

Escapades of Fay Willows - Book 1

As you glance through the books on display within this library, your eyes catch notice of this peculiar title. Thumbing through the pages, you feel that the writer was likely from a fairly humble background; very much at odds with the various kings, nobles, and other peoples of means who you usually see authoring books. On a whim you decide to delve into this curiosity further.

Chapter 1 - Devastation of the Spellblaze

I remember the devastation when I first made my journey to Elvala. Not a soul escaped the touch of the Spellblaze and no one could feel the pain and sorrow of the lands more than a thalor like myself. I know that those back home still seethe with rage; even I still sometimes feel my emotions from that moment, now and again. It was a terrible day I wish I could forget, but never will.

If I were to describe my years growing up in my birthplace, it would be summed up pretty easily as 'boring, uneventful, and repetitive'. I grew up in forests that no longer exist, collecting wood from fallen and dead trees, and planting and cultivating new trees to grow. The wood I collected was stored in a large stockpile behind my house and used to fashion staves or bows by other skilled thaloran who lived nearby. The proceeds from our exports helped us to buy items that we couldn't readily find in our forests or in the lands of the humans and halflings nearby.

That all changed on that one day. The skies abruptly alternated between various shades of purple and the tops of all the trees burst into a cacophony of sickening colors. Below me the earth began to shake to its very foundation; the ground then tearing apart, trees being uprooted and crashing down. Perhaps worst of all was the air that howled around me, a spreading dark wind that swept through the trees in a wave of decay. It perverted the lands and caused sickness to everything it touched, myself included. By sheer luck I somehow survived the devastation. I'm not entirely sure how I did. Many of my fellow thaloran did not.

Gone was the home of which I lived in and the wood that I had collected. Gone were the forests that I planted or had stood from generations before my time. All that was left around me now was the dead husks of trees, the ruined settlement I grew up in, and the many misshapen corpses of those I had once lived with. I joined together with those that

survived, to rescue who we could; many though succumbing to their injuries, both before and after being rescued. It was when we began to bury the corpses that I remember hearing the cries of anguish for the loss of loved ones, not to mention the destruction of nature all around us.

Eventually soldiers came for us and we were led towards our capital for shelter, away from the polluted lands that had once been my home. Reaching the city, I was greeted with a truly chaotic display: Refugees haphazardly streaming in from other settlements, the wounded lining the streets, and almost everyone within the capital howling in open hysteria. I was a bit perplexed at first, as the wounded weren't being tended to, or the refugees being housed. It wasn't long before I learned the reason for the maddening sounds spewing from the lungs of the populace: This catastrophe being a result of a spell cast by shaloran mages! I can still feel the tense unthinking rage I felt then even now as I recall it.

It was at that point I decided that I would visit the Shaloran lands. I felt at the time that I had made this decision of my own volition, to enact retribution against the Shaloran; now though, I don't know if that was truly the case. Regardless of my reasoning, I made my way back to my home to collect whatever I could find in the rubble, and the next day I exited the borders of the Thaloran Forests. For several days I would cross through blackened and ruined lands, finding little to eat or drink. Travel was slow, a result of fallen debris impeding my progress, and I had to backtrack several times to find a path forward. I was starving when I spotted a small settlement that had been spared from the destruction.

I entered the first inn I came across and quickly purchased some food. As I was consuming my meal, I overheard a couple patrons arguing about the recent events. A human voice yelled, "Even the orcs couldn't have brought this sort of devastation!" Turning my head to listen, I soon heard a halfling retort, "You say that, but the orcs would have soon reached these lands, and you would be too dead to care." The human fired back, "Yea, well now thanks to those accursed shaloran mages, an unimaginable amount of people are dead, DEAD!" The halfling then responded: "The orcs killed more and they left no one alive! You at least still have some friends and loved ones who survived. All those who I once knew are dead, DEAD! Dead and gone..."

Silence permeated the air between the two for a tense moment. I could feel the rage within the human, much like I could feel my own, but he soon got up and left. I wish I could say that I had done the same, unfortunately I cannot. When the halfling proceeded to begin gathering his belongings to leave, I got up and followed him out of

the establishment. Acutely aware of this, I was confronted by the halfling outside. Heated words were exchanged between us, then shouting. I don't entirely recall as to what happened next, but I do remember looking at my bloody hand as the halfling lay dead on the ground. Becoming aware of what I had done I quickly fled from the settlement.

Over the next two days I didn't eat or sleep. I crossed through several now dead settlements, obviously abandoned by whoever survived. I couldn't stop thinking about the halfling that I had killed; although the Shaloran still remained the focus of my thoughts and anger. I soon had more questions to think about though, as I came upon a recent battlefield. Charred corpses of what I assumed to be orcs lay scattered on the ground and there were an innumerable amount of them. As I crossed the battlefield I then saw the burnt remains of shaloran soldiers and this puzzled me greatly.

What anger I had felt towards the Shaloran now started to turn to confusion. By what madness were these shaloran dead? Were they sacrificed to kill the orcs? Did they willingly do it on their own accord? Were the Shaloran truly to blame? I couldn't fathom an answer to any of the questions racing through my mind and wondered what I should do. As I continued onward I would then find myself on the outskirts of a Shaloran settlement. Through the ruined structures I saw wolves feasting on what I assumed to be the remains of the former residents. I could also hear a voice cry out for help in the distance.

Making my way towards where the voice was coming from, I caught sight of a male shalore surrounded by a group of hungry wolves. A couple of them looked in my direction and swiftly made their way towards me. Having dealt with rogue animals in the past, I quickly dodged as the first one lunged towards me, and struck a staggering blow against it. The second one came around to attack me from the side, clamping down on my left arm. With a firm thrust, I slammed it against the side of a building, causing the beast to give a big yelp and let go. Realizing I was not to be trifled with, they quickly scampered off.

Taking notice of the two wolves fleeing, the other wolves soon turned tail as well. I remember how I sat down to examine my injury, noting how the wolf had bitten down to my bones, yet feeling little to no pain from the wound. I then pulled out a regeneration infusion and began to treat the gash left from the creature's teeth. While treating myself, I heard a voice call out in back of me. Realizing the shalore was still here, I turned my body around to face him as he approached. As he drew closer and looked at me, the shalore immediately stopped and gave a blank expression.

A bit caught off by this, I sat there cluelessly. For a moment we stared at each other in silence, before the shalore finally exclaimed, "You're a thalore." I blinked a couple of times at this before I replied with a "yes". Visibly in shock for a brief moment, the shalore finally came to his senses and asked what I was doing here? Upon hearing that question I wondered how I should respond; realizing then that I no longer knew the answer as to why I had come here, the fury that had originally driven me this far having mostly dissipated. After a while I finally said, "I've come to find out why."

Chapter 2 - Infusion Avoidance

I've never really understood why people so readily give their names. Among the thaloran, I scarcely knew the names of anyone, save for that of family or those of particular importance to me. I remember a dwarf merchant that once visited my homeplace. He seemed to think that whatever title he held meant something. Really, names mean nothing, and I could deal with a human or halfling merchant the same as that dwarf. I don't need to know your name to deal with you.

For another brief moment there was silence. The shalore seemed to mull over the meaning of the words I said, but obviously understood conceptually what I was after. As he took a quick moment to think, I glanced him over. Both the shalore's face and clothing were quite rugged and I noticed a quiver and dagger at his side. I would have figured him for a hunter, but the way he spoke seemed too disciplined for it. He probably was of a military background, most likely a scout. I also noticed blood streaming down his arm from an untreated wound.

"You should treat that," I stated. Glancing towards his arm the man merely grunted, "I'll bandage it soon enough". Why he said 'bandage it' confused me, but before I had time to ask about it he soon stated, "Come, it's dangerous here with the animals." Moving past me, he proceeded to begin walking southwards, motioning me to follow. Hearing a howl coming from somewhere nearby, I decided it would probably be best to do so, and we made our way out together. While a couple of animals caught sight of us, they simply just watched from a distance, and we left without any issue.

For a couple of hours we walked down a weathered road. Along the way the man would attempt to strike up conversation. He gave his name, as it seems the other races commonly do, and confirmed to me that he was indeed a scout. The scout belonged to a group called the Rangers and they had been dispatched to find any shaloran that had

been left outside the walls of the Shaloran capital. Unfortunately, while gathering people to leave the settlement where I had found him, the wolves attacked. During the ensuing tussle he'd lost his bow, before I then arrived to save him; the only one remaining alive, the rest of the shaloran he had come to rescue having been devoured. Somberly we continued onward from that point on in silence. We would walk for another hour, until an active campsite would appear up ahead.

As we approached a crossroad nearby, a couple of cloaked figures stepped out from behind some trees in back of us. With swords in hand, a few more appeared, approaching us from in front. They seemed to pause and look in my direction for a moment. A final figure soon stepped forwards, seemingly the leader of the group. Hoarsely the leader asked, "Where are the residents?" "Dead, food for the wolves," the scout replied. "Same would have been for me." The leader soon glanced in my direction. "I'm guessing this one is involved with you coming back then?" the leader inquired, "Come, let's go talk in the camp."

The leader turned to walk away and the scout motioned for me to follow once more. We made our way towards a simmering fire a little further on, a ragged bunch of shaloran sitting around it, with another cloaked shalore standing guard. A couple more shaloran were also laying in what looked to be a hastily constructed lean-to. Peering closer at those in the shelter, I could see red stained dotted bandages covering injuries on their bodies. The leader walked over to a chest nearby, pulling out a bow and some fresh bandages, which he then handed over to the scout. The look of silent bewilderment soon filled my face at the sight of this, something that the leader was quick to catch notice of.

"Something wrong thalore?" the leader asked. Deciding to finally get some answers as to why they weren't using infusions, I responded: "What's with the bandages? Do you not have any infusions?" Somewhat amused by this, the leader retorted, "A shalore... use infusions?" The leader then seemed to laugh a bit, as if some joke had been told. I could hear many of the shaloran chuckling in the background now as well. The leader then answered more firmly, "While I understand that you and the other races might make use of infusions, we shaloran strive above such things of our nature."

I was a bit baffled by this response. Hearing a cough from one of the bloodied shalore though, I politely stated, "Even if you might let those under your care die as a result of not using them?" To this the leader's face took a more solemn look, before he then turned his head to observe the wounded shaloran. Turning back towards me the leader quietly responded, "Of course not." As I regarded the casualties with a nod from my

head, I directly stated in a firm voice, "Then why are those shaloran being left to lay there like that?" To this the response was quietly given, "Because we have no means available to help them right now."

Scoffing at this, I reached into my pack. The leader stood silently as I pulled out some infusions and held them up with my hand. Externally, all the other shaloran seemed to look down on them with some odd contempt, but they said nothing. How stupid. I'd heard of the halflings being proud, but even they weren't this foolhardy. Finally from behind me the scout interjected: "Enough have died. With those wounds, those two might not live the night." Immediately I could see the discomfort cross the leader's face, but he merely closed his eyes and stated, "If you wish to treat them thalore, do as you will."

I was awestruck at this, this indifferent tone, but I held my tongue as I heard more coughing. Deciding what's best for now would be to treat the wounded, I simply walked over to provide assistance. In no time at all I had removed the bandages and commenced with my treatment. Rapidly the gaps in the skin closed and their bodies began to mend. While not fully healed, as the infusions were used up, the two I treated looked far better off than they were before. I am only left to wonder what might have happened to those shaloran had I not been there to help as I did.

While I was reaching into my pack to pull out some more infusions to finish the job, I heard the leader's voice say from behind "that's enough." Snapping my head back in amazement, I lashed out with my words, "Did you not wish for me to treat them?" Diplomatically, I received the reply: "They no longer appear to be on death's door. Those infusions you have, they are a finite resource. Maybe you should save them for those who are nearer to death." Calming down a bit, I wondered what the shalore was getting at. So I asked the question, "What do you mean, save them for who?"

Chapter 3 - Shaloran Suffering

While the shaloran are no longer as lost as they were when I first entered Elvala, I can still sometimes see the searching expressions on their faces; even now, as I write. It is as if they feel a similar loss to whatever it is they are connected to, in the same way we thalore feel the devastation experienced by nature. I do not know what connection the arcane and nature have, but I'm at least aware it is a shared relationship, and the strain felt by one will result in burden for the other.

Aware of the suffering of the other shaloran, the leader soon explained to me that while there were many rangers, their numbers were severely lacking for the task at hand. They had been sent out to help relocate shaloran refugees to safety, but many they were finding were wounded, and some might not be able to make the trip back to their capital where they could receive proper treatment. My infusions and skills in applying them could certainly help with staving off any potential loss of life and my aid would certainly be appreciated.

I can't say I had any interest in helping the other shaloran. Personally I wondered if I was simply just being dissuaded from using my infusions on the two injured shalors in front of me. However the scout, being somewhat aware of my intentions, helped to broker a deal to secure my services. If I supported the Rangers in their duties of rescuing as many of the shaloran as possible, they would cooperate with me in getting the answers I sought. To these terms I agreed. Over the next couple of days I accompanied the rangers, providing medical care when needed, and sometimes helping them with rounding up shaloran survivors.

On the third day we joined together with other Ranger Groups, before beginning to journey towards the south, through the densely wooded area that surrounded the Shaloran Capital. When we cleared the forest's boundaries I could see an unnatural misty smoke rising in the distance. As we drew closer, I could see what looked like a giant wall of fumes, whipping up dust and debris. I was told that beyond the smoke lay Elvala, which I would come to learn was the name for their capital. Traveling for a couple of minutes along the edge of the swirling sheets of grey, we came to a spot near a small lake. All at once a tunnel opened up within this cloudy barrier, presumably to invite us inside.

It was terribly disorienting within the tunnel, with the sounds of dust and wind screaming a terrible discord as we walked through. I also saw some dead bodies within the haze, the fates of which I would come to learn of later. As the city came into view I was greeted by a bleak sight. Exiting the tunnel and beginning to walk through the city streets, all I could see was blank expressions on all the shaloran faces. They all wandered here and there as if in some sort of trance. A strange sense of panic seemed to course through every shalore that I passed, as if they had lost something dear to them.

Having come here initially to seek retribution on them, I wondered if I would have still done so after seeing the inhabitants here like this. While those responsible had committed a vile atrocity against Eyal, those shaloran I saw here seemingly endured a

harsh penalty in response. I could still feel a deep anger at that time, but them living as they did now seemed to be a satisfactory punishment. Any remaining hostile feelings I had towards the Shaloran were mollified. They were now broken and had apparently already paid for the crime.

The refugees we had brought were soon escorted to an open lot in the center of the city, where hastily constructed shelters and tents had been set up to house them. Some of the refugees already there appeared to be in mourning, while others attempted to remain ahold of their sanity. As the last of the refugees left us, a shalore in white robes approached, whom I guessed correctly to be some sort of healer. From within his robes I caught eye of some infusions. Immediately I sighed in relief as I thought, 'finally, a shalore with common sense enough to carry some infusions'. We were soon asked if there were any injured among us, to which the leader of the rangers shook his head.

Baulking at this, the disbelieving healer pressed for answers. Hands were held in my direction and the healer quickly glanced towards me. Blinking for a moment, the shalore gave the same dumbfounded expression that was quickly becoming the standard for every new person I met. "Yes I'm a thalore," I sternly confirmed. "Oh, ah, yes," the healer stuttered back. As the healer regained his senses, the leader of the rangers took the healer's ear, and whispered into it. The eyes of the healer seemed to raise for a moment, before a quick "yes" parted from his lips. "Ahh, thalore, would you follow me then please."

As the healer began to walk away, I looked to the leader one more time. "The doctor will take you to the hospital," the leader started to say in a calm voice, "Don't worry, I haven't forgotten our bargain with you. I will try to get you an audience with someone who can give you the answers you seek." I got the sense that he was looking to milk my services for all he could at this point. I coldly replied back, "You best not test my patience too long." Smiling at my comment, the leader turned to nod towards the waiting healer, before he and the rest of the rangers slowly began to head off elsewhere.

The shalore soon led me through a muddy field, dodging tents and running through the temporary shelters that had been raised everywhere. I followed him to a tall building, inside of which many casualties lay wounded on beds, and some too on the floor. Making our way to the back of the building, we entered what I assumed to be the healer's office. "You wouldn't happen to know the basics of mixing infusions, would you?" I was soon asked. "I know how to mix basic numbing and regenerative infusions, the same I've used already to treat your fellow shalore." I replied. Nodding to this, the healer pulled out a paper, and sat down to begin to write down on it.

“The shaloran and thaloran are near identical in biology when it comes to infusions,” the healer slowly started to say while continuing to write, “so anything that you could use on yourself will work almost the same on a shalore. Here is a list of the components for infusion creation we have available.” As the healer finished writing, he got up and held out the paper for me to take. Then he moved towards a healer’s emblem on the wall and reached behind it to grab a key. “I’ll lead you to our laboratory where you can get to work making some,” the healer concluded. I was then led down to the basement where the workshop was. Unlocking the door, the shalore then handed me the key, and I was led inside.

Chapter 4 - Medical Treatment

It still strikes me how adverse the shaloran are to infusions. One of the purposes of infusions is to restore one to good health after suffering an injury, but for a shalore, it was more so a means of last resort to avoid dying. They seem to fail to understand that holding off on using infusions simply results in the need for more medical attention in the long run. Going beyond just mending flesh, they additionally have to worry about staving off those infections caused from open wounds as well.

Over the next few days I mixed and created several infusions. Beyond the tools needed to produce infusions, the workshop contained all the amenities for personal care and sleeping, and the healers would often bring me basic food and drink to consume. Well, I should say for the shaloran it may have been ordinary cuisine, but by thaloran standards I was treated pretty lavishly. To expound on this, I know the dwarves treat alcohol as a staple good for consumption, but arguably so did the shaloran; what with the amount of wine I was given. Regardless, I was treated quite better than I would have expected, to be sure.

Around the fourth day, after having created a great number of infusions, I was asked to come up and help with applying them. Many of those I encountered were near death, riddled by festering infections. This was brought about from the simple bandaging of wounds and nothing past that. Similar to how I had treated all the shaloran prior, I only used the infusions as much as possible to get them off of death's door. This wasn't really due to having a lack of infusions, but more so as a result of the stubborn mindset almost every shalore seemed to possess in the use of them.

It was about a week later, when most of the refugees had been treated, that word would arrive about a detachment of shaloran soldiers returning from battle. Thousands of shaloran had apparently been fighting the orcs on the eastern side of the continent, alongside the Human Kingdoms of the East. Many had died due to the raw magic that ravaged the land; although curiously, the majority of the soldiers had apparently perished when they were returning home. I was told they had been forced to travel just south of my Thaloran homelands, unable to navigate back to Elvala directly. This unexpected and lengthy detour had greatly exacerbated any injury or illness the soldiers were suffering, with many succumbing as they made their way back.

By this point I had at least some sympathy for those I treated, after having tended to hundreds of them. But I found my attention focusing more on what had been said about their journey. In the middle of the continent sat the Midvale Plains, a very large flat land from which one could literally see just an open field. From my basic knowledge of the continent, as I knew it at that time, the plains were completely open and should have been easily transverse-able. I wondered if perhaps some orcs had survived, having enough of an army to stand in the way. I would find out later that this was not the case, seeing first hand for myself what had happened to block the shaloran soldiers' passage back home.

I didn't have long to ponder this disconnect either. One of the assistant healers would approach and hand over a bunch of strange tablets in a leather pouch. Pulling one of them out, I noticed a glowing insignia inscribed on the tablet; which, at that time, coarsed with what was then an unknown power to me. As I turned to ask what these were for, I found only an empty space. The healer had moved on, now tending to the many soldiers that were entering the building. I was left perplexed and befuddled, wondering what I was supposed to do with these tablets. A nearby tap on my upper arm then brought me out of my thoughts, upon which I noticed a soldier's hand reaching into the pouch.

Turning to see what they were doing, I only then noticed the huge lacerations within the blackened armour. For a moment I stuttered, my hands full and unable to grab any infusions. Then however, I noticed something peculiar happen. Amazingly, the insignia on the tablet that the soldier had taken started to shimmer and shift, before somehow merging with their hand. A light glow then seemed to take hold within the soldier's eyes, followed by a strange white energy openly coursing through the veins of their body. What occurred next truly caught me off guard; the soldier murmuring some words, followed by their deep gaping wounds closing on their own!

Completely at a loss for what was happening, the soldier seemed to be healing themselves in front of me. As the moment passed, the glow left their eyes, and they returned to their normal color. Their wounds were not just healed, but they showed absolutely no sign of an injury ever having existed! While I know that the healers around me had been using healing spells on those I had first helped with infusions, it was my first time ever witnessing a spell being cast in front of me, let alone seeing the use of runes. I soon learned that I had been given manasurge runes, which enabled the restoration of mana lines within a person, and was important in some way to spellcasting.

I still don't know that much about the arcane and how it works, then or now. Supposedly, something had happened within the world, and it had permanently altered the workings of magic. While it was still possible to cast spells, it was now much more difficult to do so than it had been prior. Other wounded soldiers would then come after and in much of the same way to the first I had witnessed: they would take the manasurge rune; gain the glowing insignias on their hands, or arms, or legs, really any body part that they wished; and then proceed to cast healing spells on themselves or other injured shaloran.

