

DAR

By: Trevien Foster

Chapter 1

DAR

Dar the warrior, Dar the hero, Dar the grandest arena fighter, and most of all, Dar the champion of the jewels. These are the names Dar's been called during his time as a grand royal guard, which wasn't easy because Dar had to fight in both the underground and legal arenas for months before he was recognized by the lords of Alkanien as a potentially great royal guard. They weren't wrong, and Dar proved himself invaluable to the royal military even though he had unnaturally dark skin, which made people uncomfortable when they met him. However, the longer he spent with them, the more comfortable they became for his great personality. Dar wasn't only useful for his combat prowess, but he was also adept at keeping peace. Whether by disarming nearly anyone who wanted to start an uprising or if conversations ended with violence, Dar would come out on top with minimum casualties. There was no question that Dar was the best human of the grand royal guard.

Dar was a member of an elite team in the royal guard. Dar was second-in-command to Tald, a limestone troll who was the top grand royal guard and leader of the team. Next came Yaewl, the most agile human Dar had ever met and Dar's oldest friend. Kiil was a new guard human, who was very clumsy and easily distracted, but Dar saw

something in him, so he took him in as an apprentice. Fawl, whom Dar thought was the prettiest human he had ever laid eyes on, yet she also was fearsome with jewel magic and strategy. Finally, Byumer rounded out the team as Tald's granite troll apprentice, but he did have interesting stories of his time before being a guard.

Dar and his team were ordered to keep the peace in one of the grand villages. The village crystal as usual was spontaneously generating jewels; so the team's current assignment was to protect the village folk from getting any dangerous jewels so they didn't actively or accidentally use them to hurt someone.

While all the others were listening to Byumer's latest story, Dar sat down and examined his three jewels. He kept them connected to his neckpiece covered in the gold decorations that all royal guards had. He had equipped the royal-mandated jewels in case a fight broke out. Dar wished he could use more than three jewels, but humans just get too exhausted from four jewels for it to be worth it.

Just then, a village messenger on a carriage pulled by domestic yogbars disrupted Dar's thoughts. Dar noticed his badge displayed on the side of his carriage wasn't of this village; which meant Dar had to question him to make sure he wasn't up to anything shady. Dar stood up, shook off some dust from his purple and gold pants and robe, called to his team, and went to the messenger, halting him and saying, "Hello there messenger. What village do you hail from?"

The messenger responded overly regally, as all messengers seem to do, "Skorga."

Dar looked him in the eyes and said "What's your business here?" And then he added in a playful tone, "Messenger from Skorga."

The messenger turned towards the back of the carriage and rummaged around, like a rat in a trash, and produced a clean fine scroll.

He unrolled it and read in the 'messenger regal voice', "As of late the cave near Skorga renowned for spawning multiple urban myths and legends, has made anyone who has recently entered mysteriously disappear. The people of Skorga have sent me to acquire any hero willing to help in both the rescue and neutralization of anything within the cave."

Dar laughed inwardly and looked at Tald, who said, "Well then, where is your destination?"

The messenger then said in the same regal tone, "The village folk just wanted me to find anyone to go into the cave and find out why people are disappearing."

Tald looked around at Dar and the others, and responded to the messenger, "Well do you think your carriage could carry us there?"

The messenger said a little less regally, with some concern etched in his voice, "I could hold everyone but the two trolls; your exoskeletons might be too heavy for this old carriage and my poor yogbars."

Tald responded, bumping Byumer in the shoulder. "Don't worry, us Trolls have great stamina."

Byumer looked up enthusiastically saying to Kiil, "Strange cave that makes people disappear? This is going to be a great adventure! We might even see Tald get, serious."

Kiil smiled at Byumer and Kiil looked at his three jewels on his neckpiece and noticed their gold decorations had gotten caught on his robe and armor. When he got them free, he said, "Maybe we'll be able to use our jewels and save some people."

Dar looked at Kiil and smiled as they all got into the carriage. Dar then turned towards Fawl's beautiful face and whispered to her, "Y'know, after this we could spend alone time at that tavern I saw." Fawl's smile in response warmed Dar's heart; he knew he could always imagine that

smile, but there was something about seeing it with his eyes that made him feel the right way.

The messenger then pulled on the reins of the yogbars and the carriage started moving forward, Yaewl said to Kiil, "Let us just hope you can hold your own in a fight with a mystical kidnapping cave."

