty," I replied. "There's nothing I want to hear from you anymore."

"Is that so?" he asked. "Then why are you here, in this unkempt place? Surely not for the sight of it."

Like always, he had hit it on the head, though I didn't want him to know it. So I didn't respond, instead choosing to keep watching him and hiding my face.

"Let me guess," he continued. "They wouldn't let you in the central archives, being the non-member you are, and you were forced to look elsewhere. I suppose any other place you tried didn't have the answers you were looking for."

He began to step forward, ever so slightly, though each step made me hold my blade a little higher. "So lost and desperate, you followed that thought, deep within yourself, that told you of the one person who might still have an answer for you."

"And so what of it?" I asked, breaking my facade. "I'm supposed to come crawling back to you then? To grovel and beg 'Oh please sir' for an answer? I don't think so."

"All I'm asking for," he said. "Is a little trust. Hear me out, and I can give you what you are looking for."

"Yes, because you have been so trustworthy," I replied. "I can't think of many things you said in our time together that wasn't a lie in the end."

"I couldn't tell you the truth, at least the full truth, then," he said. "But now things are different. We are here in the capital, there's time now. Time to decide on my proposal."

"What proposal would that even be?" I asked, not that I would be open to any prospect he tried to leverage. "I can't see any outcome here that has me going along with you."

"I know you may think our goals separate," Jalas replied. "I've hidden the truth from you, yes, but not to deceive you. Rather, it was to bring you to the truth, so that you may see it with your own eyes."

"And I don't suppose you'll tell me what that is, will you?" I asked plainly.

Jalas shook his head. "I can't say until you see the truth for yourself," he said. "And for you to see that, I need you to trust me just this one time more. Then, I promise, you will get the answers you want."

The anger I was feeling began to turn toward myself as I started to consider listening to him. I didn't trust him, couldn't trust him. To have him show up out of nowhere, knowing where I would be, should have only reinforced that sentiment. But the creeping thought made its way back up to the surface; he also knew things, secret, whispered things long forgotten. I never really had a choice.

"Answer me this," I finally replied. "And I might consider it."

Jalas didn't reply, merely giving me a nod.

"Why did you keep that information from me, that name that you held?" I continued. "What purpose could it serve to deprive me of that?"

"It's not an easy answer," he replied. "But the short of it is that if I had told you when we met, you wouldn't be here now. And I need you here, in Dyrlega."

"And why would you need that?" I asked.

"So that you can decide for yourself which path you want to choose," he replied. "Whether or not you'll follow in her footsteps."

I was taken aback by that. Follow in her footsteps? I had no idea what he was talking about, and while I tried to parse it out, I could see Jalas growing uneasy. He started to fidget, looking behind himself as though he heard something.

"The choice is yours," he said. "But if you really want the full picture you need to follow me."

My mind was racing. Those creeping thoughts had fully encompassed me, and any rational thoughts of former betrayals were fighting a losing battle. Still holding onto some measure of caution, I sheathed my sword, eliciting a small smile from Jalas and the light fading from his hand.

"Just so we're clear," I said. "You do anything I don't like, I'll leave, find another way."

"I wouldn't blame you," replied Jalas. With that, he turned and made for the front entrance, and I quickly followed after him.

The light of the day was growing low as we exited the disheveled shrine, casting the alley in shadow. Jalas wasted little time, walking at a jogging pace along the street, ducking in and out of side roads and alleys as I tried my best to keep up. I noticed he kept off the main roads, leading us along forgotten streets that showed the few bits of wear I had seen in the city.

We weaved our way back up towards Fyrsta Musteri, climbing higher and higher until we had nearly reached the plateau. The road was in sight, however before reaching it, Jalas made a sharp turn to the left, taking us down another alley before stopping in front of a building. It looked much like those that surrounded it, though it appeared to be empty, unlivd in quite some time. No furniture could be seen through the windows and weeds grew in the cracks near the foundation.

Walking up to the door, Jalas pulled a key from his pocket, looking up and down the alley a few times before inserting it and quickly waving me inside. As I stepped in he quickly shut the door, walking off into another room. Looking around, the inside was just as empty as it had appeared, bare walls and floors showing signs of mildew and mold. The other rooms we passed through were no different, until we came to a backroom of the building.