After a while, the number of wounded soldiers began to dwindle, and most of them simply left to go home to rest. As the patients began to reach more manageable levels, the chief healer approached to thank me for my efforts. Suddenly remembering the entire reason I had come here to begin with, I noted that I had been fulfilling my end of the bargain. Nodding to this, the chief healer looked behind me towards a young soldier, who then stepped forward. Turning back to look at me, the chief healer responded, "The lieutenant will escort you to the general." I was taken aback by this somewhat, but assumed this general held the answers as to the events that had taken place within the world.

The lieutenant then led me to the center of the city where a grand building lay. After meeting with a couple of the guards, clad head to toe in shiny white plate armour, we were let in. It took several minutes walking through the spacious halls, possibly walking the building's entire length to the end of it. I would soon come to find myself standing in a luxurious looking room. Here there were decorations made of stralite, gold lining the walls, and displayed pictures of what I assumed to be important figures in Shaloran history. I was then told to wait, before being left by the lieutenant as they entered a nearby room.

Chapter 5 - General Aranion Gawaeil

General Aranion Gawaeil, leader of the Grand Council of Elvala. This was perhaps the first name I ever learned from someone outside my close friends and family. While the general never gave his name to me personally, the rest of the shaloran certainly bantered it around enough; to the point that I eventually, and unbelievably, remembered it! While perhaps there is little to acknowledge from one who readily gives their name, I can respect Aranion; whose name I learned from those around him, and the idolization and fondness that they seemed to speak it with.

After a brief moment, the lieutenant reappeared, and I was ushered into a much more plain room. Here a big square slab of rock sat, various figurines that looked like toy soldiers standing on top. A row of windows lined the north wall, while on the south wall sat what appeared to be an impressive display of armour. Within the center of this display, a fierce looking sword was presented; an aura of calm emanating from it. Making my way into the office I saw who I assumed to be the general, viewing some papers near a desk in the corner of the room. He seemed to exude an aura of brilliance, making the lieutenant look dull; though at the same time, I could sense a feeling of dreadful weight hanging around this prominently dressed shalore.

With a solemn discerning stare the general looked me up and down, before directing me with a hand to a seat next to the table in the middle of the room. Nodding in the direction of the lieutenant, the young soldier quietly left, closing the door and leaving us alone. I proceeded to sit down while the man came over to take a seat in another chair on the other side. "From what I have read in the reports from the doctors and rangers," the shalore began to say as he sat down, "you have spent several days helping to tend to many wounded shaloran. For this I thank you; both on behalf of my people, and myself."

Before I could say anything the shalore began to talk again, now speaking in a more casual tone: "I have to say, I was in a bit of disbelief when I was informed of you. A couple of my advisors offered to meet with you, but I had to see for myself that there was actually a thalore here. To my knowledge, a rare few of you have stepped foot this far outside of your forest in the last four millennia. You might be the only thalore I meet in my lifetime, you see, and I wouldn't pass up the chance to meet one of you in person." The shalore seemed to smile after saying this, though for my part I was becoming rather annoyed. If there was a reason for me coming here, getting gawked at wasn't it.

Taking a breath, the shalore began to speak again: "Before continuing with this discussion however, I feel the need to ask why? What truly compelled you to leave your forests and make this trip down to Shaloran lands?" His questions caused me to pause

for a moment. Any bloodlust that I had felt had since left me since entering Elvala and I certainly wished no harm to any individual shaloran now. After a moment I replied in a harsh tone, "Do I need to give any reason?" The rather straightforward response would evidently bring me a mischievous smirk from the general.

"Well," the general slyly started, "I imagined that if a thalore would have any reason to leave that forest of yours and come down here, it would have been to exact a bloody massacre on any shalore that they would come across." I guess I was read like an open book at that point, seen right through from my exterior to within. I shrank back a bit in my seat, perhaps confirming to the shalore my inner thoughts. To this the general seemed to relax a bit for some reason. "Obviously, something changed your mind," he said methodically, "since you haven't killed any shaloran that I am aware of, and in fact have been a great help to my people. For that, I will tell you what I know."

The shalore then told me of the events that had transpired, of when the general first learned of the 'grand plan', leading up to what was then the present time. I also came to know that this calamity was named the Spellblaze, named after the great spell that had been unleashed in the hopes of defeating the orcs, who up to now had been sweeping across the land. While the Shaloran had the best of intentions, the mages in charge had lost control of the vast energies they had tried to command; torching the orcs, themselves, and the whole of Maj'Eyal in a wave of destructive energy. Devastation of all kinds overran the continent, some perhaps not even of our world.

Quietly, I listened as I was told all of this, until everything was relayed to me. As he finished telling me the story of the Spellblaze, I was of mixed feelings on how to judge the actions of the Shaloran. On the one hand, the Spellblaze had been released across the lands, leaving scars on it that may never heal. At the same time however, I understood that the Shaloran had acted to stop what they believed to be an unprecedented threat. While I couldn't verify that the Thaloran Monarchy had given their consent to the actions of the Shaloran, I knew that they had acknowledged the rising threat from the Orcs; I myself had been drafted into some routine militia training not that long ago. Also as a result of the Shaloran's actions, I knew that the shaloran populace was now suffering, and I had already decided that was punishment enough for them.

The discomfort within my mind was obviously made clear, but the general refrained from saying anything; perhaps out of some underlying guilt for his part in the Spellblaze, or just due to being unable to convey anything that could aid in aligning my thoughts. For a time we sat in silence, though the general would finally get up after a while, and head towards the windows on the north wall. His back turned, I couldn't see his expression as

he looked out towards the Shroud, but I could tell he thought heavily on how events had unfolded. *Aranion, if you are reading this now, know that I at least have forgiven you.*

Chapter 6 - Leaving Elvala

At that time I had thought the general to be quite paranoid; but his ability to intuit the thoughts of others, and the activities they undertook in the world, could be described as unnaturally accurate. While the group that instigates the Spellhunt remains unknown at the time that I'm writing this, they were out there, and I would soon come to witness their actions firsthand in the very near future.

A brief moment would pass before the shalore finally asked, "What are you planning to do now?" Good question I thought. "I haven't really decided on that yet," I answered. Though still facing away from me, I could feel another smirk being made through the back of the general's head. "I suppose that you will likely be heading back to your forest," the general said while turning his head towards me, "but perhaps on the way back you could do something to help us Shaloran out. Would you be interested in running some aid supplies for us?" Looks like I was going to be made of use again, though I then I wondered a little bit about the request.

"I would think that after all that you have told me, you would try to garner any remaining good will you could for the Shaloran," I responded, "Wouldn't any aid be better sent by an official emissary?" Solemnly the general responded: "It isn't so much that I wouldn't mind doing that, but it is too dangerous for any individual shalore to be outside of Elvala right now. Before you arrived here, several humans from the lands in the northwest descended on our borders. Many of the shaloran that you witnessed being rescued from the outlying settlements, they fell prey not to the devastation of the Spellblaze or wild animals, but rather to the wrath of the peasants and farmers from the Cornac territories."

I could feel a grave shift in his tone as he went on. "Then, they approached us here in Elvala to do the same," the general continued, "Perhaps you saw some of their corpses in the Shroud when you entered Elvala?" For a moment he said nothing as the words circled in my mind. Then his posture seemed to relax a bit. "Of course," the general began again in a lighter tone, "it isn't just a terse moment of human anger that keeps me from sending an envoy out. Someone is stirring the people of the other lands to action. I don't know who or what the organization is, or for what reason they are doing so, but I fear greatly for what some of the humans yelled when they came."

The general then turned his body to face me, his eyes staring into mine, the serious manner of them captivating me. Feeling compelled, I asked, "What did they yell?" In the same grave tone as before the general replied, "They yelled that the Shaloran will pay for the Spellblaze." A bit cluelessly I replied, "Why would mere words declaring their rightful anger at you be of concern?" To this I received the firm answer from the shalore: "Because none but a few would have known that we called our grand plan the Spellblaze. To the various leaders of the races, even to your king and queen, we only mentioned that we would be using the Sher'Tul ruins for an awe-inspiring feat of magic. Someone told those human commoners that we were responsible, but they slipped up by mentioning that it was called the Spellblaze. I can tell some sort of clandestine operation is underway against my people."

For a moment I stayed silent, before finally rising from my seat. "Then I will run your aid supplies for you," I announced, "What would you have me do?" Smiling at this, the general promptly stood up straight. "As I'm sure you are aware," he said in a formal manner, "a shalore doesn't really make much use of infusions, or any other natural remedy for that matter. As a result, we do have quite a bit of ingredients stored up that could be of better use to help out elsewhere. I'll procure a special chest that can be used to store all of the ingredients that can be spared and you will make the delivery to the nearby Nargol Kingdom. Right now, many refugees from the other races are pouring into their capital, and the Nargols likely don't have ingredients to make all the infusions they will need."

Nodding to this, I motioned that I was ready to leave; but before I could rise, the general made a gesture with his hand for me to stop. The shalore then marched over to a stand, near to where he was first positioned in the room when I initially came in, and picked up some things sitting on top. Turning back to face me, with a very official looking stance, the general again approached. He then securely pressed a rune into my hand. The rune gave me an odd sensation, distinct from those manasurge runes I had handled before, while a pinkish glow radiated from it as well. "You can use this Rune of Return to reenter Elvala and get past the Shroud," he stated softly as I looked back up, "It will teleport you here from wherever you may be. Know that you will be welcome to come back here at any time." Giving a nod, the general then handed me a requisition order to bring to the Rangers.

With the conversation concluded, the lieutenant would be summoned again, and I was led to some living quarters elsewhere in the city. When I was ready the next day, I was taken to the quartermaster of the Rangers, and fitted with some appropriate attire for my

travels ahead. After this was done, I was then led towards the former entrance of Elvala. There I was met one last time by the general, accompanied by a small cadre of mages, and an assortment of well armed and armoured bodyguards. The general disclosed that the mages would teleport me to a location close to the gates of the Nargol capital, after which I was handed a small and near weightless chest, and some papers bearing an official Shaloran insignia on them. While I realized that the papers were likely a diplomatic message, I ignorantly wondered what the purpose of the chest was. It appeared to be too small to provide any significant amount of crafting ingredients that the Nargol's could amply use.

When asked about this, one of the mages approached to take the chest from me, and demonstrated its use. The mage proceeded to pull out several ingredients for infusions stored within; far more than could possibly fit inside the chest, and certainly far heavier than what it should have possibly weighed. Taking the chest back when it was refilled, I was then told by the general that when I reached the gates to the Nargol Kingdom: I would present the papers, the Nargol Guards should take the chest, and they would allow me inside their capital to buy any additional needed supplies for my journey home. After saying this, the general then handed me a pouch of coin for that very purpose.

Taking the money, I was then escorted to a small circle in which a runic design had been marked. The mages then began to chant and weave their hands, my vision blurring as the surroundings around me began to dance from their magic. I then saw dead trees and a nearby river colored black come into focus, while the images of Elvala faded away. My vision recovering, I could now hear the sounds of the new location I now found myself in. I stepped out into a clearing, looking down a blasted hillside towards a valley. As I got my bearings, I saw the movement of a great number of people in front of me. Dwarves, humans, and halfling formed great lines that went on for miles in all directions; all streaming towards the ruined gates of a great city in the distance.

Putting the chest in my pack, I began to make my way towards the nearest road leading to the gates. I did not know it at that time, but what I thought would be a small stop on my way back to my home forests would actually herald the start of another adventure for me. I would find atrocities within the home of the Nargols that would only be surpassed by the devastation caused by the Spellblaze itself, these events marking the start of what we now call the Spellhunt. In present time as I write this, the Spellhunt spreads over the entire face of Maj'Eyal, threatening to throw all the races ever closer to oblivion. It is the beginning of a dark age in Eyal's history to be sure.

Escapades of Fay Willows - Book 2

Looking around the back of this library, you spy a couple of books with Elvala style coverings. Intrigued by this peculiarity, you open one to examine its contents, and verify that it was indeed produced in Shaloran lands. What are books like these doing in Zigur?

Chapter 1 - At The Gates

While on the surface the Nargols appeared to be in total control of the situation within their capital, underneath it all, this was very much not the case. In an attempt to mitigate trouble, they actively confiscated any and all magical items they could find from the refugees entering the city, and hid away their leaders for their parts in the Spellblaze. Spellcasters in their army too were sent underground; mindful of the danger they were in, but also not wishing to incite angry citizens further.

I descended slowly and carefully down the hillside, crossing over the river where some stones emerged that I could step on to avoid the water. Maneuvering my way over the burnt grass, I joined with one of the processions making their way towards the city gates. I had to wait a long while as the guards thoroughly inspected wagons and asked questions of those passing through. While it seemed like none of the refugees were being turned away, drawing closer I saw one dwarf begin to holler as a guard carried off one of her items. The dwarf was still bawling when she was allowed entry, a torrent of profanity escaping from her with every step she took inside.

After a dozen more or so in front of me were processed by the guards, I was finally next. I immediately held out the papers I had received from the shaloran general, the eyes of the guardsman nearest to me growing wide as he caught sight of the insignia on them. Motioning to another guard to come over, they quickly took the papers from my hands, then moved off a bit to read them. They talked to each other in a hushed tone, before one of the guards then quickly ran off with the papers to a nearby tower. Not too long after, the guard was returning with another halfling. Judging from the immaculate blue armour that this halfling wore, I realized right away that she must be their superior.

She walked towards me with a slow meticulous pace, her gaze fully analyzing me with each step. Standing in front of me, her eyes looked up into mine as I looked down on her. Then she turned and walked away all of a sudden, making some sort of gesture

towards the guardsman as she did. The other guard then approached me and put their hands out. Sensing that I should now hand over the chest, I pulled it out of my pack. Giving a quick nod as the chest was taken, the guard hurried away through the gate, and dashed around the walls out of sight. The first guardsman then announced in a polite tone, "Welcome to the Nargol Kingdom", and I was subsequently ushered inside.

As I was pushed through the gate, I instantly saw a great many tents and crude shanties as far as the eye could see. There were throngs of refugees sitting around, their eyes looking longingly in numerous directions. Some lifelessly stared towards the west or north, likely to settlements that they had been forced to come from. Others seem to stare blankly towards the sky; perhaps wondering, or waiting, for more death to fall from it. I soon caught sight of the other guard as they returned to pass through to the front of the gate, once more ready to continue with the searches and queries of those still seeking entry into the Nargol capital.

Saddened by the sight of all this, along with the sense of loss that hung in the air, I decided to move on. I navigated myself towards the wayfarer's district, finding rows of ruins on either side of the street. Some of the destroyed structures featured collapsed roofs and walls, while others had huge cracks in their foundations. I could see a family of halflings through the open gaps of one of them, the small eyes of the children watching me as I passed by. Further down on the road, a wooden sign for a tavern lay on the ground, and the sounds of raucous activity could be heard from somewhere in the vicinity. Feeling somewhat peckish at this point, I made my way towards the sign, hoping that I might find some food to eat. After identifying the associated building, mostly as a result of all the noise spilling out from it, I quickly made my way inside.

A motley collection of halflings, humans, and dwarves stood or sat at various tables inside the establishment. Far more lively than the refugees and residents outside, the patrons conversed over their meals, gambled, and engaged in other leisurely activities. As I entered, one human in particular took notice of my arrival. "Hey, aren't you that thalore, from before?" said a human, "Yea, it is you!" Wondering who this human was as he approached, I suspected him of perhaps being addled. Cueing in on this, he quickly stated in a defensive tone: "Ahh, perhaps you don't recognize me. I'm the messenger, that happened to be in that inn, up north. You probably remember me, arguing with that Eldoral halfwit, from before?"

I clenched my teeth a bit, wondering if I might be in trouble. Again however, the messenger made another calming statement: "Don't worry, I don't think you'll have any problems. I thought about doing the same. Someone would have silenced him, sooner

or later, if you hadn't." Blinking for a moment, I was caught completely dumbfounded as to what the human had just said. I warily replied, "What do you mean?" To this he raised an eyebrow, fully revealing his crystal clear blue eyes. "What?" the messenger stated, "No one would stop someone, like that halfling, from being killed. No one really cares about what you did, such incidents are commonplace."

Soon smiling at me, the messenger began to motion towards a nearby seat. I wasn't much interested in chatting with him, but thinking perhaps he may be able to inform me a bit of current events, I decided to accept his offer. I moved to sit down and ordered a supper dish to dine on, allowing the messenger to make small talk as I ate. He would note the havoc wrought upon the various nearby regions, viciously attack 'the mages' within each of his sentences, and lament the loss of many of his friends. Oddly enough, the messenger didn't give me his name, or ask for my own; perhaps being at least somewhat knowledgeable of thaloran customs. I didn't actually notice this when conversing with him at that time either, only realizing it later due to subsequent events that would unfold.

Chapter 2 - Exchange of Information

You know, it is hard to determine who people really are deep down. The messenger was a good example of this, as I would soon find out. I had pegged him for being a disgruntled human that had suffered greatly because of the Spellblaze. In reality, he was much more than just 'disgruntled'. I believe he may have been a member of the group instigating the Spellhunt, if not just associated with it. I'm sure he perished as part of some nefarious plot inside that storehouse, but did he die willingly? That's the real question I think about now in regards to him.

Finishing my last bite, I decided to probe the messenger for some information. Upon the completion of his last tirade, I asked, "So how are things faring here?" A sigh escaped the man as he answered: "Well, the Nargols appear to have everything under control. They are managing to get enough provisions, for all the refugees streaming in, even procuring some rather good stuff for those dwarves. I have to say, it was quite a surprise to see them out here. Makes me wonder, do those dwarves have any more homes elsewhere on the continent nearby? Hard to really know, what with how secretive they are."

While I wasn't exactly interested in the dwarves, that last statement disconnected quite a bit from what I knew about them. From my knowledge, the dwarves all lived in the Iron

Throne, or at least cities nearby to it. Questioning the messenger on this he explained: "Well, the dwarven refugees you see arriving here, they had a hidden dwelling, over there in the western mountains. The cornacs were completely ignorant, that the dwarves had taken up residence so close to them, and they likely would have happily kept it all hush-hush. Unfortunately for the dwarves, they were forced to show themselves, since the 'blasted mages' caused sand to flood the lands over there."

Satisfied with that answer, I then remembered the female dwarf I saw when I was first entering the city. Wondering if perhaps the messenger might know something about what that could have been about, I asked: "You wouldn't happen to know anything regarding items the dwarves might be carrying, that the guards at the city gates would take away?" The messenger's shoulders shrugged. "Likely was carrying some device, of arcane properties, that an accursed mage enchanted long ago," the messenger mused, "Those dwarves, they seem to be getting the worse treatment, in regards to that; what with the little care they give, towards whether something is contaminated with magic, or not."

Shaking his head, the messenger then said: "You know, the Regents, are actively attempting to confiscate any object of magical origin; a means of appeasement, to placate the halflings already living here. They say that it's too dangerous for civilians to carry such baubles. Personally, I say it is too dangerous for anyone to carry such 'baubles', them included. Of course, the Regents are too arrogant to bother their fellow halflings, already living in the city; in regards to giving up 'their property', expecting them to 'voluntarily' part with what they own, if it all. Really, it is just the dwarves, the halflings refugees from outside the city, and us humans, getting our possessions taken away." The human started to laugh as he finished saying these words.

The messenger stopped laughing as a human in a dark cloak approached and leaned down to say something to him. The messenger nodded to the figure, upon which he said, "I'll catch up later, relay back to me the plan when we are ready." To this the human in the dark cloak bowed and moved away from us. He hurried over to another table with a couple of halflings, then a table with a dwarf, before disappearing in the crowds outside. The halflings and the dwarf then finished their food, packed up their belongings, and quietly left in short fashion after. Wondering just who that human was, I looked over to see the examining blue eyes of the messenger looking towards me. In a relaxed voice the messenger said, "Don't mind them, we're having such a nice conversation, to have others spoil it."

At that point I realized that there was much more to this human than I had initially thought and I wondered if he might be a bit more dangerous than I was duly giving him credit for. Perhaps a bit rashly, I decided to see just how much this man knew. So I quietly stated, "You wouldn't happen to have any plans to deal with the Shaloran?" Almost instantly the man's stance and posture changed, before in a new tone he continued to speak. "Oh!" the messenger started, "Wouldn't it be so great, to wipe those miserable louts from the face of Eyal! I assume you likely left your forest, because you know their mages were responsible, wanting nothing more than to bathe in shaloran blood, for what has been done! Don't most of us all. In due time, they will be made to pay in full; for unleashing the Spellblaze on Maj'Eyal!"

Cautiously, I asked in as angry of a voice as I could muster, "Spellblaze?" I said, "Is that what they call it?" Quickly confirming this back to me, "Indeed, or so I have been told by my friends. The fellow who came by our table, he actually has some insight, regarding such matters." Seeing as how the man liked to talk, I waited for him to feed me more information, and allowed him to speak again. "I tell you what," the messenger began anew, "perhaps you should come with me, to a little society of like-minded fellows. We've got a plan, that we will be putting into motion soon, looking to ensure nature never suffers, as badly as I'm sure you, a thalore, has felt it suffer. You see, the Shaloran are most definitely responsible, but the other races, they weren't oblivious to their so-called 'grand plan'. Every race, save for perhaps the Dwarves, had some prior knowledge of the Shaloran's machinations, and went along with it."

Obviously the messenger was likely part of, or at least affiliated with, this group that the shaloran general had feared. I could tell that the messenger was most certainly an instrument of whatever schemes they were orchestrating too, likely ones with ill intent behind them. I considered going with him, but I wasn't really interested in participating in whatever clandestine activity they were going to partake in, and I could sense a feeling of danger warding me away. "I thank you for the offer, but I must decline," I finally said. To this I got another raised eyebrow, the messenger showing off his blue eyes once more. "Really?" the messenger stated back in disbelief, "I would think a thalore, such as yourself, would jump at a chance to exact retribution, against any who defile nature, as has been done? You are a fellow defender of nature, right?"