Dar looked at Yaewl with an amused look and said, "I think Kiil is more than capable of fighting a cave."

While Dar sat in the carriage the recent solar eclipse ended and Dar was reminded of how he had always hated how the sun felt unnatural on his skin but he distracted himself from that throughout the whole trip by listening to the other's chatter. After two days and plenty of eclipses Dar and his team reached Skorga and the messenger rode them to an inn they could stay in for a quick rest before going into the cave.

As the carriage stopped in front of the inn, the messenger said, in a barely regal, and more casual tone, "Anyone in this village knows the way to the cave. Just ask one of them and they'll take you there. When you're ready of course."

Tald gave the messenger some circular golden shillings and said to him "You've done a great duty for your village. Now go get a report ready for the lords of our journey into the cave - telling him of our inevitable success." Tald gave the messenger a wry smile.

The messenger laughed and said, losing all regality "Wish I could be as confident as you." He waved as he rode off.

Byumer turned and said to Kiil and Yaewl excitedly as they walked toward the inn, "Maybe I'll finally get to show Tald how much better I've gotten since he picked me up as an apprentice."

Tald then put his hand on Byumer with a smile and said "You've learned a lot, Byumer. But just promise me you won't seek out trouble while we're in there, ok?"

Byumer looked up to Tald with a smile and responded “No promises sir.” Byumer and Kiil stifled a laugh as Tald smiled

Upon entering the inn, Dar saw a fight that was going to explode out in the tavern between two gruff men, so Dar quickly walked up to them and calmly used his words to diffuse the tension between them before anything could break out before finally joining the others deeper into the inn.

After catching up with the others, Dar got to their room. The main room was large and rectangular, but most of the room was taken up with beds, chairs, desks, and greenery lining the ceiling and walls. There were two side rooms of a smaller but similar shape separated by fusuma doors. Dar and his team found amusement in how everything in their room wasn’t built for someone the size of Tald. While everyone made jokes at Tald’s expense, Dar took Kiil into one of the side rooms and tried to train Kiil some more, mostly practicing form five of jewel combat.

Dar sighed and told Kiil calmly “Remember Kiil, feel the energy the jewel gives you, manipulate it, control it, then when you’re ready, release it.” When Dar finished he opened his eyes and he looked at Kiil, disappointingly he saw that Kiil was distracted and hadn’t listened again, most likely to a thought.

After a bit, Kiil asked Dar, still looking at the ceiling “What do you think of the royal jewel mandate.”

Dar breathed in and out and responded with some mocking, “The one where everyone in the royal military can only use the red, gray, and pink jewels?”

Kiil responded, not catching the mocking tone, “Yeah! When it comes to jewels I don’t like being limited.” Kiil looked out the window and said to Dar before he could respond “Sometimes, I envy the trolls and grocs because they can wield way more jewels.”

Dar looked down with a smile, losing all frustrations from earlier; this was a common complaint among the newer recruits, and one Dar struggled with himself early on. He said to Kiil, "It's easy to envy, but envy will get in the way if you're going to be working with both grocs and trolls, don't you agree?"

Kiil then responded calmly, looking at Dar quickly, "Oh no no no no! I'm not that envious Dar. I just want to be able to use more jewels. There are so many options, Dar, it's too hard to choose. I'd say the mandate does make it easier, but I don't like being limited I wish I could use them all at once like the top lord, I just want to be able to use more."

Before Dar could respond, he and his team were interrupted by a knock at the door. Dar dismissed Kiil, and walked out of the side room and to the door, opening the door he saw a young man in white and gold armor, the armor of a village guard. Judging by the symbol on his chest piece, he was the top village guard of Skorga. Dar welcomed the village guard into the room cordially.

The village guard said as he walked in, "Good day sir. You must be the guards the messenger sent our way, thanks for coming all this way."

Tald responded, "Yes, and you must be the top village guard... where are the rest of your guard?"

The village guard responded solemnly, "A few days ago they were sent to the cave. I thought sending them all would be enough to take care of the cave while I took care of the moderation of the village crystal's dangerous jewels all by myself." Before any of Dar's team could respond, the village guard raised his head dismissing what he had just said, "Oh right, where are my manners, my name is Sevg what's all of yours."

Tald responded friendly, "I'm Tald, this young troll is Byumer, the young human is Kiil, the young female human Yaewl, the other female is Fawl, and the older human male is Dar."