Unlike the others, this room still had a few items; a broken chair, a table, and most notably a large stove with a feather branded to its side. The back wall of the room was also different, being made of stone rather than wood, the smooth river rocks causing grooves and creases along its length. It reminded me of the homes back in Bragur.

Jalas moved up to the wall, looking it over and grabbing at several of the stones. Finally, one of the stones came loose in his hand, coming out of the wall to reveal a keyhole. Pulling a different key from his robe, he inserted it and turned, a loud mechanical sound coming from the wall as springs and gear whirled up from a long slumber. After a few moments of strained clicking and clunking, a portion of the wall, which until then had blended in seamlessly, slowly separated and moved inward, revealing a passageway as the stone came to a rest.

With a quick gesture, Jalas hurried in, and I hesitantly followed in after. The passage had a low ceiling and close in walls, making it so both of us had to duck as we entered. The light from the room could barely make it past us into the dank passage, and after a few moments I could hear the wall behind us shut, drawing us in complete darkness. I could hear Jalas mutter a few words, an orb of light coming to life in his hand and illuminating the path ahead as we began our trek down it.

The passage soon enough became a labyrinth, as one fork in the road became two, became ten, twenty. Jalas showed little hesitation at each juncture, quickly weaving his way through the maze of tunnels, myself trying to keep up with him the best I could. A Devout of Pekklar, he must know the way by some divination, I thought. Or perhaps, they had been tunnels he had traveled before, the stones familiar beneath his feet.

There were some sections that still seemed to vex him however. One portion of the path became more and more encumbered with moss as we walked it, until it was revealed that the source of its growth was a completely flooded section, with water nearly touching the ceiling. We waded through it as quickly as possible, thoughts of drowning filling my head the entire time my head was touching the water. Other sections were completely caved in, causing Jalas to curse and backtrack the way we had come.

We seemed to travel for quite some time, though perhaps it was the low ceilings and being unground that was doing the talking. Just when it seemed like we had traveled along the whole length of the city, we came to a stop, the sudden move almost causing me to bump into Jalas.

We were at a dead end, the wall in front of us no different than the others we had seen since entering. Thinking we had come to another cave in, I was ready to turn around again, but the wall didn't stop Jalas from walking up to it and speaking softly a set of words. The wall let out a low moan as it shuddered and slowly opened against the sound of rust and corrosion. Soon enough, the way was open, with Jalas stepping through, my own feet bringing me along soon after.

My back was grateful, as I could finally stand up straight in the new room we had entered. As I finished stretching out, I could immediately tell the vast scale of area as I looked around, the light that Jalas held being unable to light even the closest corners of the structure. Pillars to both my sides rose up, ascending into darkness above, supporting a ceiling too far away to know the height of.

Unlike the passageways that we had taken to get there, the immediate area had much flatter, cut stone, white like the stone of the church on the ridge. However the white barely made its way through all the black ash and soot that covered it. I could tell a fire of some large scale had clearly touched the room, the ash merely a pretext to what lay before us.

As I looked around the room with a certain level of wonder, I could tell Jalas didn't feel quite the same. He only looked upon the room with saddened eyes, though they mostly remained closed as he

spoke something to himself, as though he were preparing himself for something. Perhaps he knew what was beyond the edges of the light.

Jalas and I began to walk further in, revealing more of the room, and I could see what was truly there. Books, hundreds of them, lay flung around the room, all in various states of damage. Most looked too charred to even make out a single word on their pages. Large spears of charcoal, likely the remains of bookcases and tables, struck up from the piles of ash on either side of us, charred blades ready to strike us down.

Finally, we stopped in front of a large, dual staircase that rose around a charred statue. I could tell, even in its burned state, that it was a statue of Pekklar. The bird resting on his shoulder made it unmistakable. I could see Jalas looking at it, sadness creeping back into his eye as he just stood there. Finally, he ripped his gaze from the statue, turning to face me.

“Well, we’ve arrived,” he said.