His words gave me pause for a moment, but I simply got up and left. I remember him calling out as I exited the building, "Should you change your mind, you'd be welcomed as an initiate, for sure!" Looking up to the sky, I saw the sun beginning to set, and went to find a place to stay the night. After locating an inn I purchased a room. I decided at daybreak tomorrow I would go to the market to buy food rations and supplies for my

travels home. I then slept soundly until early in the morning, before the sun had begun to rise. Abruptly though, I would be woken up as the sounds of screaming filled my ears. Originating from outside, I wondered what was going on. I got up to look out the window of my room, seeing fire and smoke rising from a large structure in the distance.

Chapter 3 - Blazing Madness

In the market I would end up purchasing a modest amount of supplies. I bought about three weeks worth of nourishment for myself, thinking I might explore a little bit before finally arriving back in Thaloran lands. I also obtained a fine utility knife and a hatchet, both made of high quality steel. I wasn't sure I really needed this much for my journey, and I perhaps could have trekked over the entirety of Maj'Eyal, with what I procured. I never imagined what role everything I acquired would soon come to play in my immediate future.

Out from my window I saw many local inhabitants of the nearby homes running out to help deal with the fire. They quickly got to work in cordoning off the area, looking to prevent the burning embers from spreading further. Despite their efforts however, many homes would still end up being enveloped by flames. It wasn't long before a company of soldiers arrived; pushing everyone back, including those trying to help put out the fire. For a brief time it was left to burn, though it soon began to diminish. Perhaps some mages had come out of hiding and they had used water magic in secret to drown it out? It is hard to think of any other explanation as to how the blaze was so effectively extinguished.

As the fires began to simmer out, some of the soldiers moved in to inspect the burnt out remains for anyone who may not have escaped from the fiery destruction. They removed many torched individuals; some who looked to be on death's door, others who were clearly dead. After that was done the soldiers moved on to investigate the remains of the structure where everything sparked off from. I noticed them pulling out several bundles wrapped in blankets, learning later that they contained the remains of those suspected of starting the fire. Whether by accident, or on purpose, they had been killed by their own act of arson. I would also learn that those killed consisted of a human, two halflings, and a dwarf. I'm certainly glad I left the messenger when I did.

I remained in my room watching everything happening below, until the sun rose into the sky. When I was finally getting ready to leave I started talking with the innkeeper about the event. I would discover that the structure hit by the arson was the one that housed

many of the possessions that had been taken away from the refugees. After leaving the inn I would overhear the conversations from many on the street. From the communication of some halflings I passed, I would learn that nearly every arcane item stored within the storehouse had apparently been lost. Other folk on the street murmured other insights, such as those residents suspected to have been killed, to the act itself being a deliberate undertaking.

The fire would be talked about continually as I made my way towards the Nargol market. Even there, as I went about acquiring what I would need to continue my journey, many of the merchants and patrons continued their talk about the blaze. Finishing up my purchases, it was at this point that one of the patrons opined very loudly about how the refugees seemed to be behaving strangely. Drawn in to ask about this, I turned towards the patron and asked "how so?" The halfling who appeared to be of common work, despite the fine clothes being worn, glanced over with a befuddled look in my direction. "Yes, I'm a thalore," I said with a sigh, "What's up with the refugees." The halfling quickly responded: "Indeed you are. Well, I don't really know. They seem quite calm, sort of at peace; despite many of them having their belongings go up in smoke. Their emotions don't really match with their situation. Something curious is happ-"

The halfling suddenly stopped talking, snapping his head up with a concerned expression. His eyes then grew wide with fear, before the halfling abruptly turned around to sprint out of the market; the yelling behind me only then becoming audible. Spinning around, I saw a mob of ragged refugees rushing towards the stalls, ripping and tearing at everything they could! Their eyes looked wild and bloodshot, their mouths letting out unending screams. They also seemed to show no semblance of self-preservation whatsoever! Wood was smashed and cloth torn as the mob moved in. I escaped in the opposite direction, but patrons and merchants who couldn't get away were knocked down and trampled. A few attempted to stand up to the refugees; they would end up attacked and beaten, left bloody and bruised on the ground, or worse.

The madness continued for several minutes before the first guards appeared to restore order. It took them some additional time to assemble themselves, within which the mob continued to wreak a good deal of the market. When the guards finally moved in, many of the refugees scattered, leaving debris and injured people all over the place. As order was restored to the scene, a couple guards came over to check to see if I was alright. A bit after this, a guardswoman would pull me aside, intent on interrogating me as to what had happened. I relayed back to the halfling what had unfolded, detailing the unnatural

behaviors exhibited by the refugees as best I could. After telling my account, she directed me to leave the area.

As I moved away from the carnage, I wondered what other displays of chaos I might see if I were to remain within the Nargol capital. While I had evaded danger twice, it could have very well been me getting trampled and knocked aside in that market, or ending up too close to a building that suddenly went up in flames. I made a decision then and there to begin making my way back towards the city gates to leave. As I turned and began to navigate through the streets though, I then noticed a gathering crowd; consisting mostly of refugees, but also some citizens. I should have headed past them, but beyond them I heard a voice ringing out above, "The time has come for action, but it must be directed at the source behind all the harm." I stopped and turned my head as I heard the words; something compelling me to stay, and listen to what was being said. Drawn in by the voice, I began to make my way towards the outskirts of the assembly.

Chapter 4 - Despicable Atrocities

Was it anger against magic that drove people to commit acts of violence in the aftermath of the Spellblaze? Was it perhaps the deplorable situations that they found themselves in because of it? While I can't say I am an expert on humans, halflings, or dwarves; the depravity I would witness on the street leading out of the Nargol Kingdom would go beyond what I would expect possible for any sentient being to do.

As I peered in towards the mass of people, the voice rang out again: "Aimlessly, your anger is directed against those who do not deserve it. I say direct it against the source of all the tragedies that have been inflicted." I began to push my way through the crowd, wondering who the speaker was, and what they had to say. "Wherever magic is found," the voice continued, "it will eventually fail, and hardships will soon follow after. The fire from this morning was an example of this: a bunch of refugees breaking into the warehouse where their confiscated toys were stored, lighting the building on fire in their hubris, and consequently torching the many homes of those nearby. I wouldn't be surprised if the ignition point itself was a result of those same arcane trinkets being mishandled."

Making my way towards the center of the assembly, I looked up to see a halfling and a human. They wore a couple of masks that hid their identities, but I recognized the dark cloak worn by the human. Judging from the fact that the human was raising their arms, I assumed they were speaking; I can't say for sure though, the masks that were worn

covered their facial expressions just as well. "The results of the fire killed many of those sleeping within their beds," the voice began again, "more lives claimed by magic. The only good thing that can be said of the incident, was that many of those same magical items they sought to take were destroyed in the ensuing aftermath; no longer staining the world with their taint, having gone up in smoke."

It felt as if I was hearing the words through my mind; the voice resonating within my head, the anger evident behind the words as well. I saw those around me being swayed by the speech, many beginning to say such things as 'magic is to blame' and 'down with magic'. "Of course," the voice boomed, "you need not be told about the devastation you have already seen firsthand! Much like the actions that led to the warehouse being burned down, it was the Shaloran Mages that unleashed the real destruction. The lands were ravaged and the skies were warped, in the fiasco they named the Spellblaze! It is as I continue to say: wherever magic is found, it will eventually fail, and catastrophe will follow."

The voice began to speak faster and with more passion as it continued on: "There can be no denying that we would be better off, to be free from the effects of the arcane, lest we see these calamities continue to repeat. The Nargol Regents however will take no action against the halflings already living within this city. If we are to protect our world then we will have to take up the task ourselves! Any artefact or item, showing even the slightest hint of magical force, must be identified and promptly destroyed; lest we risk another event like today. We must also see to it that those who practice, or who have any connection to those deplorable activities that pervert nature, are dealt with as well; lest we allow them to trigger another cataclysm in their arrogance."

I then started to notice the people around me beginning to chant such phrases as 'destroy the arcane', 'kill the spellcasters', and 'end the magic arts'. I myself was also beginning to feel the sentiment too, though I resisted the urge to join in. Soon the voice began to issue instructions: demanding wood be brought into the street so justice could be enacted. Many from the crowd dispersed and disappeared briefly, before reemerging with the requested wood, and dumping it on the ground. More masked individuals now stepped forward, carrying large stakes of wood on their shoulders, and also numerous bundles of rope at their sides. Before long I would witness the masked individuals begin to erect these stakes towards the sky, shaping the wood into piles at the base of each stake. I stood puzzled at this display, the actions being completely foreign to a thalore like myself. It was something I had never witnessed prior. It is also something I hope to never see again.

While the stakes were being placed, the voice began to give out names of those 'guilty' within the city. A new instruction was given: bring those named here, along with any magical belongings that are found. Not before long, the crowd then broke up into several small groups. A masked individual led each of them and they began making their way into nearby houses and tents. Calling out in confusion and terror, those individuals who I assumed were the ones named, were soon dragged towards the piles of wood. The voice's next instruction would follow: tie them to the stakes, cast their offending trinkets at their feet. Immediately the rope would be grabbed upon hearing this, those named being restrained, and an assortment of items also deposited on the ground.

By this point the masked human with the dark cloak would leave, the rest of the masked cohort then taking over. As if guided by some twisted force, allegations of magical wrongdoings were thrown around by those wearing masks, against those who were bound to the wood. Sometimes specific objects would be picked up, and by some warped practice, they were made to produce sickly glows. Those deemed 'guilty' were kicked and beaten, unable to defend themselves as they remained tied. When the accusations finished up, the human with the dark cloak would come forward again, now with unlit torches in each hand. It was at this point I began to piece together what the wood was all for, the halfling then lighting the torches, causing them to dance with flame.

What happened next I still remember vividly in my mind, as if burned by the lit fire that glided through the air, and the great searing blaze that spread. Those bound by the rope began to let loose a torrent of screams, the smoldering inferno rising around them, and their skin starting to blacken and burn. As this was happening, I could hear a horrendous voice, letting loose a wretched cry. The whole assembly of people around me soon joined in, their symphony of cries building into a horrible crescendo that echoed through the streets; to the point that they were the only ones being heard, their victims' wails dying out as they slowly ceased to live. I recall retching uncontrollably as I stumbled away to the side of a building, disgusted by the sight. I also remembered how the eyes of those around me appeared to all be crazed and bloodshot, much like before in the market.

The horribleness of the act truly sickened me to my very being, but I was perhaps more unnerved by what was said next. "You all have done well, but it will take more than this to make our world safe," the voice said, "If you wish, you can join us in the fight for nature. We can ensure that all the arcane users, those who have brought us this misery, SUCH AS THOSE GUILTY HERE!-" The voice suddenly paused for a moment, as if to

reign in itself before continuing. "Will burn," The voice said in an almost entirely subdued manner. "Find me," The voice went on to finish, "Be welcomed as a new initiate to our cause!"

The crowd of people then seemingly began to bumble around, many now acting aghast as to what had just occurred. Those with masks took this opportunity to enter the mass of people; to lose themselves within it, and fade away. Despite this, I remembered those last words said by the voice, strongly recalling that the messenger had also used the word 'initiate'. A group of the Nargol Guards would appear shortly after, gathering themselves to disperse this atrocious assembly. Little resistance was offered to the encroaching force that rushed forward, and many of the participants would flee into the dark alleys of buildings, or through the tents of the refugees to get away.

As the guards took control of the area, their attention turned towards the simmering fire, and the smoldering bodies that lay within. Cries of anguish came from individuals behind the guards, which I assumed were loved ones and friends of those killed. Then all of a sudden, one person charged forward, as if to rush and dive into the still hot embers. This fortunately didn't happen, the guards being quick to react, and prevent further tragedy from occurring. It was at this point though that I could take no more of what had unfolded in front of me. I turned to leave the area and get away from the fiery carnage that had taken place. As I passed by a tent however, a hand reached out of its opening, pulling me inside.

Chapter 5 - Psionic Trickery

I am told that what I witnessed in that tent was likely the work of a psionic slaver. Using my own psyche, a manifested image of my own thoughts was made to emerge, which the slaver subsequently used against me. I had been lucky, having managed to free myself from the mental hold by seeing through the illusion. Had I not done so, it was entirely possible that I could have become enthralled to the slavers' will, and made to do their bidding unquestioningly.

I hit the ground hard as I landed towards the back of the tent. Dazed, I groggily started to stand up, coming face to face with one of the masked individuals. I assumed they must have taken part in the abhorrent spectacle I had just seen, but I wondered what they wanted with me. Slowly a hand reached up to remove the mask, revealing the face of the human messenger! "Fancy meeting you here," he said while laughing, "I knew I saw something in you when we conversed in the inn." The messenger continued to

laugh as I got up. I must have been in a bit of shock from the impact to the ground; my vision was fuzzy and hazy, things in the tent weirdly blurred together. Demandingly I responded to the messenger: "W-what do you-u want? Why have-e you th-thrown me i-in here?"

The messenger stopped laughing, a calm smile appearing on his face. "Because I would like to have words with you of course," he said, "What were you doing when you came here, when you came to the Nargol Kingdom?" I froze at those words, wondering how much danger I was in. The messenger stood unnaturally still, his cloudy eyes seemingly reading me, as if understanding my inner thoughts as they raced through my mind. I stuttered in fright, "I-I was del-livering some med-i-cal aid for th-the Nargols to us-e?" A hard slap then struck my face from the messenger, sending me reeling to the side. The messenger then declared, "Indeed," before turning his head to shout at me, "FROM THE SHALORAN!"

Taking a step forward, the messenger gave me a hard kick to the stomach; the force winding me, causing me to fall to the ground. I soon received another thwack with the back of the heel to my face, causing blood to stream out. Bending down and picking me up by my hair, the messenger drew me close to his face, his gray eyes peering into mine. Spitting both saliva and words, he proceeded to say: "I had thought better of you since you killed that Eldoral halfling. I figured you might be a fellow ally, but that isn't the case, is it? You made it down to those shaloran, beyond that little wall of magic smoke that they put up to hide themselves from us. You could have carried out a small portion of nature's wrath, but instead of enacting Eyal's fury you turned your back on it, AND SIDED WITH THOSE WHO UNLEASHED THE SPELLBLAZE ON US!"

Crying now, I was sobbing tears that mixed with the blood coming out of my face. Between sobs I quickly stated, "En-n-ough pain has been fe-elt w-without add-" before my head was instantly smashed into the ground by the messenger. He yelled back with great intensity: "NO AMOUNT OF PAIN WILL MAKE UP FOR WHAT THEY HAVE DONE FAY! Every last one of those shaloran deserves to die. To die as painfully as those we punish-." The messenger continued to rant, but hearing my name I stopped to think, ignoring the rest of what he had to say. How did he know my name? I never gave it to him, to anyone in the Nargol Kingdom, or to any of the shaloran for that matter. "How do you know my name?" I said to the messenger.

His ranting cut off immediately, the messenger looking down in front of me, his eyes now shimmering. "Whatever do you mean Fay?" he faintly replied, "You told me your name back at... When, when-." Abruptly the messenger stopped talking. Then his facial

expressions gradually faded away, leaving a faceless humanoid with solid black eyes. I didn't know what was going on, but I knew then that this was an imposter! I could feel my senses starting to return within me, and with my closer hand, I grabbed whatever it was that I had been talking too. It struggled to maintain a hold on me, trying to keep me down, but I managed to make it fall to the floor. With my other hand I pulled back and punched repeatedly at its head, until it ultimately vanished from existence.

As I began to regain vision of my actual surroundings, I then noticed someone else nearby; the human with the dark cloak! The one who had briefly visited the messenger when I was talking to him in the inn, the one who stood above the crowds and threw the burning torches, the one who likely instigated all these barbaric acts I had constantly witnessed since coming to the Nargol Kingdom! Getting up I said, "Who are you really?" Beginning to back up in the direction of the tent opening, likely to escape now that I was free of whatever had been done to me, the fiend attempted to make a swift exit. Intent on not letting that happen, I moved to catch the villain by their dark cloak, and wrench them back. I don't know what happened next, but in the following moment I found myself face down in the dirt.

I was pinned and unable to move or speak. Attempting to look at what was above me, I noticed the masked halfling, likely the same one that had been standing with the human during the speech. The human stopped running away, taking a brief moment to survey the situation, before returning with a haughty step to hover over me. "That was quite unexpected," the human said, "You must have some impressive willpower to resist me thalore. I'm afraid though, that if I can't bend you to my will, then I am going to have to kill you." As I analyzed those words in my head, the human reached within their cloak, and pulled out a small dagger.

I jostled around, attempting to get loose from the halflings' hold; yet somehow, despite the halflings smaller size, I could not break free! Impressively too, the halfling was doing this with just one of their arms. Taking the dagger in hand, the human pulled back, then thrust forward to finish me off! I was sure I would be killed, but in the next instant I noticed the dagger tumbling away in the air. A bit confused at this, it took me a moment to realize that the halfling, who was still holding me down, had prevented the human from killing me. Apparently just as caught off guard, the human turned towards the halfling, looking dumbfounded with disbelief. Finally regaining their composure, the human asked the simple question on both of our minds, "What are you doing?"

Chapter 6 - Spared

Over time, the Nargols apparently caught the ones behind all those twisted incidents, and the other instigators that would follow after. They publicly executed those who they believed to be the culprits and planted their heads on stakes as a warning to those who would disturb the peace. Despite this though, burning events and other depraved actions would continue for a long time to come in the Nargol lands, both in and out of their capital. The messengers may have been killed, but the message they championed persisted.

Abruptly, before giving the halfling even a moment to respond, the human began raving: "You don't seriously mean to spare her? She's in league with the Shaloran, SHE'S IN LEAGUE WITH MAGIC!" The human's tone progressively got more emotional as their tirade went on. "Have you forgotten our mission and what we are charged to do?" the human continued, "This THALORE, has turned HER BACK, on NATURE! She. Must. DI-" The human stopped talking as the halfling suddenly raised their free hand up. Then in a deeper tone than what I would have expected from someone of such a small size, the halfling calmly replied back "enough". The human's body immediately shrank back at this. Though masked, I could sense the dismay coming from the human's body language.

The halfling put down their hand, before finally responding with an explanation: "Our mission is to root out the foul practitioners of the arcane, to make sure no further tragedies occur from magic's failings." The halfling took a deep breath before continuing, "This thalore is no spellcast-." "SO WHAT!?" the human interjected with great intensity, cutting off the halfling again. "SHE HAS ASSOCIATED WITH THE SHALORAN!" the human started ranting again, "THE ONES WHO CAUSED THE SPELL-" Once more the halfling put up their hand and again the human ceased to speak. With the human now firmly silent, I slowly felt some of the pressure on me relax. Somewhat tensely, the human finally turned away, and left through the entrance of the tent.

As the human with the dark cloak left, I could feel the halfling casually get off of me and step away, giving me some room. Slowly I made to get up, the halfling turning its head to look in my direction. As I came to my feet I decided to ask again, "Who are you really?" Turning its body fully towards me, the halfling paused a moment before answering, "Do you wish to truly know?" I paused as this question was put to me. These

fanatics had been responsible for the repulsive scene that I had witnessed outside. On top of that I had been dragged into this tent and subjected to whatever they had just done. That human had even tried to kill me! I felt anger at that moment more than anything else, but something was driving me to seek out an explanation. So I replied, "I want to know why."

The halfling remained silent, emotions covered by the mask, and their body language indicating nothing to me either. The only thing I could tell about the halfling was the military attire being worn: a complete set of leather armour, with gloves, bracers, boots, and greaves included. We both stood looking at each other, likely pondering what was going through the other's mind. What I can tell you for myself though was that I was full of rage, and with each passing moment, that fury was building within me. Having enough of the silence and wanting my answer, I was about to begin shouting, before at last the halfling stated, "Because nature has suffered enough, has it not?"

The sentence that was uttered struck me deeply. I was directly reminded of the reasons I had headed down to Elvala, of how I was initially driven to make my journey. Yet I accepted that the shaloran people had been punished enough when I saw the state they were in. The actions of these fanatics though? This seemed less about exacting revenge for the wrong done to nature. No. This seemed closer to a vendetta against the arcane; with the Spellblaze being an excuse to kill magical practitioners, and destroy their works. Regaining my composure I replied coldly, "Does that justify killing the innocent?" To this I could feel hostility rise from within the halfling and I knew I had truly hit a nerve. In the following instant though, all I could feel was pain.

I didn't even see the halfling move before I felt the punch connect with my stomach. Looking down I saw the halfling below, just as the other fist connected with the bottom of my jaw. Stunned by the blow, I careened back a bit before falling down. Now looking up at the halfling, I could see the hostile inner emotions emanating towards me, towards the words I had just uttered. "Innocent?" the halfling ruthlessly said, "There is no innocence in those who pervert nature and her design. There can be no forgiveness for them either." I should have been afraid of the halfling at this point, but my anger came back, fueling me to go forward. "What warranted that horrific display that I saw outside then?" I fired back as I bounced back to my feet, "To take random people from their homes, charge them with what you see as wrongdoings, and then set them ablaze!? How does that help alleviate nature's suffering!?"