Sevg smiled at Dar saying, "Yeah, I've heard of you. You're a real inspiration."

Dar smiled and responded, "Nice to meet you, but we need to focus right now. How many guards went into the cave?"

Sevg looked down diddling with his yellow, pink, and dark red jewels on his neckpiece nervous, while saying, "The entire village's guard went in, you know just to be safe; that place has some crazy stories. But the full guard of this village without me is eleven."

Yaewl instantly responded confused "For a village this small that's a lot of guards?"

Sevg responded in a very official way, "Yeah but this village has lots of unnaturally bloodthirsty goblins and yogbars in the surrounding forest - so the extra hands help a lot."

After a small pause, Kiil asked curiously, "Sevg I'm wondering - what are the myths with the cave? Maybe we could find something useful in them." Dar gave Kiil a quick smile of approval.

Sevg said after thinking a bit, "The cave is known for 'strange voices' coming from it. There are even sightings of the cryptid darkons, though reports differ. There is an unusual lack of life near the opening though that's more of a fact. And people have said there are new jewels never seen by anyone before." Dar was surprised by Sevg bringing up darkons and it gave him memories of back in the orphanage when the mistresses would tell stories and the main villains were usually a darkon.

Fawl then said in her elvishly elegant way snapping Dar out of his memory, "If there is a new jewel no one's ever seen, then it must be reported to the top lord of Alkanien."

Dar turned and saw Kiil's face, he looked like he was no longer paying attention to the discussion in the room, like his mind was

distracted. Dar knew a new type of jewel would be tempting for Kiil, given Kiil's lust for jewel lore.

Dar quietly whispered to Kiil, "Contain yourself for now Kiil, there might not even be a new jewel as far as we know."

Tald then stood up from the chair too small for him and said, "I think we've had enough of a rest, we should start heading out and take care of this cave as soon as possible."

Everyone nodded their heads in agreement. Sevg then said, "Alright follow me! I know the fastest route to the cave." Dar and his team quickly followed Sevg out of the inn, past the village's crystal, and through a half-clear trail in the surrounding woods. And after half an hour of walking, everyone reached the cave.

When they finally arrived they found some kids were playing some game at the mouth of the cave. Sevg rolled his eyes and smiled, saying to the kids softly, "It's getting dark little ones. Best head home."

The kids looked up and one of them said, amazed. "Woah! Are those royal guards?"

Sevg looked at the kids more sternly this time, saying, "This cave here has been extremely dangerous as of late. So go along and return home." The kids looked up at the cave then turned to look at Dar's team and left.

Dar examined the large mouth of the cave, the top of the cave was full of a thick amount of stalactites, and Dar noticed that all flora that tried to grow into the cave seemed to have withered as they touched the darkness of the cave, it was menacing in all regards.

After a while, Dar turned to his team while a new solar eclipse was starting and said "Alright let's head in."

Chapter 2

THE CAVE

The cave was the perfect size for a dragon lair all the way through, though the stalactites would have easily scraped some scales off of even a small dragon's back. The ground was uneven, changing height every so often, sometimes making it hard to traverse the cave. Especially for Tald and Byumer whose larger stature and weight of their rock skins made it difficult for them to traverse slowing down the expedition greatly. As far as Dar had seen, this was a cave of unwavering darkness; Dar was internally grateful for Sevg's fire from his dark red jewel. The cave had no menacing voices or new jewels. However after a while, Dar and his team reached a fork in the cave and Dar noticed one way got darker - a difficult task, considering how consistently dark the rest of the cave had been.

Dar turned and said to his team "I have a strange feeling about that way, it might be the way to the ones that disappeared."

Tald looked into the way and noticed how it got darker and then he said "Something powerful could be down there. Prepare yourselves." Everyone stiffened in preparation as they walked down the cave. As they walked, Dar noticed the fire Sevg was holding in his hand was getting dimmer as the cave got darker. The others started to fade from view as they went further and further into the cave. Dar reached out to hold Fawl's hand; grasping Fawl's hand in his calmed Dar as they descended further and further into the thickening darkness. Soon Dar couldn't even see his team, nor the fire of Sevg. Dar tightened his already strong grip on Fawl's hand.

After a while in the darkness, he felt his hand close through Fawl's hand, when he tried to find Fawl, she had disappeared from just next to him.

Dar instantly cried out "Fawl! Where... Where di... Tald? Kiil? Yaewl!? Byumer!? FAWL!?" Dar stared dumbfoundedly into the darkness for a second before running forward hoping he could find something up ahead.