“What is this place?” I asked, though I could feel an answer clawing its way up from the back of my mind. Jalas spoke just as I knew myself.

“The central archives,” he replied. “Or at least what's left of them.”

With that, Jalas mumbled a few words, creating a hand motion around the light in his hand. Soon he stopped, throwing the light into the air, where it scattered into a hundred copies of itself. The full room suddenly came into view, and I almost fell down at the sight.

The room was long, nearly as big as the main room of the church in Ranadur, and nearly as tall. The center was clear, flanked on either side by several stories off balconies and walkways, the large pillars supporting it all. Now that the ceiling was illuminated, I could see the paintings that decorated it. From end to end were a vast collection of events, from battles I couldn’t place to great acts I couldn’t name to depictions I couldn’t even describe for how spectacular they looked.

Looking down from the murals, I could see the full scope of the damage the place had sustained. The piles of ash were far deeper than I had initially thought, with large drifts of the stuff being settled against the walls. Scorch marks stretched up and down the walls, some looking like the results of large blasts rather than a simple fire. On the farthest walls, a few splatterings of oak brown could be seen. There were at least a few portions that had been spared from the flames.

Looking it all over, I couldn’t help but feel a tremendous feeling of loss. It felt as though I was deprived of something I didn’t even know the name of. I could have stood there, staring out at the ruins lost in thought, if Jalas hadn’t spoken.

“It’s saddening, isn’t it?” he asked. “To know that there is so much we once knew.”

“What happened here?” I asked, ignoring his question. “I thought...I thought the archives were fine, housed in Fyrsta Musteri.”

Jalas shook his head. “Perhaps the new archives,” he replied. “A cheap imitation of what once was, which could only hope to replicate a fraction of the knowledge once stored here. No, the true central archives were destroyed long ago.”

Jalas walked over to one of the sets of stairs, sitting down and looking out over the piles of ash.

"I should have been here," he said, a pained look in his eyes. "I should have been here to save it."

I slowly walked toward Jalas, until I was standing next to him. "What happened here?" I asked. He took a moment, breathing in deeply before speaking.

"The Third Assembly had been fractured for nearly 200 years when the fire was started," he said. "Different factions with different ideas of what was right, what was wrong, how best to rule, without the respect and civil debate of the past. One faction though, which held a majority vote within the Assembly, was the most radical. Though that's just another way of saying heretical."

His gaze landed on an untouched area of the room, the bookshelves merely licked by the flames, though the books had long been taken elsewhere.

"It was those ancestors of that majority group that had outlawed Dasugan worship you know," he said offhandedly. "Sought to punish a small sect of followers by cutting out a whole section of the faith. And 40 years ago, that majority decided to continue the purification of the faith that had been started all those years prior."

That came as a surprise to me. Every Dasugan cultist we had met had been rather bloodthirsty; had there been a time when there was only a handful like that? Jalas had gone from sitting to walking, moving his way toward the selves as I followed behind.

"Why outlaw such a thing?" I asked. "Why split the faith in such a manner?"

Jalas shook his head. "There are many reasons, and I'm sure some felt it to be a real danger. Though many others saw it as a chance to elevate new, fringe doctrine, to erase what they saw as a blight on their way of worship."

"Their plan was to burn the archives and kill the Devouts of Pekklar, so that there would be no trace that such a god of death ever existed, and that in time, she would be forgotten by even those who held her name close. They nearly succeeded with the first part."

"But you got away," I cut in.

Jalas nodded. "As did others. There had been talks of unrest for weeks following that burning, sermons spoken about the evils that still lay within the capital. When I saw the flames, I knew to run. It wasn't until later that I heard a coalition of other Assembly members had attacked the offending group soon after, and that many on both sides layed dead. I was...I should have stayed and died alongside them, if it meant saving this place."

A new thought sprang forth, that of when Jalas and I had first met.

"So all that talk of the Collapse," I said. "Of it being pirates or cultists burning the city."

"Assembly lies," Jalas finished. "So that the nation at large would never know the truth. That the Assembly ate itself alive. So that the Fourth Assembly could form to combat the Resurgence they had caused."