The halfling dropped to a more defensive stance before replying: "If you are referring to the people we named, then know that they were all defilers of nature: Potion brewers,

runemasters, a blacksmith who specialized in magical artefact creation, and more than a dozen mages capable of casting spells. We have done great care in identifying various users who pervert nature for their own pursuits..." The halfling trailed off to take a breath before continuing: "As for how we killed them, a signal needed to be sent; seared into the hearts and minds of the citizens of this city. Perhaps you may not have the stomach for it? If so, I suggest you go back to your little forest, thalore. This won't be the last example we use with fire that you will likely see."

I don't know what made me more furious at that point: the callous deference of the halfling towards those killed, how this group was misusing nature's pain for their own agenda, or the suggestion to simply go back home. What I did know was that I was now livid inside, the halfling acutely cueing in on this too. Attempting to redirect my anger, the halfling quickly surmised: "Of course, you seem like you are made of sterner composition than most, not just in physical fortitude either. Head to the southern shoreline, then turn east. You'll find a path leading towards our base of operations." Registering the words, I took a moment to scrutinize them in my head. "And why should I do that?" I asked. "You wish to know of us, do you not?" the halfling said immediately, "Go talk to our instructors if you truly wish to find out who we are."

With this the halfling turned to depart from the tent. My ire had not subsided much, but I made no further attempt to confront the halfling. Battered and bruised, I sank down to the ground to rest for a moment. Pulling out one of my infusions, I began to heal my wounds. When I felt I was in better shape I got up and left the tent. Looking up I saw the evening sky. I decided that I would be staying one more night in the Nargol Kingdom and made my way back to the inn that I had previously slept in. At noon the next day I awoke and headed straight to the gates of the city to make my way out. There I pondered where my next destination would be before finally deciding to head south.

Escapades of Fay Willows - Book 3

On picking up this book you pause for a moment. Something doesn't feel entirely right about it.

Chapter 1 - Blackened Shoreline

Truly, there has to be no other place showing more damage in all of Eyal than its southern shoreline. Though I never traveled to the eastern side of the continent, I can't imagine anything that would compare to the destruction that was wrought here. These lands will never fully recover. I do hope for the Shaloran though, that this will serve as a constant reminder, to never brashly use magic in such a way again.

Following the travel instructions that I had received from the halfling, I proceeded south. I do not know why I didn't just head back home; something about the anger burning within me, it was pushing me forward. As I went south the sky would begin to turn a shade of colors, from blue to purple, and then a blackish red. Before long I couldn't even see the sun anymore, as thick smokey clouds blanketed the whole sky. After a full day of travel I set up camp near some burnt out trees. There was little to forage for in the destroyed wilderness, but I was able to find some edible berries and mushrooms, saving on my provisions.

The next day I continued on with my journey. After a few hours I reached the southern shoreline, a horrible sight to say the least. The waters bubbled as if being boiled and the ground was charred black. What trees or plants that still stood were completely dead and lifeless; as was the wildlife that had not escaped, their dead bodies even left untouched by the bugs and worms. Walking eastwards I could see small pools of lava escaping to the surface, forming countless small lakes across the landscape, and streams of red hot death that I cautiously had to avoid. To the north I noticed the lands jaggedly shooting outwards towards the sky, as if being pushed up from below.

Moving closer towards this raised landscape, I could see in the distance that the unnatural rock rose as high as a mountain. Within the unstable formations I could see twisting chasms, death traps of pointy spikes, and rivers of lava visibly running throughout. Remembering back to the shaloran soldiers I had treated in Elvala, I realized why they had to move northwards to come home. The center of the continent where the Midvale Plains had been located no longer existed. It was now replaced by

this deadly gauntlet, which would have certainly killed anyone inside it, both before and after the Spellblaze occurred. The soldiers may have also encountered the fanatics too, which might in and of itself have also been reason enough to avoid moving this way south.

Beginning to travel through this devastated landscape, I had to be careful. The light of the sun was snuffed out by smoke and debris, leaving the glow from the lava emerging from the ground the only way to see my footing. I don't know for how long I would head eastwards, but my progress through the land was slow. In the course of time, I would see an impassable river of red appear ahead of me. The lava flowed down to the open sea, with some burnt out remains of a dense forest behind it. I noticed to the north a clearing in the land above, so I continued my way up to see if I could find safe passage that way.

I grunted as I climbed the terrain to a plateau, seeing a small cavity appear in the jugged mountains up ahead. The land under me was precarious, but I was able to find decent footing through the lethal landscape of deadly drops and pitfalls. Slowly I made my way through to an opening, then into a clearing, and there I finally saw a path leading through the course rock. Suddenly in front of me however, I discerned what looked to be the image of a group, running down through the passage. Drawing nearer, one of the individuals within the group caught eye of me, and yelled out something to the others. They slowed to a cautious crawl as they began to approach.

I was a bit amiss as to who these beings were. I wondered if they might be some unknown monstrous race, due to how large they appeared to be. They were tall and wide, their bulging mass of muscles evident on their bodies from quite a distance away. Something also glistened on their skin, which upon drawing close enough, I identified to be glowing runic insignias; similar yet distinct to those runes I had handled in Elvala. Getting into earshot, one of the beings finally called out, "If you plan on taking us back, be prepared for a fight!" In a sign to show I wasn't hostile, I put my belongings on the ground, and backed away. This action somewhat stunned the beings. Though still on edge, they assumed a less aggressive stance.

"You aren't aligned at all with those cultists, are you?" The being continued, "My apologies for any distress we may have caused you." I merely shook my head as those words reached me, realizing at that moment that these were likely more victims of those fanatics. I proceeded to ask who they were and what had happened. "Never seen an ogre before I assume?" another ogre said, "We are, or we were, a nomadic tribe that wandered the lands as peddlers. Mostly we sold runes and infusions, but we also sold

other various small trinkets too. Then magic rained down from the sky and the earth opened up; destroying everything, killing many. We immediately went to help those we could in a nearby human city."

At this point tears began to stream down the ogre's face. Continuing to speak between the sobs, the ogre shakily said, "I'm not sure why, but a small band attacked us." At that moment the ogre began to cry, to the point that it was unable to speak. Seeing this, another ogre with several scars on his face stepped forward. "We were bound in chains and taken to a small settlement just beyond here," the scarred ogre stated, "There, we were subjected to insane experiments, something about 'cleansing us', and we witnessed a great many ogres die in grotesque and horrible ways. Realizing we would meet a similar fate, we broke out of our bonds, and made to escape from our cages." The ogre paused for a bit, surveying the devastated lands that I had just crossed. "Although, I'm not exactly sure where we may be running too."

Chapter 2 - The Fleeing Ogres

There is so little that is known about the ogres, who apparently know nothing of their own history either. This may have to do with my remoteness from the outside world, but I think their race may have only recently come to inhabit Maj'Eyal. Viewing the Shaloran archives, there is little mention of the ogres, and I don't believe anyone among the Thaloran would know much of them either. I wonder where the ogres truly come from?

I could feel the stares of the entire group looking past me, towards the uninviting landscape. They did not know where they could go, only to run. Looking to establish that it was indeed the fanatics they were escaping from, I asked, "Did the cultists you speak of wear masks on their faces?" The ogres immediately snapped their gazes back on me, tense fear unmistakable in their eyes. It was enough to tell me that the cultists they spoke of, the masked zealots I had encountered, they were one and the same. I remembered the anger within me that I felt, knowing that these ogres were now facing those same sinister actors; the ones that had initiated those atrocities in the Nargol Kingdom, and that human who had tried to kill me.

It was at this point I decided: if I could help these innocent victims of those magic hating madmen then I would. Feeling the Rune of Return in the back of my pack, I remembered and thought of the Shaloran. Looking up at the ogres I declared: "If you follow me I can lead you to Elvala. They have cut themselves off from the outside world, but I'm sure you can find safety within their lands." The ogres immediately locked their

eyes with mine as I stated these words, the shock and irritation clearly shown on their faces. "You would suggest we go to the Shaloran?" one of the ogres callously responded back, "Weren't they the ones behind this, this Spellblaze!? We would be peacefully going about our lives if it wasn't for them turning the world upside down!"

Keeping my calm, I decided to try persuading the ogres to go to Elvala and replied, "Where else might you go to survive?" To this I continued to receive frowns, but the one ogre who first spotted me pondered the question, and then asked, "Would they even help us, would we even be safe?" I stopped for a moment at the first question, before responding to it saying: "They are unable to help those in the outside world, a likely result of the actions from those same cultists that captured you. However, I know that they feel deeply for what they have done, and I believe they will offer you sanctuary if you go to them. If you have nowhere else to head towards, then allow me to bring you to them to ask for shelter." As I finished speaking, I caught notice of one of the ogres staring back. Seeing this, some of the ogres turned to look at the ogre, before one of them asked "is it them?"

Carefully looking at the ogre, I saw some sort of dark blue glow covering his eyes, and his gaze seemed to be as if he was looking at something. Suddenly the ogre piped up all at once, "We need to move." All of a sudden I could see a grave expression take hold of every ogre in the group, with one of the ogres starting to mutter repeatedly under their breath, in a panicked manner, "what do we do?" A bit ignorant of what was going on, I asked, "What is it?" The eyes of the ogre stopped glowing as he quickly turned to face me; now searching me intently, wary perhaps of a potential deception. "You better not be trying to mislead us, thalore," the ogre finally stated in a firm voice, with his words ringing in an ominous tone, "Take us to Elvala. We need to move. NOW!"

Taken off guard by the abruptness of the demand, I simply stammered out "o-kay". The ogre, not missing a beat, then turned to the other ogres and called out "let's go"! Hastily he stepped forward to grab my arm, before beginning to run with me in tow; the thunderous sounds of the other ogres soon following us. We then recklessly started charging through the death traps of the land: jumping small chasms, skirting past sharp rocks, and squeezing through rubble and debris. What had taken me maybe half of a day to transverse, we seemingly traveled in about an hour. The ogre that kept a hold of my arm would sometimes lift me up to avoid the hazards on the ground, making for a bumpy dash towards the sea. Pointing out the western direction that we needed to go with my other arm, the group swiftly turned, and we began dodging the lava that pooled and streamed all over the southern shoreline.

I was beginning to wheeze and choke at this point, the ogre holding my arm only then recognizing my distress, and making a motion to the other ogres to come to a stop. As we slowed down and came to a stop, the ogre turned his head to look to our rear, the same dark blue glow appearing over his eyes once more. My curiosity towards the glowing eyes finally getting the best of me, I asked what he was doing. The glow immediately faded as the ogre looked at me. "I take it you aren't very well versed in runes?" the ogre dully responded, "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, being how opposed to the arcane you thaloran are said to generally be. I'm using a rune that grants me vision of what the terrain is like around me, though I'm not necessarily using it for that specific purpose right now." The ogre stopped talking for a moment to look back again, the glow returning to his eyes.

Chiming in to finish the explanation once more, the scarred ogre stepped up saying, "He's looking back to see how far away those cultists chasing us from their encampment are." We were being chased? I suppose I shouldn't have expected any less from those loathsome cretins. They likely wanted to recapture the ogres, for whatever nefarious intentions they had. I began to recall the events I had recently witnessed in the Nargol capital and how unsettled I felt afterwards. I wondered what cruelty these ogres had suffered by their hands? Looking to stop myself from recalling anymore of those terrible memories, I pressed the scarred ogre on how they knew we were being chased.

"To give you the short version, the vision rune is giving him the power to see the relative location of the individuals pursuing us," the scarred ogre explained, "There is a bit more to it than that, but for our purposes he can get a pretty good glimpse of where those cultists following us are." Rather impressed that the ogre could do that, I wondered what other feats runes could accomplish. I figured when we were in relative safety that I might ask the ogres a bit more about what their runes were capable of. Then I heard a curse, turning to see the glowing eyes of the ogre now peering ahead us at something else.

Pressing him on what was wrong, the glow went away from the ogre's eyes, and quietly the ogre gave the heavy response: "There is a group of people in front of us and there are definitely cultists among them too." Upon hearing this, the faces of the other ogres turned to a look of total dismay; their hopes of escape waning away. The muttering ogre from before would again say "what do we do". "I don't want to go back" would then promptly come from another. One by one, cowardly words spewed from the mouth of a new ogre every moment, until it seemed everyone in the group was erupting in fear. For a moment this sorry display continued. Finally, the ogre holding my arm let go, yelling to

the others "ENOUGH OF YOUR SNIVELING"! The other ogres went silent at this, now looking up, as if waiting for direction.

Chapter 3 - Battle Preparations

By this point in my life, I had never seen an actual battle, let alone been a part of one. However, I do not believe this is necessarily the case for the ogres. They say that they lived as nomadic peddlers, but I wonder if perhaps that was just a cover story that they used. Maybe they hired themselves out as mercenaries or adventurers? It is hard to know what lies within their past, whether recent or distant.

Realizing the situation at hand, the ogre with the vision rune now took up the task of preparing the others for the fight to come. Stepping forward to address them, he quickly broke into a speech: "The enemy is on both sides of us, but we aren't caught yet. Those behind us have to travel through the treacherous ground we just traversed, while those ahead of us are still some distance away. We have time to form a plan and prepare for battle before either group arrives." As the ogre finished, one of the others piped up, "What will you have us do commander!" The newly minted commander grunted before replying, "First, we need a plan of attack."

To this another ogre stepped forward. "How fast is each group moving towards us?" the ogre queried, "Which one will be on us first?" At this the commander paused for a moment, then proceeded to take a look in front and behind him with his vision rune. When he was finished he responded: "The group behind us is closer, but it looks like they are only slowly navigating the lands we crossed, due to all the hazards. The ones ahead are approaching at rapid speed and will likely get to us sooner. Do you think we should hit the front group first, strategist?" I could see the strategist raise his head, smiling a bit upon being named. "Yes Sir!" the strategist piped up, "Maybe we can punch through them before getting hit in our rear?"

The commander nodded to this and then firmly began to address the other ogres. "We don't have any weapons to fight with," the commander boomed, "But we can use the environment to our advantage. Knock them into hostile terrain, use choke points to avoid being overwhelmed by their numbers, fight dirty and kick the blackened dirt into their faces." The commander stopped to take a breath before hollering, "WE WILL NOT BE GOING BACK!" To this the other ogres hollered the same "WE WILL NOT BE GOING BACK!" Then all the ogres broke into a resounding roar, raising both their arms

and their voices, and making odd gestures and movements with their hands. The signs of the craven display I had just witnessed prior were no more.

I immediately noticed the bigger ogres break off towards several dead trees; where with surprising ease, they then ripped some of the sturdier ones from the ground. After breaking the branches and roots off, they proceeded to swing the trunks around like giant clubs. More ingenious ogres started to rip their clothing into careful strips. They then took their belts off, fashioning them together with the fabric, and constructed crude slings. Other ogres collected rocks and piled them on the ground nearby, ammo I assumed for said slings. Some ogres seemed to pair off with each other, before starting to perform bizarre poses. When finished, they began to punch and kick in the air. I believe all of this was some sort of practice for fighting unarmed, though it may have also been a pre-battle ritual.

I stood awestruck at the sight of the ogres and their astounding ability to turn into a fighting force. I was so absorbed that I didn't even notice when the commander came up to me. Attempting to get my attention, he loudly commanded: "Thalore! Attention!" I snapped my head quickly in his direction. "Whaa-wha-," I stammered, zoning back into my immediate situation. "Do you have anything that can be used to help us out?" the ogre asked. Quickly registering those words, I jerked my pack off, and pulled it apart to display its contents. "This is all I have," I said. The commander peered into the bag, then reached in to grab the hatchet and the utility knife.

He weighed the two objects in each hand, before bringing up the hatchet and taking a few swings. Wearing a satisfied expression, he handed the knife back to me. "None of us can use this," the commander said, "It's too small for an ogre to wield effectively. You take it and use it to defend yourself." Hearing those words I soon realized something, I would be in this coming scuffle. While I might have chased off a hungry animal or two, or swung a practice sword at some dummy targets, I didn't have any actual experience in a real battle; let alone against an armed opponent that may be intent on killing me. The commander, taking notice of the discouragement crossing my face, then softly said: "That you have come this far with us, I can tell you aren't with those cultists. If need be, just run, and focus on saving yourself. They likely will let you go. It is us ogres they are after, not you."

The words tore through me, igniting my emotions within. I immediately raised my head to shout back, "No, I will fight with you!" I'm not sure if it was primarily the anger within me, the ire I had against the fanatics, or something else that caused me to say those words. I knew though that I would not let the ogres fight alone. I might die in the coming

confrontation, but I would not run from it. To this the other ogres quickly glanced in my direction, surprised but nonetheless happy. One ogre then gave a cheerful shout, "TO BATTLE!" The other ogres soon shouted "TO BATTLE" as well. With a smile, the commander then raised his hand, signaling to the other ogres to be silent. He then gave a slight nod towards me with his head, before then softly saying "to battle."

The commander didn't give much more time for the other ogres to get themselves ready, likely mindful of the fanatic's behind us. Calling for the ogres to line up, the strategist then formed them into several small groups. I was told to join the one closest to the sea, while the strategist and scarred ogre took charge of a couple in the rear. The commander then assumed a leading position in the middle. When the ogres were assembled, the commander gave the order to advance, and we quickly began to forge ahead over the terrain.

The hazards of the land prevented everyone from keeping pace with each other, though each individual group moved in a fairly disciplined manner. I dodged lava, uneven ground, burnt foliage, and the crashing waves of boiling water as I tried to keep up. Thinking back to it, our rapid pace would buy as many precious minutes, helping to keep us ahead of those behind us. We continued on like this until we could see the image of the fanatics group in front appear. There we waited for a few stray ogres to catch up, while the commander took a moment to view the battlefield, and the strategist made some small adjustments to our group positions. Finally, we moved forward.

Chapter 4 - To Battle!

Due to the darkness of the sky, and the scorched lands of the battlefield, it was hard to see anything; though I still remember the sounds of the battle in great detail. The bubbling of the lava and boiling water, the warcries that filled the air, the magical discharges from the ogre's runes, the impact of weapons clashing against each other... Of course, none of this compared to the death cries of the ogres or the fanatics, when their lives ceased to be.

As we closed in I could make out the individual forms of the fanatical warriors in the opposing force arrayed against us. Their battle line consisted of a couple of rows, with fighters in the front and archers in back. Considerably outnumbered, it looked as if they had the upper hand over us; although I now wonder if this was truly the case. Many weren't wearing masks and their tattered clothing reminded me of the refugees in the Nargol Kingdom. Perhaps they were new initiates, swayed to join by the words of the

masked zealots? All the initiates wielded weapons, but even I could tell that they had little idea of how to hold them properly.

The masked zealots within the group were a different story. They held their weapons well and many of them even wore armour. The light from the surrounding lava bounced off the metallic plates, chains, and rivets; making them stand out. Most of the zealots stood in the front line, even some of those with a bow or sling in hand. I figured they had positioned themselves as such to encourage their new initiates by leading from the front. I also recognized one of the masked zealots as well, that being the halfling with the leather attire; the one who had aided the human with the dark cloak back in the Nargol Capitol, along with giving me the directions to go this way. I remembered those swift movements the halfling had made back inside that tent and wondered how much of a difficult and bloody fight this battle might come to be.

Voices rang out from the zealots as they prepared the initiates around them to defend themselves. Shots and arrows came towards us with lightning speed, a couple ogres howling as they were hit by the incoming fire. Those ogres with makeshift slings in our ranks soon began to throw rocks into the opposing line, many of their shots peppering the initiates specifically. Several of the initiates screamed in pain; before then staggering about dazed and disoriented, bringing chaos to the fanatic's line. Then I heard a call from our commander, our line suddenly stopping a small distance away from our enemy. The fanatics looked at us with confused faces and I must say I was perplexed as well. Then the ogres began raising their arms up.

All at once an array of colors lit up our darkened surroundings, the insignias on the ogre's runes beginning to glow. As I looked at one of the ogres near me, I could see a light green glow encircling her arm, before a torrent of acid appeared to shoot forth. The liquid lashed out at several of the fanatics, drenching their bodies in slippery caustic fluid, and causing some of our foes to drop their weapons. Then a flash of lightning shot forward above me, piercing through a zealot and an initiate in front. Many of the fanatics began to scatter for cover, unable to cope with the onslaught of power that the ogres were unleashing on them. Some of the initiates fell to the magical barrage while a few others began to visibly break.

It looked as if we had the fanatics on their back foot, but then I heard that horrid piercing cry; the screeching reminding me of those innocents burned to death back in the Nargol Kingdom. All at once my surroundings had darkened, the ogres' magical attack stopping unexpectedly. I could see some of the ogres near me try to raise their arms again, but the light from the ogres' runes covered skin had now dimmed. Ahead of us many of the

fanatics lay injured or dead on the ground, but the majority of them still stood ready to fight. Then suddenly the fanatics seemed to cheer, beating their swords and shields, apparently not dissuaded from fighting by the ogres' efforts against them. Out of the corner of my eye though, I noticed a lone figure charging forward towards the fanatics line.

Running by some lava, I could see that it was the ogre commander! Gritting his teeth and my hatchet in his hand, he approached one of the masked zealots to give a powerful blow. The zealot was sent reeling backwards through the air and into a pool of lava. I remember feeling a dark sense of satisfaction as I saw that first fanatic burn alive. It was a fitting end for one who likely took part in those burnings from before. The hooting and hollering from the enemy ceased at this, while the commander turned to a shaken initiate nearby. With a simple swipe of the hatchet, the commander cleanly sliced their head off, and caused it to glide through the air a fair distance away.