Eventually, Dar saw something manifest into view. Soon, he saw black walls with gold symbols engraved into them with jagged purple stones that generated slight amounts of light in the ceiling. As he went further Dar slowed, examining the gold symbols which made him feel nostalgic but Dar couldn't think of a reason why; it was almost like he could make them out. As Dar walked he looked away from the dark walls and saw what seemed like an end to the hallway. Dar approached the end cautiously, when he was close enough he saw it was an opening to what Dar would describe as an egg-shaped room, where the high-vaulted ceiling was supported by columns that curved with the walls. Every surface was inscribed with more gold symbols.

As Dar entered the room he noticed at the end of the room there was a menacing throne, the backrest looked like a geyser of dark thorns. Dar slowly crossed the cavern to examine the throne. Just as he approached the throne, two white glowing shapes appeared - one shaped like a circle with a triangular slice taken out of it at the top, and the other looked like a crescent. Then a crooked smile opened under the two shapes with black teeth blending into the darkness of the throne. Dar stepped back and noticed purple lightning emanating from the throne. Dar could now make out a humanoid shape that blended into the throne without the light, its body was a void black and smooth.

Dar demanded, "WHERE ARE THEY..." Dar hesitated for a second before continuing "BEAST!"

The smile opened more, and Dar heard what sounded like thousands of voices trying to escape at once. Dar moved to cover his ears, before a sound came out saying, "They're fine Dar. First, let me talk to you and then I'll return your friends."

Dar thought for a while questioning what was happening before even trying to respond. Finally, Dar was able to recompose himself and respond, "OK then, but first, who are you?"

The mouth opened and the voices escaped once again, all of them saying "Oh right...My manners...Forgive me, I am Grandfather Darkon."

Dar looked at the figure in shock, saying, "Wait wait wait wait, darkons are real? I thought...I..." Dar sighed and calmed himself and said staring the Grandfather in his weirdly shaped eyes "That can't be true, darkons are boogeymen made up to scare kids into obeying their parents or make a story more interesting, like giraffes and platypuses."

Grandfather Darkon made what sounded like a chuckling noise and opened his mouth once again with the horrifying voices vying for escape yet again, saying with venom tinging the voices, "We were real before those... Jewels."

Dar looked at the Grandfather in confusion, saying, "What?"

The Grandfather rose out of the throne, revealing he didn't have feet; his body continued like the body of a snake allowing him to slither across the smooth void ground. His tail didn't seem to end, it just went under the throne. Before Dar could register anything, the room disappeared and reappeared as a village in a similar area to Skorga, but all the buildings were different. They were smooth, void black, covered in gold engravings. symbols, and cracks, and all the buildings seemed to have spires on top of all of them. Instead of where the village crystal was

supposed to be, there was a hole leading to an endless dark abyss which curiously Grandfather Darkon's body fell into now.

The Grandfather's voices returned, coming out noticeably calmer this time saying "This was an ancient village of the darkons." Then the grandfather waved his hand and dark humanoid figures of varying sizes filled the village, they all had the same weirdly shaped eyes and crooked smile as the grandfather. Their bodies were also smooth even though it appeared none of them were wearing anything, and they had white hair just like Dar. Then the Grandfather's voices escaped yet again, saying, "These were darkons, but long ago we made a mistake." The scene changed to multiple figures standing still in the woods - one figure was like the darkons, it was holding out its hand to a groc, a human, a troll, an elf, and a centaur.

The Grandfather's voices escaped once again, saying "We helped other beings to advance like us."

Dar was dumbfounded, saying "How's that your big mistake? How?"

A heavy sigh escaped the Grandfather as the scene changed to a strange field with a large crystal of a color Dar had never seen in the middle of it. The voices returned and said, "Three thousand, two hundred, ninety-one years ago on this day something fell out of the sky. When it collided with the ground, I went with the others to investigate it and saw a giant chunk of crystal. For some reason, I was afraid of it, almost as if I had seen it do something. I still don't know why, but I grabbed a black jewel in a wand-cut shape on the crystal because I felt like it was calling to me..."

Dar thought to himself at this revelation *a black jewel? That's new!* The Grandfather's voices continue. "When I returned to the village, the holes of life, where all new darkons are created, in the villages had giant crystals growing out of them. These new crystals were producing jewels

spontaneously, and they were similar to the black one I took from the crystal. But these new jewels were of varying colors.” The scene changed to what the Grandfather was describing.