We stood there in silence, gazing out at the room. It was only now that I could notice the charred skulls that dotted the piles of ash. I thought back to the disheveled state of the shrine of Pekklor, the reason for its desertion now apparent. I refrained from confirming it with Jalas.

“So I never had any real chance, did I?” I asked. “I was never going to find anything here.”

Jalas shook his head. “Not here, no,” he replied. “But that doesn’t mean that the information doesn’t exist.”

As he spoke, he set down his bag and pulled from it a large book, looking like a ledger. It was clearly worn, both from age and damage, the pages a sickly yellow on the edges and the casing blackened from flame. Taking the book in my hands, I looked over the aged cover, being able to faintly make out a single word: *Prestur*.

Before I knew it the book was open, and I was flipping through the pages as carefully as my shaking hands would allow. The book went back ages, with entries of people that lived a thousand years prior, though they almost all held similar distinctions. That of wealth, that of nobility, that of people who wielded power.

I skimmed through for a time, before finally skipping to the last few pages, to the most recent entries. There, on the top of the page, I saw what I was looking for: Holfa Prestur. After so much time, after so much distance, I couldn’t believe that it was in front of me. The joy radiating through me was only cut by another sinking feeling, one which was somehow able to tear my eyes from the page.

“How long have you had this?” I asked Jalas. “Truthfully?”

Jalas hesitated for a moment, looking off into some far corner of the room before responding. “I’ve had it longer than I’ve known you,” he said. “Though it didn’t mean much until we met.”

His words were like daggers to the chest, but I tried my best to keep anger from rising in me. “Why not show it to me?” I asked. “Why wait until now?”

Jalas looked down, seemingly in shame, trying his best to find the right words.

“I couldn’t say before why I’ve done what I’ve done,” he said, and I thought back to the desert, when I swore either Tyra or I would have taken his head off. “I choose to work with the cultists to hurt those that had wronged me, who burned the thing I swore to protect and killed those who were sworn alongside me. It was only when I saw them burn Hartre that I saw they were no different.”

“If I had told you who I was then, if I had given you what you wanted back at that bar, you wouldn’t be here now,” he continued. “And I needed you to see where it all began, where all this fighting started, so that you could see the fate that has befallen us. So that maybe, we could help each other.”

As the last of his words landed on my ears, I looked again at the book in my hands. Each word, each careful stroke of the brush, only filled me with an anger of what could have been, until I couldn’t hold the weight of it any longer.

“And to what end has this all been then?!” I said, raising my voice. “What’s been the point of stringing me along, depriving me of the very thing I’ve sought after? You talk of loss, of sacrifice, but you

abstain from saying what it all means, where it all ends. What sick, twisted goal of yours does it all serve?!"

I stopped to catch my breath, and I could see that Jalas was unphased by my outburst, as though he expected it from me. He took a moment to reply, only doing so once I had regained my own composure.

"Tell me," he said. "Who currently rules Larafell?"

I was taken aback by the question. "The Fourth Assembly?"

Jalas nodded. "Then tell me, who makes up that body?"

"I...don't know."

Jalas shook his head. "40 years ago, a war was started, but not between the Assembly and Dasugan cultists. That came soon after. The true war, the one that has cast this nation into chaos, is the war between those heretical Assembly members, and those members who opposed them."

"The Third Assembly died, and it was only through a common enemy that both sides were able to tentatively rejoin into the Fourth Assembly. Now, 40 years on, it is still those few surviving noble houses and church officials that make up the Assembly ruling class, survivors of a war put on hold by a greater threat."

"And so they still sit there, those heretics and their descendants, veiling for their false dogma. Make no mistake, once the problem of Dausuga is finished, they will not hesitate to begin the fight once again. So when you ask me what it is I want, I think the answer is all very clear."

It finally was. After so much time wondering, the answer was indeed very clear. Not something so base as revenge, but something more. "You want justice," I replied. "To see them stripped of any power before more is lost."

Jalas nodded, giving another somber look out to the ashen dunes. "My final confession; I never lost my need for revenge. It merely stagnated once I knew I couldn't work with those zealots of the east. But now it has been reignited by divine providence."