The mere sight of the commander in action inspired the other ogres, who immediately surged forth to join the carnage. Visibly panicking due to the wall of giant figures moving against them, many of the initiates broke and turned to flee. The masked zealots stayed to fight, a slew of them subsequently getting knocked about. Those that wore heavier armour stood a bit more firm, but the rest were clobbered by fists and tree trunks. The enemy was falling before us and I was sure that the battle was nearly won. Then I saw an ogre sail through the air above me, landing into the boiling waters of the sea nearby.

One by one, ogre after ogre began to join a growing chorus of agonizing cries. Peering out into the shadows, I could see a small image rushing all around the battlefield in the direction of their origin. When the enemy warrior came to a stop near a lake of lava, I realized it was that masked halfling! Catching an ogre near to the lava unaware, the halfling somehow knocked them over, resulting in the ogre burning to death. Out of the darkness, another ogre appeared and attempted to smash the halfling with a violent blow in retaliation. With a simple crouch the halfling ducked, before quickly jabbing at the ogre's stomach. Then the halfling jumped up to land a devastating kick against the ogre's head, knocking them out.

A third ogre promptly came out to attack the halfling with a tree trunk, but with a sidestep the halfling simply moved out of the way, and disappeared into the darkness. The ogre followed, but from the grunting and yelling it seemed that this ogre did not fare well either. The halfling would emerge again and again, leveling ogres with shocking ease, before escaping from counterattack. Ogres in the shadows would be attacked and shout in pain, while those who strayed too close to the hazards of the landscape would

find themselves spiraling into death traps. In an instant, the battle had shifted in the fanatics favor, while trepidation and fear was beginning to sweep over those ogres around me.

Chapter 5 - Dark Resolve

It is hard to describe the sensation that came over me. It was still me, but I didn't feel in control. That other me, it seemed to thrive on the violence I inflicted or received, and wanted nothing more than to endlessly kill. It caused me sadness as I inflicted misery and terror on those I came upon; as they died, screaming in agony. It is someone I hope to never become again.

Viewing the ogres in my vicinity, I could see they were beginning to lose their will to fight. What's worse is that some of the initiates that had fled had now returned; beginning to batter their shields, hollering and posturing once more. From one of them I heard the phrase "hooray for nature's champion"! They would yell other phrases too such as "nature's might shall prevail" or "the ogre's magical taint ends"! The sheer display of strength from the halfling and the heckling of the initiates would further sap the morale of ogres; so much so that some began to shake in fear, turning into cowards yet again. Nearby to me an ogre even dropped her weapon and fell to the ground, having lost all hope.

I lowered my head as I felt the tears begin to stream down from my eyes. I could feel the anguish, dismay, and all the other hateful emotions being directed towards the ogres. I remembered once again the events in the Nargol Kingdom. It made me angry, angry at those inflicting the pain, for whatever petty reasons guided them to do so. The ogres didn't deserve this, nor did the innocent victims that the fanatics burned alive... or me, back in that tent. Those inflicting all this heartache, producing endless atrocities, they were all insufferable gnats. What's more, they disparaged nature's name while doing so! I felt I had to do something to keep this from happening again-

-I FELT 'I' NEEDED TO KILL THEM!

Yet what could I do? Nothing. I could hate them all I wanted, but that wouldn't stop these perpetrators of cruelty. Even if I could kill one or two of the fanatics, there would be the rest of them; not to mention that other group behind us that had yet to catch up. There was no chance at victory, no chance of being saved. As I looked around the number of ogres fighting continued to diminish. I could feel despair starting to take hold of me; as if

I was falling into an abyss of nothingness, deep within myself. Save for my hatred, I couldn't feel any other emotion. But what did I hate? I despised the fanatics, but I couldn't direct my hatred fully towards them. No, something else...

"Does da tree hunnie wish to leave?" I heard a voice say to me, "Maybe run back to yon forest?" I looked up to see a masked dwarf, holding an axe and shield. "We know of ya Fay Willows," the dwarf said, "Ya have no taint of magic, yet are ya an ally of nature? From where ya stand, it would seem that ya be an ally of da ogres." The dwarf brandished the weapon wildly as it continued to talk. "Ya know," the dwarf mused, "Perhaps I shouldn't be blamin' ya. I'm sure da ogres told ya some wild tales, and dis is just a misunderstandin'. We're just wanting to help da ogres ya know, and dey seem to be gettin' a little bit more cooperative now. It is a shame a few of 'em had to die, but a message had to be sent!" The dwarf began to chuckle for a moment as it finished speaking.

The dwarf stopped chuckling to continue again, "How about ya cooperate with us too hunnie? Else I'm afraid I'm gonna have to hu-RRRRRRRK!"

The writing for this chapter has been increasingly looking more messy, as if the author was writing as fast as they could, or with an unsteady hand. But now suddenly, the typeface starts to completely change; the letters looking slightly contorted, while a dark and chaotic feeling rises from the page. You wonder if a new writer took over to write.

All at once, the sounds of battle seemed to disappear, my attention centering solely on the dwarf in front of me. In the next moment all I could see was blood. Blood on my hand, on my arm, on the mask of the dwarf, on my knife plunged in the throat of the dwarf, and from the coughs out of the dwarf. Dropping the axe and shield to grasp at the knife, the dwarf choked as it tried to breathe. Slowly I bent down to pick up the axe, gripping it with my left hand, and bringing it back behind my head. Then with all my strength 'I' brought the axe down on top of the dwarf! A strange feeling filled within me as the dwarf died to the blow, coursing through every fiber of my being.

At that very moment, I recalled the Eldoral halfling I had killed, from when I had initially started my travels. I had hated the reasons said in support of the Spellblaze and became enraged to no end at the one spouting that nonsense. I had followed the halfling out with a steak knife in hand and... 'I' killed him. It was a horrible feeling taking a life, yet a dark surge of energy coursed through me then

too, and 'it' wanted to drive me to kill more. This drive to kill was the real reason I had fled that settlement. I was afraid I would kill someone. Someone who didn't deserve it. Even that halfling I killed didn't deserve it. But, these fanatics...?

It felt as if something in my mind had snapped. I remember laughing very loudly! 'It' was a dreadful feeling. I might have been crying too. I couldn't tell what emotions to feel and I wondered if I was going mad. What was happening to me? I don't know, I still don't know, neither then nor now. But that wasn't important. The urges to kill within me were growing. The ogres around me could no longer fight, yet I didn't exactly care about that; no, I was really only concerned with the fanatics. There was no innocence to be found from these zealots, these instigators of torment and madness, or the initiates blindly following them. The drive within me to kill was strong and wondered why I was resisting it? I could kill these fanatics with a clear conscience, couldn't I? Maybe I could also help the ogres escape as a result too.

Then I noticed a human zealot looking at me and the dead dwarf. I began to make my way over to the human, who began to wave a sword in one hand. For some reason I thought it was kind of comical, despite what should have caused me to think of an intense fear for my own well being. I could hear muffled shouts of something coming from the human, though I couldn't distinguish what was being said. As I drew closer I saw the human begin to shake; so much so that the mask that they wore shifted, the man's face underneath being partially revealed. I could see the fear in his eye, before he raised his shield in an attempt to hide away. I remember the enjoyment I felt from that fear.

I used the axe to sweep the shield from the man's hand, knocking it away so he couldn't break eye contact anymore. I think I was smiling at this point, grinning madly. I could feel the fear building within the man and I was relishing in it! At the same time though, the sadness inside me, the other emotions; I was plunging deeper into the depths of my own darkness. He was terrified and attempted to thrust forward to attack me, lunging out towards... Where was he attacking actually? I think he had intended to attack me, but he ended up moving over to the side. I simply raised the axe in my hand, as I had done before with the dwarf, and I brought it down with a deep blow that connected with the human's shoulder.

The man cried out as he dropped to the ground, holding where his arm used to be; the red blood spurting and bubbling from his severed arm, the hand still rigidly gripping the sword. He then tried to move away, just as a lovely nearby pool of lava

caught my attention. I smiled a little as I kicked at his body, sending him in with a plop. I felt a strange sense of joy as he burned alive, yet simultaneously felt disdain for what I had just done. I felt another surge of energy course through me when the man finally died. Then I felt an even greater urge to kill. I wondered at this point if I would be able to stop myself. But why would I want to stop? I should be actively trying to kill these fanatics, shouldn't I?

I could hear the screams of terror of others around me. I noticed that the sounds weren't coming from those wearing masks either. Easy pickings to satisfy my urge to kill. I began to approach them, them yelling for help, my intense urge to kill rising with each step! Unexpectedly though, I felt a strong pull on my arm, and was prevented from moving forward. Looking to see what was holding me back, I noticed the masked halfling clutching my arm. In an instance, all I could feel now was hatred, remembering everything in the Nargol Kingdom that had been done. I then turned all my attention towards my new prey, no more thoughts holding me back on what I would do next.

Chapter 6 - Hateful Wrath

I'm not sure how big the fanatics group was when we battled them, though only about twenty or so wore masks. What I do know is that when I first saw the ogres they numbered over fifty. After the battle, only nine of them would join me in the escape; although, I don't think the rest of the surviving ogres were all killed. I wonder what cruel end they must have met at the hands of those monsters.

This chapter continues in the typeface that the previous one had changed into; but now the letters look more crisp, neat, and in harmony with the writing. A certain feeling of malevolence takes hold of you as you read the text.

Unlike the other fanatics, I could remember the gist of the words that came from the masked halfling; "Should have killed you", "a mistake to spare me", and so forth. Then the halfling stopped talking. Out of me came my overwhelming animosity, being channeled into the halfling's body. While this happened I impulsively swung the axe to the side with my other arm, then slammed its backside into the halfling's shoulder. The solid grip on me remained firm, though I could hear the audible clenching of teeth as the halfling tried to ignore the pain. Looking to end things quickly, the halfling lifted me over its shoulder, and catapulted me towards the boiling waters of the sea!

I don't know what exactly happened next; being parallel above the ground one moment, appearing behind the halfling the next. A startled shriek followed from the halfling as my bloody cut erupted on its backside! Reacting quickly, the halfling spun around and jabbed at me twice, which I casually just swatted away with my right hand. Proceeding to unleash an all out assault on the halfling, I struck blow after blow against my prey, and left deep splits in the halfling's armour. At this point I could remember the grin on my face, tearing at my face muscles in an unnatural way. My emotions were unleashing from every blow I made while the halfling seemed helpless to respond.

Keenly aware of this though, the halfling switched up its stance and strategy, attempting to strike back with a series of kicks. I remember receiving several hits to my body, suffering little from the blows, but feeling a pressure around me release. Swiping back at the halfling with the axe, my blow now was easily dodged, and the halfling then subsequently responded back with a fury of punches against me. Annoyed now, I retaliated wildly with a huge slash of the axe that the halfling would have no chance to escape from. I savored the yelp as my attack connected, the blade of the axe cutting deep through the chest plate of the halfling's armour and into the flesh underneath. The halfling began to cough up blood and suffered greatly from the inflicted wound. I could feel my emotions within the injury, tearing at the halflings insides.

My instincts completely enveloped me at that point and I began to swing the axe relentlessly with little care of what I hit. The halfling tried to avoid my blows, but a number of them hit home. Blood flew as I sliced all around. I'm not sure if it was all the halflings blood either, I think I may have cut through several other fanatics unintentionally at that moment. I do however remember the halfling's swift move in the other direction, attempting to escape the retribution that I was bringing forth. The halfling dropped close to the ground, the abuse I had rendered now taking its toll. I could hear the fearful murmuring from all the fanatics around me, both initiates and zealots. They were all shakily backing away from me.

At this point the writing appears to start to return to the book's original typeface and style. You can no longer feel anything as you continue to read.

For a brief moment I stood, not knowing what would happen next. Then suddenly I felt a large hand place itself on my shoulder. Glancing back I found myself face to face with the ogre strategist. Talking quickly, the strategist quickly relayed that the other fanatics

behind us were closing in. Peeking past the ogre, I could see the figures of the other group. Far more numerous and much better armed and armoured, the light flickered off the long wall of advancing metal that stretched from the elevated rocks to the sea. Looking ahead however, I saw only a handful of scattered initiates and zealots. If we broke through the front group now it would open up a path for escape. It would be my ultimate rebuke: to see the ogres to safety, out from the clutches of these fanatics.

I called out to the ogres to breakthrough now, before pushing towards a couple terrified fanatics ahead of me. The remaining ogres, who were still willing to fight, saw this and began to rally. There was no resistance left to be found in the fanatics' battered line, their morale now completely broken, due to the halfling having been thoroughly trounced. Most fled from our advance, the few who stayed simply being knocked aside as we passed. Looking back at the battlefield I caught a glimpse of that halfling; staring at me with cold intensity that pierced through their mask, but unable to do much else. I could feel a bit of satisfaction rise within me, from snubbing the fanatics, and getting this victory over them.

Many of the ogres had fallen during the battle, many killed by that halfling's hands. Some ogres remained on the battlefield, alive but too injured to follow, or perhaps too demoralized in the case of some. I recalled the female ogre that had dropped her weapon, noting that she had not joined us in the escape. There was no way for us to retrieve them, the other group of fanatics were already in pursuit of us. We would be chased for a long time after the battle. Even after the fanatics disappeared from our view, we continued to run for a long while. When we did stop it was only after one of the ogres had fallen down, due to wounds inflicted on her.

Retrieving some of my infusions, I was quick to treat the female ogre, and a couple others. The ogre commander, who had managed to survive the battle, would also come over for aid. The ogre strategist would swiftly take command at this point in the journey, telling me to only use the infusions enough so that we could get going again. Further on, when we were well away from that battlefield, I would again be allowed to continue with my assistance. For some reason I remember the ogre strategist looking at me in a perplexed way, while I made use of one of the last infusions, that I had available in my pack. After I finished up with my treatment, we continued on towards Shaloran lands; the only brief respites being the periodic stops to catch our breath. It felt as if we didn't stop running until after the sun became visible in the sky once more.

Escapades of Fay Willows - Book 4

These books seem to be part of a series, but curiously, this entry seems to be the fourth installment. After a brief search you fail to find the second and third titles anywhere within the library; although you do find a broken magical security ward, likely used to thwart theft attempts of tomes from their shelves. Closely examining the device, you see signs which show that it was nullified by anti-magic activity.

Chapter 1 - Exhaustive Travel

The endurance of an ogre is quite astonishing. While I had collapsed from exhaustion, most of the ogres had persevered, staying awake until we made it to that abandoned settlement. In particular, while many of the ogres had managed to acquire some shut eye with me in that abandoned settlement, I was told that the strategist would go on to make the entire journey to Elvala without a wink of sleep! I honestly don't believe any other race in Maj'Eyal could possibly stay awake, let alone as active, for that long.

I don't know how much time I had spent along that hellish shoreline. Perhaps days, over a week? It was good to see some semblance of greenery and living nature again. Making our way into the area just south of the Nargol lands, I basked a little in the natural sunlight from the sky; upon which I felt a rumbling in my stomach, reminding me that I had not eaten for quite a while now. The ogres for their part did not seem the least bit hungry or tired, but after such extensive travel I wondered if this was truly the case. Reaching into my pack, I pulled out all my provisions, and laid them out one by one on the ground. Almost immediately I noticed the ravenous stares from the ogres.

Have you ever seen a hungry ogre? Within an instant they will eat any food put in front of them. I barely had time to get out of the way, before the entire lot of them converged on the tasty morsels that had come into their view. When I looked back next, all that I had laid out was gone, and the ogres were now rummaging through my backpack. After failing to find anything more to eat, they adopted some semblance of civility once more. The commander got up and came over to thank me for the food and asked that I excuse himself and the others. That didn't do anything for my own hunger, but I'm glad they enjoyed filling their stomachs, I guess.

From behind me the strategist then approached, with one of my remaining rations clutched in his hand. I hastily snatched at the food when it was offered, before any of the other ogres might have caught notice of it. Half of it had already been eaten, but considering how hungry I was I didn't really care. Both the commander and strategist seemed to chuckle as I quickly consumed the ration. As the ogres regained their composure though, I could see the reality of the situation creep back into their faces. Once again I could see the dark blue glow appear over the eyes of the commander's face, looking in the direction of the southern shoreline.

"Any sign of them," the strategist asked? "No, but that doesn't mean we are in the clear," the commander responded. I don't remember much of what was said after that. During the following conversation that occurred between the commander and the strategist, I would lose consciousness. I do at least recall though, that the strategist would relinquish the leadership role back to the commander. When I awoke next, I found myself sandwiched between a couple of ogres, atop several mattresses. A repulsive aroma tickled my nose and I looked over to see a skewered wolf being turned on a campfire.

Rolling around to get my bearings, I noticed that the ogres had apparently made camp in the middle of what looked to be a settlement; which I assumed to be one that the Shaloran had abandoned, due to the change in the building architecture. I could see some of the other ogres sleeping on an assortment of debris: broken furniture, bales of grass, and various other items likely scavenged from the nearby structures. The scarred ogre, who was turning the skewer, took notice of my stirring. He shouted out loudly that I was awake, before the commander and strategist then emerged from behind one of the buildings.

"How are you doing thalore," the strategist called out, "Did you rest well?" I groggily sat up straight, not yet fully awake. "I'll rest better when we get to Elvala," I replied, "What has happened?" To this I received a quick summary. We had arrived at the outskirts of Shaloran territory, the ogres having carried me here after I had collapsed. The strategist noted that what appeared to be scouts for the fanatics had been following us, though they were hanging back far in the distance. Whether any more fanatics were nearby was unknown, although the commander had been actively keeping watch for any sign of trouble.

"We can't linger here much longer," the strategist would finish saying. Looking at the ogre I asked, "When will we be heading out?" Before the strategist even had a chance to reply, the commander interjected with a great bellow, "Immediately, after you have

had something to eat!" I could tell from the commander's facial expressions that he was suggesting what was hanging over the fire. I was a bit disgusted by the thought of this, so I noted that I would go acquire my own meal. The commander paused for a moment, but with a sigh he told me "to be quick", and then turned to rouse the rest of the ogres.

After a little while of searching through the nearby buildings, I noticed a trapdoor with a rusty lock. Breaking the lock and descending a ladder, I found a cellar untouched since the time of the original shaloran inhabitants; likely from even before the Spellblaze. There was a considerable amount of bottled wine, but also ample proportions of old vegetables and dried fruit that looked edible enough. I brushed away some cobwebs from a nearby chair and table, then proceeded to eat my fill. Satisfying my hunger, I then collected a couple bundles of the produce, and carried them back to the campsite.

The commander was already assembling the other ogres when I returned. I noticed that a couple of recently killed carcasses were slung on the scarred ogre's shoulders, while some ogres had now armed themselves with whatever weapons or tools had been laying about. A few of the ogres also haphazardly wore some bits of makeshift armour, partially covering some of their vital areas. Seeing me carrying more food, the commander would direct a couple of ogres to help with the load, and the strategist would ask where I had found it. I relayed back the location of the cellar which I had entered, noting that there were additional contents within.

The commander, while interested in acquiring more supplies, was quite disinterested in the fact of where they lay. Concerned with the time it would take to bring it up, the commander noted that an ogre wouldn't be able to easily fit through any of the doors in the settlement, let alone a trap door to one of the cellars. The strategist opined that I had fit through and insisted that we take the food to ensure that there was enough to eat for the remainder of our journey. The commander was hesitant at staying any longer but consented. After spending another half an hour, I was able to bring up all the food. We then continued on towards Elvala.

Chapter 2 - Seeking Sanctuary

I want to emphasize that I come from a society where there is little practiced magic, let alone any products of it such as runes. While there were thaloran who were capable of casting spells, their knowledge was self-taught and done in secret; not to mention that thaloran users of magic were generally ostracized from the rest of the community when found out, if not completely exiled from Thaloran lands. Even now, I still don't know

much about the inner workings of the Rune of Return that is grafted to me. I am however working to learn the basics of runes and the greater subject of the arcane forces behind them.

The fanatic's scouts continued to shadow us as we moved deeper into Shaloran territory, but were always careful to stay a fair distance away. It would be a couple more days before we would eventually reach the edge of the Shroud. Navigating to where I had first crossed through the misty wall to get into the city, I took off my pack, and rummaged through it for the Rune of Return. Finding it, I took the rune out, and presented it to the ogre commander with an outstretched hand. I had expected him to take it, but he simply nodded his head and said, "A Rune of Return." For the next brief moment I stood there, hand held out; the commander clearly as puzzled as I was to our interaction. It wasn't clear to him what was going on, until the scarred ogre finally chimed in and stated, "You have no clue how that rune your holding works do you?"

At this the commander blinked, before realizing the situation and remarking, "Right, you're a complete novice." I could feel the blank expression worn on my face and the ogres were plainly aware of this. "Come over this way kind thalore," a voice called out. I turned my head to see who was calling me, before identifying it was a female ogre; the one who I had first helped with the infusions after the battle. "Let's see here that rune you got." I was a bit confused, but I made my way over, and promptly displayed the rune to her. Taking it in one hand, she proceeded to examine the rune, before handing it back to me. "Right," the ogre began, "This here rune is bonded to you, only you here can inscribe it. After that is done, you here can use this here rune to enter there Elvala. Then kind thalore, you can request entry for us."