Then the Grandfather’s voices continued, “With the crystals in the holes of birth no new darkons could be created, making the darkons vulnerable. One human gathered many folk explaining this to them and shared his discovery of how the jewels could be used as weapons...” The Grandfather looked down and his voices said sadly, his crooked smile shrinking “The human rallied many to help him take down and... Kill the darkons.”

Dar looked at the Grandfather and said, “Well... what does this have to do with me, that was three thousand years ago? How are you still here? Where are we?”

The Grandfather looked at Dar, his smile growing and the voices escaped once again saying, “The jewel spoke to me, about a plan. A plan to get revenge and to return my dead. All I needed to do was trap myself in the jewel in this cave and wait for someone. To wait for you.”

Dar’s froze in surprise, looking up at the Grandfather, and his mind raced. Dar was confused, but somehow he convinced himself to ask “Why me? What about my team?”

The scene shifted back to the throne room with the Grandfather sitting atop it yet again, his voices saying “You are the last darkon, but you’re only half darkon, the jewel says it will make you a whole darkon if you help me bring our people back to their former glory.”

Dar looked at his skin thinking to himself before saying “How can I believe you? Hell, how can I even trust you!?”

The Grandfather’s voices escaped saying “You ca... Oh, the jewel says it can only be wielded by darkons such as yourself. But besides what it says, please help me. I’ve been stuck here for thousands of years

listening to this jewel promising me to have my people back, you are the only one who can, then you can also help your people regain their former glory, which will mean you will have to overthrow your lords.”

Dar backed up, he tried processing everything before responding “I could help you, but I’d be betraying Alkanien, which I’ve sworn to protect from threats not become one!”

Before the Grandfather could say anything a sinister voice came from the walls, saying **“Poor boy you’ve been disillusioned. By not accepting the offer, thousands of innocent beings will remain dead. Your people who had hopes, dreams, and lives will be lost in their afterlife, left to rot by your so-called ‘merciful lords’.”**

Dar didn’t respond, he felt conflicted, his mind agreed but at the same time, he’d been loyal. Dar thought confused, *Who was that? Can I just trust them? Are they telling the truth?*

Dar looked up and demanded to know, “Where is my team?”

The Grandfather widened his grin as his voices escaped saying, “The jewel took them somewhere else so they couldn’t get in the way of our conservation.”

The sinister voice from the walls returned saying **“I’ll give them back, they could be a great help in our plot.”**

Dar said sternly and sadly at the same time “They’re too loyal, they wouldn’t help you fight the lords.”

The sinister voice came back saying **“That’s a simple fix! I can change their loyalty, their wills, from the lords to us, they will still be your friends, they’ll still act as they used to, they won’t feel like they’ve changed.”**

Dar questioned this for a second, but he ultimately decided on a plan, saying, “Fine I’ll help, return my team and I’ll help you.” Just as he finished talking Dar’s body felt weird. Dar looked down and realized his

body was turning into one similar to the darkons he had seen earlier. Dar closed his eyes, he breathed in and out. Dar was startled when he felt something in his hands, when he opened his eyes, he was confused to see Fawl's beautiful face squinting. Dar then realized he could see his team. Becoming a darkon gave him the ability to see in the impregnable darkness, and that meant they weren't lying, Dar felt strange about all he had learned and felt, but in the end, only anger was in his heart, for the lords, for those who had hurt his people, they'd pay.

Dar looked forward and saw the black jewel lying on a pedestal of stone made of a strange dark material. Dar took his free hand and reached out grabbing the jewel. Once the jewel was in Dar's hands the pedestal crumbled into dust. Dar turned towards his friends and by the look of surprise on each of their faces taking the jewel must've lifted the darkness.

Dar heard the Grandfather's voices in his head saying "This is our time, our return brother you are one of us now, Darkon Primio."

Then the sinister voice followed saying "**Indeed, but are you willing to do what needs to be done?**" Just then Sevg appeared in front of Dar in a cloud of dark smoke with the sinister voice coming back to say "**KILL HIM!**"

Epilogue

Jauil had been trained to be a castle guardian her whole life, so to everyone else, her designation number was G1. From birth, she had been taught rigid discipline, unwavering loyalty, and unflinching strength. Jauil and most other castle guardians were rarely allowed outside of the confines of the castle, but today was different, today was possibly one of the special cases where she could be allowed outside the castle because a full team of highly renowned grand royal guards had been reported missing after going inside a 'mystical' cave. Jauil's squadrons of guardians that were chosen by the lords consisted of G2, G3, G5, G6, G8, G10, G14 S1, S4, S6, S9, and T5 To go and neutralise any threat. Jauil was surprised by a T squadron member joining this mission, which told her that this mission was of utmost importance.