"But how does it involve me?" I pressed again. "Why do you want me here?"

"Because you and I are very much alike," Jalas replied. "For we share a similar pain, a similar situation, inflicted by the same group."

"You mean the Third Assembly, or heretics, whichever," I said. "What have they done to me?"

Jalas looked at me. "I think it's quite obvious. House Prestur was one of the leading noble houses, you know. Famed for their silver tongues and lightning wit, using such skills to great use in the Assembly system as far back as the first. They were also one of the main houses that rallied against banning Dausugan worship."

"So, when the time came to retaliate after the Great Fire, House Prestur was right there, fighting against the heretics to the last. In the end, all but one of their line were slain."

“So my mother...” I began.

“Was the last member of that noble house when she fled from Larafell,” J alas finished. “And in the following years, many thought that the house’s line had died off completely. Until I met you.”

It all began to click together in my mind. It was no wonder that my father had failed to find anything himself, for my mother had made sure that there was almost no way to trace her back. And why wouldn’t she, no doubt in fear of the forces that could have come crashing down on our little village should she have been discovered.

“You are the last of your line, the last inheritor of the name Prestur,” J alas continued. “The fault of which being those heretical noblemen who sit in power right now. They’ve stripped us both of what was, and what could have been. So I’m telling you now, we’re on the same side here, the side of the wronged. Together, we can put things right, give your mother and all those others the justice they deserve. Restore the faith and make it all whole.”

Those last few words rang in my mind, meshing together with all the other thoughts that were clogging it. It was so much to take in to the point of being overwhelming, I didn’t know what to think. A war I had never known about, ancestors whose names I’d never heard, and J alas expected me to be a part of it?

I had no connection to any of it, to such noble prospects and political inquiries. My place was out in the field, out in the land, working and toiling until the day was done and the people could relax with one another and share in tales of the toil. Yet I knew I couldn’t return to that, for that time was over. There was no one left for me to go back to, no further task to complete. I had no place in the capital, but I also had no place at home. There was truthfully no place that I belonged.

I looked back down to the biography of my name, and read along the words that accompanied the section of Holfa Prestur, my mother. Born in the spring to her parents, Eigin and Konu Prestur, becoming the youngest of seven siblings. Found early in her life to be gifted in the devotional arts, and was henceforth trained and taught in the ways of devotion. Became a follower of Fradurst and joined as an Assembly member five years before the Great Fire would take place, spending most of her time advocating for peace.

As I read more and more, as I got to know more about her life, I could help but feel such an immense feeling of loss. It was what I had been searching for for months, directly in front of me, but as I read I felt as though I had lost it all over again. Her life, and that of everyone held within the pages, destroyed, ripped apart, because of someone’s misguided self-righteousness. Fighting for what you believed in, only to be forced to flee from everything you knew.

I pulled my mother’s necklace from my pocket, letting the gold glisten under the orbs of light. It was a small pendant, really, two tiny antlers curving up to form the outer rim and a small leaf printed on its face. Glancing back to the book, I could only imagine how it would have looked on her.

I looked up from the book, and I knew my decision. “Alright then. I’ll do it.”

J alas perked up at that, and seemed ready to launch into something, but I cut him off.

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“But let me be clear,” I continued. “I’m doing this for myself, to honor my mother. I don’t care for what happens outside that. I won’t be used again, Jalas. Understood?”

To that Jalas nodded, and I let out a sigh.

“Good,” I said. “Now, how is this going to work?”

Jalas revealed an earnest, toothless smile. “We’ll start with your name. Around here, names like yours still hold quite a lot of power, as much as any Devout there is.”

We talked more, for a time, though I scantily remembered what of. We soon left the charred archives, making our way back through the labyrinth and out into the old house. It was night time when we emerged, the whole city bathed in the light of the moon, the streets and houses a pale gray.

I remembered my first time looking out at the city, how vast and imposing it had seemed. How foreign it was. But looking out at it again, I felt something else. I felt as though a weight had been lifted from me, that the last months of unease had been washed away. I felt as though I were finally home.