It felt like the words popping out of the ogres mouth were some type of different language. The ogre, who I would eventually come to know as my instructor, then gave me a series of explanations about runes. Ultimately though, she would eventually decide that it would be best to skip the full lesson on rune theory, and just graft the Rune of Return on me. To ensure that I would have the least trouble activating the rune, the ogre chose to inscribe it on my back, a bit below my neck. I can remember how painful the experience was as the nerves of my spine were pricked and prodded. Despite this though, I can also remember the exhilaration my body felt, being touched by arcane forces for the first time.

"There then, finished I am," the female ogre said, pleased with her work. She then circled around me, before putting her hands on my shoulders. "Kind thalore, all that is left for you to do is to activate your now rune, and get past this here barrier," she

explained, "Before I tell you what to do, know that I thank you. If it hadn't been for you, I- we here... we here likely would have all died." I could see the tears beginning to stream down her face, the scarred ogre then trodding over, once again ready to fill in on what was being said. "It seems our lives are in your hands, yet again," the scarred ogre started, "We hope that you will be able to convince the Shaloran to let us in, but even if you can't, we wanted to thank you. All of us ogres wanted to thank you, for helping us." Around me I could see the other ogres bowing their heads.

"I'm sure you will be let in," I replied while smiling, "Tell me what it is I have to do." The female ogre then raised her head, wiped away the tears from her face, and started to walk me through the process to activate the rune. I gave a solemn nod to the ogres before performing the steps myself, the rune taking a lengthy moment before sending me on my way. Instantly my surroundings completely changed, the bustling of shaloran now visible all around me. I could feel a heavy sensation on my neck where the rune was, but other than that I felt no different. A few of the shaloran turned to look in my direction, unquestionably surprised at my entry, though not as much as I would have expected. "You're that thalore who helped us from before?" One of the shalore called out, "Welcome back!"

"Oh, a, thank you," I replied, slowly adjusting to the fact that I had suddenly entered Elvala. Realizing that the ogres were still waiting for me outside I excused myself and then started running to the middle of the city. Looking for the building where I had previously met the general, I caught sight of the guards who had stood outside during my previous visit, and swiftly made my way over to them. Panting and out of breath, I slowly gasped out, "Ogres... seeking asylum... here in... Shaloran lands." The guards stood in bewilderment after hearing the sentence I let out, grasping what I had said, but unable to determine what to do.

Then from behind me came a voice, "What is this about ogres?" I turned around to see a young female shalore, who I recognized as being one of the mages who saw me off from Elvala. Seeing my face, the mage seemed to oddly coo a bit. "Ooo, you're that thalore," she said, "We've never personally met, but I helped teleport you out a short while ago. Welcome back to Elvala." Catching my breath, I explained the situation involving the ogres outside; putting great emphasis on the fanatics chasing them, and how ogres were seeking refuge in Shaloran lands. As I finished, the young shalore answered back, "Judging from what you have told me, it would likely be best if those ogres were brought in promptly."

Approaching the guards to communicate something, their muddled faces quickly became somewhat distressed by the words spoken to them by the shalore woman. I don't know what the mage had said, but it seemed as if the guards were almost pleading with the young shalore about something. Eventually she called for me to follow her, then set off in the direction of Elvala's former entrance. I could tell that this shalore seemed to have some plan in mind, perhaps one that would allow the ogres safe passage into the city. As I made way to follow her, I noticed the two guards murmur something to each other, before one of them rushed towards a door of a nearby building. The remaining guard then turned to look apprehensively in our direction as we walked away.

Chapter 3 - The Enchantress

Alreiwen Tael, the foolhardy enchantress, and easily the worst conversationalist I have ever met. Among all the shaloran I know of none have a greater ego than hers. Still, I respect her sense of justice, along with her gifted abilities in the arcane. Who knows what fate might have befallen the ogres had she not been present when I had come along to make that emergency request for their entry as I did.

Along the way the young mage probed me with varying questions relating to my travels and of the events that had unfolded during them. Of those questions asked though, the ones involving the treatment of the ogres have stuck out in my mind the most. "So the ogres, I've heard a little bit about them," the mage started commenting, "While they never really came over to Shaloran lands, I have heard the stories expressing their altruism and heroics. But from what you told me, about those extremists, it seems rather odd that they wouldn't have killed the ogres outright. I mean, they have obviously managed to merge their bodies with arcane runes. What more reason is there for someone who hates magic to not just kill them then and there? For what purpose do you think those extremists kept the ogres alive?"

"I do not know the reason, nor do I care," I responded off-handedly to the question, "For what purpose would you attempt to discern any meaning from their deranged actions anyways? I see little reason for you or any other shaloran to care." Laughing at this, the young shalore replied back in a casual manner, "Perhaps you are right, but just because they seem to act mad to you doesn't mean that they pursue whatever their doctrines are aimlessly." She firmed up a bit before continuing, "They will likely be our enemies in the future, but hopefully before we ever truly encounter them, we can grasp their motives. If

we can understand how they act, we can anticipate what moves they will make, and we can make plans to counter their schemes as a result."

As we continued on I noticed that the shalore was intently looking at me, or rather at the back of my neck. "Judging from where the rune I crafted was placed," she remarked, "I guess the ogre's helped you with inscribing my Rune of Return?" Taking a moment to process what the shalore said, I soon spouted, "You crafted?" The shalore smiled and laughed a bit. "Indeed I did," she proudly answered back, "A masterwork rune produced by the best enchantress among all the shaloran! Though I'm wondering, why didn't you graft it on yourself? Are thaloran really 'that' backwards when it comes to the arcane?" I remember the harsh expression I gave, which she immediately picked up on. "Right. I'll try to keep that in mind the next time I meet a thalore," she replied.

As the Shroud came into our view the enchantress asked where exactly the ogres would specifically be on the other side. I noted to her that I had left them in the same place where I had entered through on my first visit to Elvala, directing her to the spot with my hand. Standing stoically and raising her arms, she started singing in a low harmonic sound. Any skepticism I had as to what she planned was soon replaced with astonishment, the misty smoke in front of us slowly beginning to move and dance. Then a tunnel, smaller in size than the one I had first traversed with the rangers when I initially entered Elvala, formed in front us to the other side.

Moments after that, the ogres soon appeared on the other side. Not missing a beat, the ogres entered the tunnel one by one, and began to move towards us. After a few minutes the first ogres would begin to arrive within the boundaries of the Shaloran's capital. They made their way over to us, and showing their exhaustion, collapsed onto the ground. Likely surprised by this spectacle, I quickly noticed many shaloran spectators starting to gather. They curiously looked on at this unexpected event that was now taking place in front of them. As the last ogre cleared the misty smoke, the mage put her arms down, and the tunnel within the Shroud collapsed. Finished with the spellcasting, the mage swayed about a bit, before she gradually set herself down. Peering up at me with a smile on her face, she made a simple statement, while gasping in and out: "It... is done. You have led... the ogres... to their safety."

"Indeed, though this wasn't the proper way to go about it," I heard a voice state behind me. Turning around to see who was speaking, I saw that it was the shalore general; along with a large company of armoured soldiers, who were now breaking their way through the onlookers. For a moment I wondered if there would be trouble, but the general would give the order to bring the ogres to the healers, alleviating my fears. As

the prominent shalore began to approach us, his eyes then snapped over towards me. Stopping for a moment, he gave a long stare. Then he stated in a quiet, but authoritative voice, "You should head over with the ogres as well." He then continued on past me towards the trickster enchantress.

Deciding for now it would be best to follow the orders of the general, I proceeded to make my way to the healer's grounds. Naively thinking I would look for the chief healer to see how I could help out, I entered the building, and approached the nearest healer inside. I can still remember the shock on the healer's face as he glanced up at me. It hadn't even crossed my mind that the general had suggested that I head to the healers for my own injuries, not for that of the ogres. One by one, it felt like healer after healer would catch wind that I was in need of aid; before suddenly, I must have had half of the healers in the building tending to me, even some of those that were originally helping the ogres!

I can't say I remember much of what happened next, nor could I recall feeling any pain from any of the injuries that I had apparently accumulated. The healers however, recognizing how critical a state I was really in, whisked me away with great urgency. I was given several anesthetic infusions, which subsequently caused me to black out. I would learn later that while the healers were initially aghast at how brutally injured I was, they were truly horrified when the regenerative infusions they applied failed to have much effect; their regenerative spells not faring much better. In total, it would take my body a couple months to recover. To this day I am told to be careful of injury, due to how long it would take for me to recuperate.

When I finally came to, the healers checked me over thoroughly, and I was told someone would be coming in to see me. After a brief period of time, I was greeted by the enchantress once more. "I see you are doing alright," she said, "You're certainly quite tough thalore. Don't worry about the ogres, Aranion has granted them asylum." Speaking proudly as she finished saying those words, the shalore then oddly became more business-like, both in posture and tone. "Now then," she began anew, "I realize you have only recently awakened, but 'General Gawaeil' wants me to get the story from you. What transpired after you left for the Nargol Kingdom to the point when you came back here?"

Chapter 4 - Terrifying Interview

I do not know if Alreiwen has forgiven me; for the terror I had inflicted on her, and the hatred within me that she was subjected too. While it was but a mere moment, I could tell that all my emotions had been channeled into her very being. She knew what was inside me now and how potentially dangerous that other me could be. Rei, if you are reading this, know how truly sorry I am for what happened.

For the next two hours the enchantress proceeded to grill me, as to what had happened after I had left Shaloran lands. In great detail I informed her of my experiences within the Nargol Kingdom and my subsequent travel along the southern shoreline of Maj'Eyal. Every so often the inquisitive shalore would ask me questions: about the fanatics I had witnessed, the events I had seen them carry out, or of activities they may have been a part of. I honestly couldn't tell if it was for her own satisfaction that she queried me as she did or because the general had asked her to do so. However, it was as this conversation came to a close, that the more infamous point of our discussion would occur.

"So, that mostly concludes more or less what Aranion had sent me here for," she began, "However, the healers also wanted me to ask you a few questions in regards to your body. I'm not sure if you have been told yet, but you have been in this hospital bed for quite some time now, despite injuries that should have healed in a few weeks. You wouldn't perhaps have an explanation for why this is, would you?" Instantly, I wondered if perhaps what had happened on that charred battlefield was connected with my slow recovery time. I was finally realizing that something was wrong with me by this point, though to what extent I couldn't exactly tell. Regardless, I wasn't interested in talking about that terrible instance; not wanting to remember what had happened of course, but also knowing nothing good would result from recalling it.

"I wouldn't know why that would be," I replied, while turning my head away from the enchantress. Despite not being able to see the shalore's face, I could tell that she saw through me immediately. "So you do have some idea then!" she cheerfully responded. I glanced at her with disgust, viewing the gleam of enjoyment beaming from her eyes; although, I couldn't tell what she was satisfied from. Guessingly, she then said, "Judging from the ogres' reactions, perhaps it somehow involves your recent fighting experience against those extremists?" I couldn't help but dart my eyes away, realizing that they were only telling her how easily, and accurately, she was reading me. She seemed to giggle a little bit at this, which only served to annoy me more.

Regaining her composure, the enchantress then said: "The ogres I spoke to talked at great length, about you leading them here to Elvala; how without your help they would

likely not have survived, in your fight against those magic hating extremists. However, the more we spoke, the more it became clear that something was amiss. Curiously, no ogre would say much in regards to you; in whatever it is you did in that battle, despite how important you were to apparently winning it. From what I can understand there were many ogres with you too. How were you so crucial in them getting here? I heard from the Rangers that you held your own against a couple of wolves, but armed and trained fighters are clearly a step above some hungry animals. You don't strike me as having that much combat experience; fighting within a pitched battle like that, as the ogres have apparently described to me."

The enchantress intently examined me as she spoke, analyzing me for any hint or clue I would give her. For my own part, I was actively attempting to repress my memories of those recent events; to not relive the mix of emotions that had taken hold of me at that time, to leave them silent and buried. Intent on digging further into me though, the enchantress continued to press on, unknowingly drawing closer and closer to meeting that darker version of myself. "What is it that you are hiding about yourself that the ogres dared not mention about you?" she asked, "What unmentionable thing did you perhaps do to help them through their plight?" The enchantress continued on with the probing questions, one after the other, endlessly, never stopping-

-Until finally, I decided that she needed to stop.

You sense a disgustingly vile feeling rise from the page as you start reading through the following paragraph. The characters written look distinct and different from the rest of the text, as if written by a new writer.

"CEASE ASKING ME THESE QUESTIONS NOW!" The phrase swiftly escaped from me, though I had no intention of stating it as forcefully as I did. The young shalore was abruptly taken aback from my statement; her eyes filled with confusion, the smile that one could mistake for a permanent fixture on her face was now gone. She began to shiver and sweat profusely all at once, before stammering out "wha-what?" She shook in her chair and I could see the fear emanating from her body. I paused again for a moment, tasting the fear, feeling a sense of glee! This sensation I felt, it felt similar to something from before...

I realized all at once what was happening. My emotions were beginning to take a hold of me, that other me was here! I immediately pulled every force of my being away from the enchantress, causing her to instantly jump out of the chair. She then scrambled away, gasping as the pressure I had exerted was lifted; her eyes now wide, after catching a

full glimpse of the darker me within. "I'm sorry" was all I could muster to say, as she warily looked on, seemingly now appearing much older than before. Rattled, she made eye contact one last time, and then shakily made her way to the door; to get away from me, to escape. Sometime after she was gone, I would realize that a pair of guards would be stationed outside my room, and I'm pretty sure they weren't there before the enchantress had come.

When I recovered enough to move around a bit, I was released from the care of the healers. I was given a dwelling in a secluded part of Elvala, with a pair of guards stationed outside at all times. Although I never asked, I was sure those guards were there to confine me from the rest of the citizens of Elvala. I didn't blame the Shaloran for this. Even now, that other me is still there; trying to influence my thoughts, wanting to escape and lash out. Who knows what sort of actions I might have been pushed to do? I may have gone into a mad killing rage against any shaloran I saw; the irony of which is not lost on me, considering my initial reasons for leaving Thaloran lands, so long ago.

Chapter 5 - Festival of Happiness

It is worth noting that after my long period of solitude, many more ogres had come to seek refuge in Elvala; hundreds of them even. The ogre strategist had petitioned the Grand Council, requesting that as many of his brethren be sought out and saved. Agreeing to the request, the general made secret contact with the Nargol Kingdom, as well as some of the human nations, and any ogre that could be found was quietly secreted to the shrouded Shaloran lands.

It was as I finished fully recovering from my injuries that I truly felt I was at the lowest point in my life. Having all the time in the world to think, I could not stop myself from remembering all the events that had happened; from when the Spellblaze occurred up to the present time of my internment. Every waking moment felt as if I was dreaming, whether I was asleep or awake, yet this nightmare was real. Deep within myself too, that other me from when I fought against the fanatics, it too was trying to claw its way to the surface. I was in a state of indescribable agony and rage, despising my life more and more.

It wasn't until several months had passed, since coming to this dwelling, when a visitor would come to see me. I could hear outside the guards talking to someone; the voice being a distinctly deeper tone, obviously belonging to that of an ogre. After a moment, the guards let my visitor in, and I immediately recognized the ogre strategist. With a

solemn face he began to speak, "How are you then thalore? It took some time, but I was finally granted permission to meet with you. Likely if it wasn't for you, we ogres would all be dead now, or worse. We never got to properly thank you for helping us to escape those cultists and leading us to safety here in Elvala. Yet, while we were freed from our imprisonment, we perhaps led you to your own."

As the strategist finished speaking those words, he paused to bow his head, and I could sense every ounce of his sadness in that brief moment. Regaining his previous composure though, the strategist raised his head once more to speak. "We figured we would have a celebration for everyone," the ogre began, "After all that has happened, everyone is in need of a good dose of cheer; to take our minds off everything that has transpired." Finishing that last sentence, the ogre looked directly into my eyes, as if to add one important addition to it. "With this in mind," the ogre opined, "I asked if you could perhaps be invited as well." I had barely clued in that I was receiving anything more than gratitude from the strategist, but then I realized I was being invited to an assembly of people.

Would 'I' be okay I thought? Could the 'other me' potentially lash out again at someone? "I don't know if that would be a good idea..." I said trailing off; in the hopes that my uneasiness would be conveyed, not any of the anger or the other emotions that bubbled inside me. Seeing it instead as a moment to speak, the ogre chimed in, "Because you don't know if you will be able to control yourself and have another incident like you did with that young mage?" Taken a bit off guard by this, my eyes grew wide, and my mouth dropped. Yet the strategist said nothing, continuing to stand there with the same solemn face that he had entered with. Recovering from his statement, I turned away saying, "I don't want to hurt anybody. It would probably be better if I stayed away, the less contact I have with anyone...."

My words perhaps hit me the hardest as I stated them. I hadn't realized it until I had said it, since I had been busy trying to keep a handle on myself, but I was talking as if I was ready to become a recluse! I had spent over three months here lamenting my situation, yet now I was pushing away a chance to free myself from it? All at once I immediately began to feel my immense emotions, hatred similar to all the unfortunate occasions I had experienced. It was the anger I felt prior to approaching that halfling and the instance where I plunged my knife into the masked dwarf! But now, there was no one here for me to direct my animosity towards- "Except yourself?" I blanked for a moment when the ogre said those two words, those words connecting with my thoughts perfectly. For a brief moment I sat there quite muddled. Then the intense feelings within me faded.

Getting up, I firmly looked at the strategist and announced, "I accept your offer." The ogre strategist seemed to become ecstatic at this, before taking my arm, and immediately making way for the door. I couldn't decide if I was perhaps being led or simply dragged by the overly enthusiastic ogre, to wherever the festivities were. I certainly felt happier at that point though, more than I had been in a long while. In the back of my mind, I thought that if there was a chance for my condition to improve, it could perhaps be through the interaction with others. At the very least, it was a way out of my seclusion, and perhaps a way to get my mind off of the many past events that were now haunting me.

Drawing closer to one of Elvala's main fields, I could hear the voices and sounds of rhythmic beating up ahead. In front me there was a gathering crowd forming a ring around a stage, all the attentive gazes fixed on a group of a dozen ogres who were performing at that moment. Observing the ogres, I noticed that they were steadily beginning a synchronized and captivating dance. Those viewing the ogres seemed to be in little spirit, yet the ogres continued on, progressively picking up the pace of their movements. Little by little, the ogres would move faster, and then they encouraged the spectators to join them by clapping. Slowly as those around began to clap, the mood of the audience began to improve, until I began to see smiles crack from a few faces.

As the ogres finished their dance, a couple of shaloran would step forward to entertain the crowd. One began to sing a pleasing chord before stopping, then the other sang the same chord at a lower frequency. Upon finishing the second chord, both shaloran would harmonize their sounds to produce a beautiful melody that washed over everyone. Within myself, it felt as if I could feel happier emotions, from the times before the Spellblaze. As the lively acts continued I felt as if I was regaining other pieces of myself that I had lost, and for the first time in a long while, I felt happiness. Without a doubt the affliction that had taken a hold of me was still there, but with each moment it felt less and less significant. Even as the festivities died down and ended, I continued to feel joyful emotions.

Making my way back to my dwelling, 'I' felt in control of myself and my actions. Whatever the enigma within me was, 'it' did not, and would not, lord over me. As I came up to the guards I smiled and gave a friendly gesture. Though I was heading back in for now, I knew that I would leave this abode tomorrow. While the ogres are quick to note that I had saved them when conversation touches on past events, in reality, I believe that they were the ones who had actually saved me. The ogres actively dismiss this as modesty, but since that time when I was at that festival, I now have feelings of hope. I

have been working to gain full control over myself and take a hold of my life once more. For that I say thank you to the ogres; for the renewed lease on life that they had given me, for that push I needed to move on.

Chapter 6 - Rebuilding Anew

As time passed, both ogre and shalore would slowly adapt to their secluded lives from the outside world. The shaloran would carefully go about gathering their leftover belongings from the abandoned settlements in the north and work to create permanent magical implements that would ensure the misty smoke concealing Elvala would stay in place. They also expanded the Shroud to encompass all the forests nearby and locked down the entirety of the Shaloran Peninsula. Many individual shaloran would begin to study the vast energies that had been unleashed by the Spellblaze, in hopes of learning more about the damage that had been caused, and what effects it would leave in Eyal.

The ogres settled down in the southern portions of the peninsula to rebuild new lives for themselves. They helped to grow and harvest food to feed everyone and took up more laborious jobs that the shaloran were ill-suited for. Many gave birth to children, resulting in a great many young ogres running around, and this helped to bolster their limited numbers dramatically. Some of the ogres also took up occupations working with runes and infusions. While my knowledge of runes is still quite limited, I could tell from their workmanship with infusions that their skills were as good as any thaloran masters I knew of back home. Despite some disagreements the ogres had with the shaloran, they managed to create a thriving relationship, and I believe that friendship will last for a long time to come.

In regards to myself, I want to one day leave Elvala, and venture back out into the broader world. I know however that if I was to leave I would need to know how to properly defend myself; in case I ever ran into those fanatics again, or some other foul group that might seek to cause myself or others harm. I also wished to learn about rune magic and whether it could be something I myself may want to utilize. Finally, I couldn't ignore the nagging affliction which influences me. I knew that if I ever lost control again, my emotions consuming me once more, that the other me within might lash out against those who I did not mean too. With this in mind, I sought the help of those around me, looking to learn whatever they could teach.

I was surprised to find that when approached about this, both the shaloran and the ogres were quite willing to provide me with what they knew. Back home, few thaloren

were interested in sharing their knowledge with others, and even between family members it was rare. The exception to this of course was where a necessity to thaloran society existed, such as in times of war, or other calamity. Even then, it was limited. I will note that in regards to this, the shaloran I approached tended to request something in exchange for educating me, usually asking for monetary compensation. The ogres on the other hand did not, being quite open in sharing their knowledge. One in particular was overly eager to do so.

This was when my instructor, the female ogre who had helped graft on my Rune of Return, approached with an offer to give me a full breakdown on the application of runes. I was told about the great multitude of types that existed and the numerous abilities that they could employ. I would go on to learn about the basics of rune use: being lectured on how they would gather a body's innate inner magic, convert that magic into arcane energy, and mold that energy into an effect that could then be cast. On top of this, I would learn that a rune would create a magical buildup within the body when it was activated, which would make subsequent rune use difficult; be it from the same rune, or others that might be inscribed.

My instructor was also keen to give me a hands on demonstration regarding the effects of runes, to ensure I truly understood how they worked. I remember when we first started that she abruptly disappeared from in front of me. I was confused as to what had happened and looked around aimlessly, only to hear her start laughing behind me, and then have her appear on my right. I would also be introduced to several ogres, featuring a diverse array of runes, and shown small demonstrations of what they could do. As a parting gift, my instructor offered to give me a rune for my own personal use, a heat beam rune. Unlike how my instructor had grafted the Rune of Return onto me before, I inscribed this rune onto my left arm myself, and it is still with me at the time that I write this.

From the shaloran I would learn an assortment of generic fighting skills, specifically in regards to combat equipment. A weaponsmith gave me a rudimentary refresher on how to wield and orient a weapon in combat, before getting me to practice on hitting training dummies. I would be provided an assortment of weapons for this, ranging from everything including: hatchets and hammers, daggers and clubs, and a large variety of swords in various sizes. From an armoursmith I got to learn about the different pieces of protection and got drilled on: basic stances to position thicker portions towards the enemy, understanding how to properly put on and wear armour, and how to reduce impacts of incoming strikes towards me. I would also run a small training course decked

out in a full set of plate armour that was lent to me; learning how to maneuver around obstacles, and avoid completely exhausting myself while fully encumbered by armour.

When I was ready, several experienced ogres and shaloran would offer to spar with me. Taking everything that I had gained knowledge of and putting it into practice, I engaged in mock battles with opponents using a wildly disparate set of skills and spells. From these scuffles I would learn the importance of pacing myself in a fight, to be wary of what techniques a foe might use, and that my heat beam rune was more useful for alleviating disadvantages to myself than as an offensive tool. It wasn't long before I could hold my own in a fight, even against trained and battle hardened opponents. Some military officers would recognize this and I would subsequently be asked if I would be interested in enlisting in the Shaloran Military. Figuring it would help in advancing my combat skills further, I accepted the offer, and for several years I would serve as a soldier in Elvala.

During my tenure as a soldier, I would get to learn a great deal about controlling my inner emotions. Enrolled in a program for those with unique abilities, I would slowly begin to learn more about the adverse condition afflicting my body, and how I could use it to my advantage. I would grasp how I could affect my surroundings, both inanimate and living, and in some cases I would even be allowed to practice using my dark thoughts against others in controlled settings. I can't say I ever gained full control over the chaotic energies within me; at least, not to the extent that the 'other me' had employed against the fanatics. I could at least direct it away from other people though, even amongst allies while in the midst of combat.

When I look back at the many events that occurred after the Spellblaze, I wonder what my life might have held for me had I not left to travel as I did. Much time has now passed since the time of my initial journey, but even now, I consider whether now is the moment that I will leave to explore distant lands, and see what has become elsewhere in Maj'Eyal. I wonder how the rest of the people on the continent fare, if the lands have shown any signs of healing, and think deeply about what might be happening back in my ancestral home. Whatever may lie in my future, I know that I am now ready to make my way through it. When I do leave, my escapades will continue once more, and perhaps I'll have another tale to write down too.

Escapades of Fay Willows - Book 5

Chapter 1 - Dead on Arrival

Truly there is nothing more disturbing than the experience of encountering ghouls. You will likely first smell them, as they emit a terrible stench; else if you are lucky, you'll just hear them as they groan in a low, painful sounding tone. Casting your eyes upon them, you will be presented with a truly horrible display: rows of hanging flesh and dripping puss, surrounding a vaguely humanoid form. The worst of it though is their touch and feel. An average individual would likely feel grossly unsettled just poking an ordinary corpse with a stick, nevermind engaging a walking undead one up close in combat.

As I walked along the western treeline I recounted the events that had led me to these daily patrols. Thirty-three long years had passed since the cataclysm of the Spellblaze; the moment solidly burned within my mind, as well as inside my body. I had survived the destruction, the incidents that followed from it, and now found myself here in Elvala. After joining the ranks of the Shaloran military, I would develop deeper feelings for one of the soldiers that I had trained with, and would eventually come to be married. Yet, while I was content with my life, I wondered how those in the outside world fared. Had the anger of my fellow thaloran subsided and the forests of my former home recovered? How evident were the signs of the Spellblaze's destruction elsewhere throughout the continent? Perhaps now might be the time when I should leave to explore, as I had often pondered on doing.

Returning from my patrol along the old path that divided the western and northern forests, I noticed a gathering of military personnel in the distance, a couple of Elvala's higher officials also amongst them. As I approached the group, I caught sight of what looked to be a decaying corpse at their feet. Glancing towards the lifeless remains, I felt a coldness emanate; a dark force that felt worse than anything I had ever experienced, including the tumultuous emotions within me. Becoming aware of my presence, one of the officials then turned to face me. "Fay, I need you to quickly get to the other side of the Shroud," the official commanded, "Take a look around and report back anything unusual you see." Sensing some urgency to this request, I promptly faced the magical barrier, and dove in without a second thought.

Making my way through the misty smoke, I recalled the numerous times I had been inside. I had traversed the Shroud before: to act as an escort for Nargol emissaries and

traders, to help ogre refugees gain sanctuary within Shaloran lands, and to rescue anyone who had gotten themselves stranded in the outside world. This time though, I could feel a great tension around me, and I redoubled my efforts to go forward. For the next two hours I slowly waded my way through the smoke, until at last I began to see the world on the other side unfurl itself. Upon getting to the outer edge of the Shroud, I heard a guttural sound bellow out from somewhere close by. Unexpectedly, a gaunt figure suddenly jumped out, arms swinging violently in my direction!

Caught off guard and unable to dodge, one of the arms would connect with my chest. The force of the strike reverberated through my steel breastplate and threw me off balance, giving this unknown assailant the opportunity to attack again. Thrusting forwards towards my left arm, I could feel teeth clamping down hard through my mesh gauntlets. Pain seared through me as something virulent coursed through my body; sapping my strength, and making me feel somewhat sluggish. I did not know who this attacker was, but I could feel the darkness amassing inside me. All that was left to do was to unleash it.

Beginning to counterattack, I activated the heat beam rune in my left hand, and set my opponent ablaze. Immediately following this I began to overwhelm my foe with a fury of vicious blows, the brute flailing wildly around as it tried to fight back. Pressing my advantage, I struck with a devastating swipe that cut hard across the entity's upper body. Then I paused for a moment, waiting for whatever I was fighting to keel over. To my surprise, I would find out that the struggle wasn't done yet, and a renewed offensive came my way! I stepped around as the being then lunged past me, before following up with a simple slash to the back of the creature's neck; this partially separating its head from its body, bringing an end to the skirmish.

Having a chance to closely examine the enemy I had just fought, I noticed a single eye hanging out from one of the eye sockets. Squinting through the mist at the rest of its body, I then realized I had been fighting another rotting corpse! Blinking a bit as I got my thoughts together, I wondered if there were any more undead meandering about, and began to look around. It wasn't long before I observed a few more deceased individuals standing upright. Deciding I would dispatch the ghouls I attempted to quietly approach one; only to then realize how difficult this would be, due to all the muddy ground in the area. It was at this point when I wondered why all the ground was so mucky, before discerning the multitude of tracks and footprints all leading into the Shroud.

Realizing the danger that was headed to Elvala, I quickly activated my Rune of Return, and waited for it to take effect. As always, I instantly found myself appearing in a

crowded area, several shaloran wandering about. Before I could reacquire my bearings, a female shaloran officer accidentally walked into me, and I was knocked to the ground. Gaining awareness of my sudden entry, the officer turned to help me up, noticing the festering bite marks on my arm as she did. "Command will want your report on the undead you encountered," she stated, "We've had a few more wander in while you were out scouting."

The officer then motioned with her head in the direction of the main fortification line, overlooking Elvala's northern forests. Nodding back, I proceeded to run over to the right tower above the main gate, where I suspected the watch captain would be. Making my way through the host of gathering soldiers forming below the walls, I found my way to the staircase, and started ascending it. Climbing up was difficult, a result of all the archers and mages that were also hastily trying to get up at the same time. As I came to the top the watch captain called out in my direction and I hurried over to give him my report.

Chapter 2 - Elvala Under Attack

Looking past the gruesome nature of the unliving, I can somewhat appreciate the brilliance of the tactics and strategy that was employed. Everything seemed to have been meticulously planned out beforehand and the undead followed these plans unerringly. This allowed the controlling necromancer to stay safely out of harm's way for the duration of the battle.

As I finished giving my report, I noticed the watch captain's eyes become fixated on something within the Shroud. Looking over myself, I then made out the quivering distortions that were starting to appear in the magical barrier. Reacting to this, the captain called out "PREPARE TO FIRE", and those manning the walls rapidly assumed firing stances. With a simple arm swing, a full barrage then followed over the battlements; the volley turning the distortions within the smoke into a whirling maelstrom. Despite the onslaught that slammed through the mist, a glistening phalanx of spears, shields, tattered armour, and bleached bones would emerge. Endless rows of skeletons would step out in defensive formation, their weapons held high while they moved in a cohesive block.

The captain then gave the order to "FIRE WHEN READY", the archers and mages continually unleashing everything they could on the encroaching skeletal force. However, for every single skeleton that was shattered, or had its bones scattered across

the battlefield, it seemed as if two more would emerge behind it. Being unliving enemies with no free will of their own, they continued to advance towards us, no matter how many of them we felled. As they drew closer to the base of our walls, the shaloran soldiers from below began carting up rocks and stones. Unlike with arrows and spells, the skeletons could not overcome the heavy weight that was being dropped on them, and many were instantly crushed and buried.

Looking down below, the watch captain seemed to muse over the situation. "I don't see them carrying any ladders," the captain muttered, "but judging from how they marched up to the walls they must have some plan in mind." As the captain continued to monitor them, I started to hear hoarse voices whispering in the air. All at once, startled voices from those on the walls called out that they were under attack. Realizing right away that there must be something up here with us, I carefully looked around for signs of any unseen actors, and felt a faint presence of something moving nearby. Quickly pulling my weapon out of its sheath, I slashed at the space where the presence was, and a low gasp escaped as my weapon cut through a hidden apparition.

Becoming aware of what was happening, the watch captain called out to the defenders, "We are under attack by shades, DEFEND YOURSELVES!" All at once, everyone turned away from the battlements to respond to the new threat. Those that could determine where the specters were would directly engage them, while those that couldn't unleashed attacks in wide arcs where they suspected they'd be. It wasn't long before a torrent of death cries filled the air, but it soon became clear that this was just a mere distraction; the skeletons using this brief moment to construct ladders and form pyramids made up of their bones.

Now with means to get to us, the skeletons hastily clambered over the battlements, and arrived on top of our walls. Using their vastly superior numbers, and hitting us before we had a chance to reorganize, we were pushed back enough that they were successful in establishing a foothold. Seeing that we were going to be overwhelmed, the watch captain hurriedly gave the order to fall back, and a disorderly scramble off the walls ensued. Unfortunately in the confusion, a fair number of soldiers couldn't disengage, and were subsequently cut to pieces. Having lost control of our fortifications, a small force of the skeletons moved to take over the gates. The majority of the skeletons however would jump off in pursuit of us, attempting to run us down.

As we passed through one of Elvala's narrow corridors, the watch captain saw an opportunity present itself, and ordered the mages to form a firing line. Following closely after us, the skeletons funneled themselves into a tight formation, and thus made

themselves into the perfect target. Waves of lightning, fire, and cold spells washed over the skeletons and sent their bones bouncing to all ends of the brick covered road. Seeing these foes vanquished, the defenders started to break into a resounding cheer, until the realization set in that there was much more to come. Looking past the broken skeletons in front of us, we could see a great host of undead now flooding through our opened gates.

The guttural sounds of an enormous horde of ghouls began to fill the air and an elite group of skeletons followed closely behind them; these particular skeletons being armed with a vast array of weapons, while wearing decent protective armour. However, it was beyond these lowly undead that truly frightening necromantic atrocities would come into sight; imposing monsters composed of many bones, standing as high as Elvala's tallest buildings. A final line of skeletons also appeared too, but these ones would instead wield staves and bows. Rapidly the unliving enemies began to organize themselves, before beginning to move as a unified block towards us. Our mages attempted to ready another set of spells, but instantaneously found this difficult to do; the opposing undead archers raining down shots to disrupt them. Realizing we would have to engage the undead fully, we raised our shields, and proceeded to step forward to give battle.

As the front lines drew closer, we would be caught off guard when the ghouls made giant leaps over our entire formation. We soon found ourselves boxed in: the ghouls clawing our undefended back ranks, while the main bulk of the unliving collided into us from ahead. With little room to maneuver, shaloran archers and mages began to panic as they were cut down by the ghouls; many inevitably breaking, then fleeing from the line. Sometime during this melee too, the watch captain would also be slain; his body rising as a subservient ghoul that another soldier would unfortunately have to put down. The situation was looking quite bleak and hopeless as we found ourselves trapped by the undead on both sides, soldiers doing their best to weather attacks coming in from all directions.

Chapter 3 - Leadership from the Front

As an experienced commander would tell me long after the fight with the undead: "The winner of a battle is not necessarily dictated by the amount of enemies slain, but rather by which side breaks first. While the quality of an army's ability to fight is important, it means nothing should its soldiers lose the will to continue." We had been lucky in the defense of Elvala; a result of the aid from the ogres, and the rallying leadership of

General Gawaeil. Without them, all hope of victory would have surely been lost, and the unliving would have certainly overran us.

The hatred within me began to build as those around me were attacked. However, I had my own problems to deal with. One of the 'bone giants', the name I would give those colossal undead abominations, steadily approached. Managing to avoid its first strike, I focused the malevolent thoughts within me to unleash a mighty attack, destroying a good portion of the bone giants center. This seemed to be for naught however; the necrotic giant simply reorganized the bones of its body to form a protective barrier, then magically began to rebuild itself anew a moment after! Swiftly the bone giant then proceeded to unleash another heavy swing against me, leaving me stunned and temporarily unable to react. Put on my back foot, matters only got worse when a ghoul approached me from behind, and bit deeply into my shoulder.

My situation was looking quite precarious, but from the rear I heard a voice call out, and the ghoul that had been behind me suddenly hurtled past. A flash of frost then blasted a hole through the ghoul and blew off one of the arms of the bone giant in front. A young ogre then stepped up to stand beside me, a spent runic insignia visible on his left forearm. I could also hear the familiar footsteps of stampeding ogres elsewhere, hurrying into the fray. I didn't have much time to observe what was happening at that point though, the bone giant would converge on us expeditiously to continue the fight. Attacking the ogre first, the much bigger bone giant swiped from the side with its other arm, and knocked the ogre away like a rag doll.

Leaving itself open to me, I lunged forward to attack while it was unguarded. This would have a negligent effect however as I lacked the strength to put any real force into the blow. What's more, the barrier of bones surrounding the bone giant would absorb the damage done entirely! Responding to my efforts, the bone giant came at me with another powerful battering, and then belted me again for good measure. Yet again, the ogre would come to my aid, tackling into the bone giant's lower frame to knock it down. Seeing me in my exhausted state, the ogre shouted at me to run, and then braced himself for the bone giants retaliation with a shielding rune. Battered and bruised, I heeded the advice to get away, and tottered off to recover.

After getting some distance from the bloody engagement, I turned to view the battlefield in its entirety. The enemy ranks had been broken significantly by the charging ogres, but a good deal of our defensive line was injured or dead. Many of those shaloran who had panicked and fled were now returning to fight, engaging in small groups that kept the unliving forces off balance. However, the support line of undead mages and archers

remained largely intact, and were now pressing hard into our unguarded flanks. The scene was one of chaos and I could not tell if we were winning or losing, though countless comrades were falling all the same...

"It seems that this has turned into quite the battle," a voice said from behind me. All of a sudden as I heard those words being stated, I could feel myself being enveloped in a bright glow; my bruises disappearing, my wounds closing up. Turning to face the voice, I came face to face with a brilliantly armoured shalore, his glowing hand outstretched towards me. I recognized the armour worn and weapon held as being the same set from the Grand Council Chambers, but was it really 'him' wearing it? Putting the hand down, the shalore continued to say, "I'm no doctor, but this should be enough to keep you on your feet until the battles end. Now then, let's see..." He paused for a moment as he took in the sight of the battlefield, then began to draw in a deep breath.

In a rather surprisingly loud voice for a shalore he yelled: "DEFENDERS! FOCUS YOUR EFFORTS ON CRUSHING THE ARCHERS AND MAGES, LEAVE THOSE HUGE SKELETAL MONSTROSITIES TO ME!" Before I even had a chance to understand what was going on, the shalore then blinked in front of the ogre that had helped me, and instantly struck the side of the bone giant we had been fighting. All at once, a violent display of colors exploded, shattering the towering menace into a thousand pieces. Not missing a beat, the shalore instantly moved onto the next one, and brought it down with little effort as well.

Seeing this marvelous display, I immediately regained the energy to fight, and began to run in the direction of the undead's firing line. Before I could reach the skeletal mages and archers however, a couple of the elite skeletons stepped forward with their shields raised to meet me. Looking to break through them and press on, I thrust forward foolishly; only for the attack to be deflected, my footing also thrown off balance. Seeing the opportunity, one of the skeletal elites dropped its shield down, and prepared to launch a counterattack.

Before it could though, a heavy club flew over my head, and the skeleton's skull was sent sailing away. From behind me, another one of the ogres arrived at my side, and together we converged on the second skeleton. After sending bones flying, I nodded to my fellow brother in arms, and we continued on towards the waiting undead archers and mages. Along with the other defenders, we dove deep within the enemy ranks, and tore our weapons through their back line. Perhaps realizing that they had no hope of winning, the skeletons then began to fall back, looking to escape.

Getting ready to pursue them, we were stopped by the remaining ghouls, who jumped in front to get in our way. The surviving bone giants, that had not yet been dispatched by the general, would also come over to help form a rearguard. While our undead foes had been weakened significantly, this last defensive action gave enough time for an ample amount of the skeletons to get away. Passing through our gate, they would plunge into the Shroud, and successfully make their retreat.

Chapter 4 - Confrontation

I was oddly able to get back on my feet quite easily after receiving the healing spell cast on me by the general. This would hold true to the additional aid I would receive after the battle had concluded. While I know I was given equipment that would bolster my ability to recover from injury, it seems that I mend far faster when the chaotic emotions from deep within are surging forth. This isn't something I can easily take advantage of however; those same hateful energies precipitously dissipate after a fight, usually before I can get proper medical attention.

It was at this point that I knew we had won. The bone giants that remained still proved to be quite a threat, but with enough overwhelming force, they too were defeated. As the last of the undead were destroyed, the defenders began to break into another victory cheer. I was about to join in, but then I noticed another bright glow enveloping me. Turning around I would see that I was now being tended to by a healer, who was also offering me some regenerative infusions with the other hand. From somewhere nearby I then heard the voice of that mighty shalore state, "Help Fay as quickly as you can doctor, I want her in peak form as soon as possible." Hearing my name spoken, I wondered again if it was indeed him.

Looking over towards the shalore, I saw him take off his helmet, and confirmed that it was indeed General Aranion Gawaeil's. Speaking to me directly he stated: "We will be exiting through the Shroud to see if we can catch whoever was responsible for this incursion. Judging how the undead were acting, it is likely that whoever sent them must be nearby." I silently nodded as I registered the words, after which he put back on his helmet, and did a quick check of his equipment. When the healer's spell was finished, the general ordered that the wounded be taken to the healing grounds. Then he held out his hand in my direction. Taking a deep breath, I grabbed ahold, and the general used a teleportive charm to bring us to the other side of the Shroud.

Regaining my awareness after reappearing, it didn't take me long to notice the retreating group of undead, or the lone cloaked figure that was moving among them. Keeping a good distance, General Gawaeil and myself started to shadow them. For a couple of days we traveled just west of the Nargol land border, passing through multiple destroyed settlements which showed signs of being recently attacked. I had guessed that the Nargol's had attempted to reclaim these lands, only for their citizens to be turned into unliving thralls; those newly risen ghouls then used against us in Elvala.

We slowly made our way after the skeletons, catching up to them as they moved into another lost community, somewhere northwest of the Nargol capital. Rounding the edge of one of the buildings, we spied the cloaked figure sitting next to a well. Out from a ruined structure, a couple of skeletons emerged carrying some food on a plate. I could also see another skeleton bringing some water up with a bucket from a well. Whispering in a hushed voice, the general quietly commented, "It appears, unlike the rest of those in the following, our friend here is alive." As if on cue to the statement, a low raspy voice spoke from the shrouded character, "Yes, I am indeed very much alive."

Dead silence permeated the air for a long moment after that, apart from the sound of food being eaten by the cloaked figure. The skeletons continued to stand motionless, obviously aware of us, but perhaps waiting for some cue to act. Deciding to make his move, the general then stepped out in full view. I could see him clutching his weapon as he did so, but noticed that he had yet to draw it. Seeing the general, it was almost as if a joyous cry escaped as the cloaked figure exclaimed: "Ahhhh! You were the one who was capable of crushing my creations in one blow. I must say, I wasn't expecting anyone to be capable of doing that. Well done! Although your abilities in stealth are perhaps not as notable..."

The general then pulled his sword and stood at the ready with it, before announcing, "I'd very much like to crush their creator as well." To this a raspy laugh escaped from the clueless fool, and then as if to taunt the general, the cloaked figure motioned with their hand to give it a try. Accepting the invitation, General Gawaeil casually raised his sword, pointing it in the direction of this reckless adversary. Without hesitation, the general charged forward. Noticing the sudden movement, the skeletons quickly moved to form a defensive line, blocking the approach.

Consisting mostly of mages and archers at this point, the skeletons laid down a volley of projectiles and deadly magic to disrupt the advance. Immediately though, the general teleported himself next to our ill-advised antagonist, and avoided it all entirely. Reacting to this instinctively, the shadowy individual produced a magical sphere of protective

energy, ready to meet the imminent attack. Firmly gripping his sword with both hands, the general raised it above his head, and brought it down in a powerful swing. I am not entirely sure what happened next after that; a blinding bright flash would shoot forth from the magical clash of the two combatants, preventing me from seeing much of anything.

I do know that there was an explosion of energy that erupted, the ensuing shockwave sending me soaring backwards into a building. Recovering from the shock, I got up and reoriented myself, before looking out a window to survey what had happened. All I could see was a scene of destruction as flattened structures, mangled trees, and charred air remained. Ahead of me I also noticed a hole in the wall, which I assumed I must have been thrown through. Stepping through the hole to the outside, my foot crushed one of many shattered bones that now lay strewn about the blasted ground. This would unfortunately be noticed by several skeletons that had also survived the blast.

When they raised their weapons in my direction I knew I needed to act quickly. I advanced on a couple of the closer skeletons and deftly broke one into pieces with a pair of well placed strikes. I was about to take on the second, but then I noticed the other skeletons nearby raising staves towards me. I dropped down behind some rubble, avoiding the explosion of magic that then lit up the space I had previously been in. Holding my weapon tightly, I could hear the skeletal footsteps then start to approach my position. I readied myself as I waited for the skeletons to come closer, watching for the moment when they would appear.

Chapter 5 - Staff of Bones

First rule of combat, always have a plan of escape ready in case you get into trouble. Second rule of combat, understand when escape is not an option. Third rule of combat, don't put yourself in a position where you will get flanked on multiple sides. Fourth rule of combat, don't exhaust yourselves before the conclusion of a fight. Fifth rule of combat, don't die.

Unfortunately not as mindless as I thought, the skeletons were smart enough to keep their distance as they came into sight. Cursing, I began to run as fast as I could in an effort to close the gap; the skeletal mages taking the opportunity to send a volley of fire spells my way. My anger exploded and I felt a turbulent rush fill me, flames encircling my sides as I was hit. In the following moment I was cleaving my weapon through the rib cage of one of them, shattering it to bits. Not missing a beat however, the other

mage then unleashed a searing ray of arcane mana, clipping my shoulder. As I was about to retaliate against the impudent undead caster, an arrow suddenly pierced through my foot, and I was pinned to the ground.

Realizing the danger I was in, I raised my arm, and discharged my heat beam rune to free myself. Alleviated from the maladies afflicting me, I started after the archer that I had left in error. Seeing me closing in, the skeleton released another arrow in my direction; which I sidestepped out of the way of. In a heartbeat I was on top of the skeleton, senselessly battering it with an onslaught of blows. When the archer was dealt with, I turned once more to look in the direction of the skeletal mage. Merely taking a couple strides over to it, I simply cast my arm out, and knocked its skull off.

I panted heavily, before I grabbed one of the infusions that the healers had given me, and aptly made use of it. Slowly recovering, I started to hear the distinct sound of applause, and a voice also mockingly shouting out "well done, well done". Checking my surroundings, I quickly spied the cloaked figure, but I could not see General Gawaeil around in our vicinity. Deciding to inquire as to his whereabouts, I asked, "Where is the general?" To this I got the response: "Oh? As in Aranion Gawaeil? Well, the general is occupied, at least for a brief modicum of time. Likely he'll be back soon, but for now, I think I'll entertain myself with you."

A cold feeling immediately took hold of me as an evil smile appeared on the bottom of the shrouded being, the rest of its face still hidden in shadow. I began to approach with my weapon drawn, but the enigmatic entity then reached within its cloak, and blinked away to a pile of shattered bones. I froze in place, feeling a dark sensation wash over me as an object was pulled out; something that I knew held great power, great and terrible. Trying to discern what it was, I was able to make out a short thin staff, but not one that looked to be made of any material I had seen one constructed of before. Perhaps sensing my awareness towards the item, the cloaked figure spoke again: "Oh? You don't seem to be a mage, yet you can feel this dark power, can't you?"

"Bones are so interesting, you know," the cloaked figure started to opine, "They can tell you a lot about a person. You can learn the owner's identity, where and when they lived, how old they were when they died, the injuries and hardships they suffered, and so forth. Quite fascinating really. Of course, studying them is quite frowned upon. Quite bothersome really." The perplexing oddball coughed and wheezed a few times, then continued, "Some of the most peculiar bones I've come across can be found within my staff... and when I find some peculiar bones I like..." As the sentence trailed off, a chill

went down my spine, and I could feel the dark intentions fully becoming engrossed on me.

I then watched as the cloaked figure made a brisk motion with the staff towards the remains on the ground, the bones organizing themselves, slowly building into a towering mass that climbed upwards. Limbs of all manner of terror and death sprouted out as a new bone giant came into existence. The necromancer let loose a gleeful chortle, then indicated to the bone giant that I was an enemy to be clobbered. Responding to the command, the bone giant turned towards me, and lumbered in my direction. Looking to inflict the first blow I charged forward. Hoping to gain an early advantage, I struck hard at one of its legs; bones splintering and breaking as I struck deep.

Much like before though, this bone giant would also bring around its bones to rebuild itself, thus negating any disadvantage I had sought to cause. In the next moment I could do nothing, the abomination suddenly sending forth one of its limbs, catching me in my upper arm. The spikes and razor sharp joints inflicted great pain as they ripped through, causing me much agony. In an attempt to take the initiative again, I pushed forward with a quick thrust, but found that I was prevented from mustering all the physical force that I could. Hatred began to boil within me as I was further knocked about by heavy blows. Finally I would unleash those built up malicious energies against the bone giant, stunting its movements.

The bone giant floundered, my dark thoughts now interfering with it. Trying to attack me while under the pressure of my animosity, its attacks became slow and readable, and I was able to dodge them. Now on the offensive, I slashed heavily against the undead nuisance, and started to overwhelm it with my blows. Again though, I would witness a barrier of bones coming forth to protect the huge foe. Not the least bit discouraged, I relentlessly continued my attack until I eventually broke through. Unable to withstand my continual ferocity, its bones flew in all directions, and I tore right through it. Now standing with its architect ahead of me, I could hear the bone giant behind me collapse, falling into a pile of bones once more.

Chapter 6 - Evil Malice

There is truly no other way to describe the necromancer that I met but completely evil. One might consider the magic hating Ziguranth, those zealots I had written about in my earlier books, as evil, but even from those fanatics I could at least feel they were trying to act for noble reasons; despite how warped those 'noble reasons' might have been.

This fiend of undeath though? I could sense nary a good intention from. The purpose behind each action undertaken appeared to only be for entertainment and amusement.

As I felled the bone giant, the menace ahead of me started to clap once more. "Very good, well done, quite the display," the necromancer stated in a sinister tone, "Your bones will truly be worth adding to my staff." Turning my head towards the wretch, I announced boldly, "It will take more than your mere bone giant to kill me!" The necromancer, seemingly getting caught in thought to my statement, then replied: "Hmmm, bone giant, quite the name. Of course, you seem to be misunderstanding something. The 'bone giant', as you call it, is not quite dead." Taking in those words, I didn't have much time to react before I was walloped from the side.

Snapping my eyes as to what had hit me, I immediately realized that my undead foe was indeed not defeated. The unliving colossus then stepped by me to come face to face with its maker, a simple movement of that dreadful staff then being made to tell it to pivot around. Viewing the bone giant once more, it appeared to have reassembled itself into a new barbaric arrangement. As the skirmish restarted, I could hear the voice of the necromancer cry out: "These 'bone giants', as you call them, they are something else, are they not? I got inspiration for them from the Nargols, when they fought with the Conclave in the Allure Wars. You see, few know of this, but the Nargol's actually used necromancy to ultimately win that war."

There was then some more wheezing and cackling from the coward, but I was more concerned with my current predicament. Somewhat exhausted from beating the bone giant the first time, I now lacked the strength to overcome its defenses, and proceeded to slowly back away. While I tried to get some breathing room I quickly analyzed my situation. The swirling barrier of bones were already circling the behemoth's body and I knew that I wouldn't be able to do any lasting harm as a result. Sooner or later, I would have to give battle again, and that was an engagement I would want to initiate on my own terms. I just needed to find an appropriate avenue of attack first...

Distressingly, finding an opening was made more difficult as the necromancer's prattling started again: "These 'bone giants', as you so cleverly named; they can be formed in a variety of ways to kill, and as you can see they are quite durable. I'm actually quite thankful that you managed to rip through it as you did just now. I can already see ways in which I can improve my next one." Concluding the venomous praise, the gasping laughs resumed. It was quite infuriating. I'm not even sure why I remembered those damned words so vividly. However, I would not be bested by the necromancer's bone giant, and decided that I would make my final stand against it.

I rushed in and took a nimble swipe that knocked away a few bones. Noticing that the bone barrier didn't prevent the damage, I quickly came to realize that its powerful defense had since dissipated. Sensing that I would have a brief moment before it could come back, I made a heavy strike that caved in its midsection; though again, the bone giant would shift its bones around in order to maintain itself. Not being deterred, I pressed forward and unleashed everything I could muster.

The bone giant would not allow itself to be defeated so easily however. Like it had done earlier, it shot forth one of its limbs, and caused me similar trauma to what I had sustained previously. Not allowing myself to be hampered from the attack, I let loose my heat beam rune; causing the bone giant to burn, while relieving the discomfort that I felt. Seeing my runic action, the raspy voice of the necromancer then mused: "Hmm, runes... ohhh, I know! I'll graft some runes onto the next one. What interesting ideas you are giving me!" Still engaged with my current opponent, I continued to hit the bone giant again and again, until finally it fell apart. Not sure if it would get up a third time, I continued to hack at the broken body until it was completely smashed apart.

Somewhat forgetting about the one who had assembled it though, I immediately felt my body go numb, and found ice forming all around. Instantly immobilized, I darted my eyes all about, before spying the cold vapours swirling around the outstretched and sickly white hand of the necromancer. Slowly, the bone loving maniac approached me, coming around to my left arm where my heat beam rune was inscribed. Putting the hand under the chin of that mischievous grin, the necromancer noted: "Not once but twice you have defeated my 'bone giant'. I suspected you might be able to bring it down that first time, but bringing it down again right after was quite unexpected. Now, I really have to wonder, who are you? You appear to be a thalore to me, but what were you doing in Elvala? Hmmm, curious..."

Circling to initially stand in front of me, before continuing around to my right side, the ninny intently looked me over while making "hmm, hmm" sounds. Proceeding to stop, the necromancer began to contemplate out loud: "Quite surprising seeing you use runes. Are you a criminal exiled from your forests perhaps? Wait, what's this second rune you have?" While I couldn't see what was happening behind me, I could feel the intense staring at the Rune of Return that was inscribed on my back. The following remark then rang out: "Ahh, interesting, a shaloran design; albeit, judging from the markings, it appears an ogre's handiwork was involved in the placement of this rune, if I am not mistaken. Quite intriguing, I wonder what its purpose is for?"

Continuing to ponder over me for several moments, the wicked character came around towards my left arm again. I couldn't do anything just yet, but I could feel the arcane energy replenishing within my heat beam rune. All I needed was a mere moment before it could be used once more; then I could escape my icy imprisonment, and deliver brutal justice for those lost in Elvala. Perhaps aware of my intent though, the fiend stopped and stated: "You are quite an oddity aren't you? That said, you aren't much the conversationalist, so there is little reason for me to keep you alive. I can study your dead, or rather 'undead' corpse, just as easily." I could sense the dark magic beginning to accumulate. Raising that hand up that had been used to freeze me, the necromancer then concluded by saying "farewell thalore."

Chapter 7 - Powers of Undeath

Something that I have always wondered about is why people give names to inanimate objects. When General Gawaeil rescued me from the necromancer, he would lose a hold of his enchanted blade at some point during the confrontation. Even now as I write this, the general frets over his lost sword as if he had lost a loved one! While I can understand how one can get accustomed to a weapon, surely he can find another to use instead?

Sensing that I needed to act now, I activated the heat beam rune to melt the ice around me, and sent a surging blast of fire towards the necromancer. As the malignant enemy stumbled back in flames, I took the moment to heave my weapon forward, only to pierce through nothing. Before I had a chance to see where the evil mage had gone, I was enveloped by a burst of hot flames from behind. I flipped around to see the necromancer, singed yet no longer on fire; a joyous belly laugh escaping from those impertinent lips at my folly. My cruel foe then raised up an arm in a humiliating gesture, showing off the heat beam rune that had just been used against me.

Annoyed at how easily I had just been read, I grit my teeth and got ready to charge. Likely still anticipating what I wanted to do, the necromancer then called forth all manner of undead to impede me. After hearing some more cackling, I felt a sharp pain cut through me as a dark beam of energy was fired, the spellfire bursting through a couple skeletons that now stood between us. As I cringed in pain, I had little time to react as the unliving minions began to drive into me from all angles; including the skeletons, which seemed unfazed, despite certainly being hit by the necromancer's spell. Infuriated, I began to strike at everything within reach, and hewed a path through the unliving up to their foul summoner. Coming face to face with their master, I was about to

deliver a great blow; but then with a simple wave of those hands, I felt a heavy force slam into my chest.

Something dark pierced my mind and try as I might I could not resist it. I was sent careening backwards, slamming into a partially collapsed wall. My vision blurring from the impact, I crumpled downwards onto the ground, and groaned out loud in pain. The necromancer cried out in amusement, before yammering: "How pathetic you are really, you telegraph yourself freely. Such overwhelming force you hold, yet easily countered all told. One must strategize in a fight, you can't always win just with might! Oh well. Once you rise again, how to engage in battle, I'll teach you proper."

Poetically, I could say those words struck me more than any physical wound inflicted on me that day, but that would fail to describe just how many spellblasts I would sustain. For every action I would make, the necromancer would be two steps ahead, and for every mistake I would make, I would pay dearly. As I struggled to survive, I could feel my body beginning to grow colder, and I knew that I could not continue on much longer. My desperation was perhaps just as noticeable as anything else to my opponent, who subsequently let loose a salvo of necrotic magic to finish me off.

I collapsed one final time, unable to move, waves of cold and dark energy circulating throughout my body. It made me realize just how far the limits of my mortality could really go, along with how close to those limits I now was. My thoughts turned over to past events of my life, remembering happier times before the Spellblaze; when I lived in the forests with my fellow thaloran, simpler and more peaceful times to be sure. I didn't want to die, nor suffer whatever mad plans this nefarious individual would have for me. Yet, I could do nothing more now, as the villain approached to stand over me. "Such a fruitless effort thalore," the necromancer opined, "Perhaps with time, you would have become a notable hero of legend. But now you die."

In the next moment I could not describe to you the amount of pain I felt. Deathly magic would be discharged into my body, torturing every fibre of my being. As I anguished, my mind slowly began to black out, and I slowly inched closer and closer to death; or perhaps rather, to undeath. I might have been turned into another shambling corpse right then and there, had the general not managed to return just in time to interrupt that particular outcome. I don't know the specifics of what happened next, only that the general was somehow able to extract me from the situation. I would incredibly endure long enough for him to cast a basic healing spell on me, keeping me alive until we returned to Elvala where I could properly be treated.

I briefly remember that while I was laying in one of the medical beds back in Elvala, I would open my eyes, and I would see my husband slouched over in a nearby chair. I tried to call out to him, but instead I let loose a scream; my body wracked in pain from the many injuries I had endured for so long. My husband would call for a healer, upon which I would lose consciousness again. The next time I woke up I was in my room, inside my own house. I could see the night sky outside a window and my husband was now asleep in his bed nearby.

I called out saying his name, "Awain". As he roused from his sleep and looked at me, an endless amount of tears would begin streaming down his face. In a cracked voice I heard him say, "You're awake, you're still alive." He hurried over to me, putting his hands under me to embrace me tightly, all while sobbing uncontrollably. For a moment I allowed him to cry, feeling that I should hold back on inquiring as to what had happened. I didn't know how long I had been asleep, but I had the feeling that he had waited the entire time for me, waiting for the moment I would come back to him.

Chapter 8 - From the Brink of Death

Eventually I got the story from my husband and found out the aftermath of the battle in detail. The necromancer had perhaps allowed for General Gawaeil to retreat with me, if not just fled from the general's arrival. I was very close to death, but the healers worked tirelessly to stabilize my condition. This was not helped by my chaotic affliction and the terrible injuries that had been wrought by those deathly necrotic spells. For countless days I remained within the healing grounds, until being relocated to my own bed.

At this point, a somber expression took hold of my husband's face, and I noticed his eyes gaze in the direction of my covered body. As I lifted the bed sheets I immediately understood why, seeing the blackened scars that were etched and engraved into my skin. Meekly he told me that while the healers were sure I would live, the wounds inflicted would leave deformed scars that would never heal. For a moment I sat still, contemplating what to say. Then smiling without hesitation, I looked up at my husband, pulled off the covers, and slowly made to stand. Discomfort surged through me as I did, and I swayed a bit as I rose, but I stood in front of my husband nonetheless.

His eyes darted around and his mouth stammered, until I looked him in his eyes, and made my way over to kiss him. Raising my head, I stated to him in a quiet tone: "I do not care how I look, as long as you, Awain, still love me. That alone is enough for me to continue on." At this his face relaxed as I slowly descended to kiss him once more. As I

drew closer to him, held within his arms, he quietly gave the response, "Yes Fay, I still do." I remember that night as being one of my most cherished moments in my life and would change nothing for it.

Yet, despite the incident that had brought me so close to dying, I knew in my heart that I yearned to leave Elvala once more. One may think it bizarre, but at the moment I left with the general, I was reminded of my initial travels that had brought me here in the first place. It has taken me almost a decade from that near fatal showdown to recover, but I now prepare to exit through the Shroud, and see what has become of the world. Awain deeply disagrees with my decision to leave, but out of his love for me he won't stop me from going. I also know that should I ever truly find myself in danger, I can use the Rune of Return to come back, regardless of where I might be.

From what I've learned from the rangers, visiting halfling merchants, and envoys coming from outside; there was now much happening near Shaloran lands. Being unable to exact control over their lands as they once did, the Nargols have mostly ended their patrols on the roads leading towards Elvala. Lawless bands of humans now roam the nearby countryside; some driven to banditry by their hopeless situations, others just seeing an opportunity to take what they will. What little interaction we have with the outside world is made even more difficult as a result. It is believed that a major hideout and staging area for these rogues can likely be found within the Old Forest.

Rumours of the Ziguranth were also abound, as were the heinous atrocities that they committed. Trained bands of their anti-magic warriors scoured the lands for any who were capable of casting spells or were in possession of items powered by the arcane. It is believed that they are influencing the politics of many Human Kingdoms and the Eldoral Halflings; though in the Nargol lands, they instead still employ those continual burning events to get their message across. Curiously, there is speculation about some ogres fighting among their ranks, though how such a thing is possible I don't know. If confronted by those zealots, I would have a difficult fight on my hands to be sure. It has been over half a century though, perhaps they may have forgotten about me after all this time passing?

Outside of the various movements of such distasteful groups, the shaloran researchers have also mentioned a task that I might wish to undertake. The most prevalent mark of destruction left by the Spellblaze can likely be found along the Blackened Shoreline to the east of Elvala; the same lands where I had helped the ogres, as described in my third book. The primary path that the destructive energies took, it is reasoned that a better understanding of the Spellblaze's effects can be obtained by surveying this area.

However, the shaloran know that venturing out past the Shroud would be dangerous for them; due to the aforementioned Ziguranth, but also just in how hazardous those seared lands are in and of themselves. Despite the dangers, it is important to know just what sort of lasting damage has been done to our world, and how we might be able to help with alleviating Eyal's pain.

I won't be discouraged from leaving Elvala because of that clash I lost with the necromancer. However, you can be sure Awain, that to be within your arms will be the first thing that I seek when I return. There are people who need help, villainous schemes to be thwarted, and another book of my escapades to be written. I will be cautious in whatever adventure I pursue in the outside world. All I ask is that you wait for me, my dear husband.

At the bottom of this page there appears to be a message scribbled in the margin: 'Commendations to the author. The in-depth descriptions and attention to how the various undead moved and acted was most enjoyable. I'll be sure to take many of these ideas and adapt them for my own use. Should we meet in the future, you can be sure that I'll allow you to write of our meeting too. The Master'