Jauil was in the Lords' room, with the remnants of the G squadron after a recent attack. Last night a seemingly rogue squad of highly trained elves had attempted to infiltrate the castle walls with an assortment of assassination gear.

The lords were discussing the recent attack with lord Everoth saying, "I've always suspected the elves were dangerous. Their beliefs are dangerous to every single one of us!"

Lord Rithol gave a smug smile and responded, "Was there ever a doubt that the elven council would attempt this? Their ways will lead us to war again."

Lord Tiyuo sighed and responded, "As far as we know these are rogue elves that took the elven beliefs way too far."

Lord Everoth cut off Lord Tiyuo before he could finish, "If twenty can go this far so can others. We might just have another elven war, which

I know was nothing to all of you because to you it was a short 3-month conflict. However, I was on those front lines. I fought those elves. And I saw good men brutally killed by crazed pointy-eared monsters!" Everoth lifted his eyes as though seeing the battlefield fresh before him; then he took a breath and turned to the other Lords. "I saw the same thing last night when they killed good castle guardians outside my room mercilessly. This, despite us replacing the system of having one elven king with a council - we still haven't prevented another war!"

Lord Helch raised his hand, for silence and said, "We need not fight each other gentlemen, we jussst need to agree that there issss a threat deep in thosssse elven woodssss, be it the council or a rogue insurgency of elvessss." as Helch finished, the S squadron walks into the room with their red and gold heavy armor. They moved in formation to the opposite side of the room from Jautil's squadron, posting themselves on the walls below Helch's throne. Helch smiled, lifting his hands and saying, "And we need not worry with a casssstle guardian ssssqadron like my Ssss ssssqadron. Anywayssss let ussss carry on gentlemen."

Lord Syui raised his head, as if he just wanted to show he was paying attention, and said, "We need to ensure our relations with the elven council are not disturbed! We should send messengers to talk with the council to ensure we still have good relations with the elves."

Lord Foreor looked at the other lords, and said matter-of-factly, "What about these guards in Skorga? It could be related to the attack; the elven jungles are close enough."

Lord Rithol leaned his head onto his arm and said mockingly, "That's unlikely. Elves prefer places of light and plant life; they wouldn't stake out in a dark cave to kill guards or anyone else who enters."

Lord Griltor looked grim and sad, he looked down and asked, "How do we truly know they are dead? For all we know, the ones that disappeared are being held somewhere."

Lord Filthor twiddled his thumbs while saying, "Why would the... whatever in the cave want them alive? There is no benefit for it." As lord Filthor finishes, the front doors to the room open and T5 walks into the room in his blue and gold heavy armor. As he walks towards the lords, squadron G and S form up behind him. Jauil examined him and was surprised to see that T5 was a groc; most castle guardians were human or troll.

Once T5 is in the center of all the thrones he bows to the lords and says, "We are ready for departure my lordssss, any final orderssss."

In the middle of all the thrones sat top lord Alkia in their purple, blue, and red royal armor and their throne had one of each colored jewel embedded into it. Alkia raised their head and spoke in an indistinguishable but powerful voice, saying, "I want whatever is inside that cave alive."

T5 put his hand to his heart looking at Alkia and responded, "Yessss ssssir." Then T5 signaled squadron S and G to follow as he left the room towards the courtyard. When they reached the courtyard another solar eclipse began and Jauil saw a house-sized carriage being prepared by three hillars, the strange hexapod creatures that were barely intelligent enough to be considered people. T5 signaled to wait. Once it seemed the hillars finished preparing the carriage, T5 signaled to enter. once inside T5 pointed out three rooms where each squadron would be staying. Then T5 went to the head of the carriage and started the long ride to Skorga. After five days with little to no problems, they reached Skorga. Once Jauil left the carriage she noticed a strange dark swirling cloud forming in the sky, though it was only above the woods surrounding Skorga.

T5 saw a village messenger tinkering with something nervously, and beckoned to him saying, “Tell ussss everything you know of the disssappearing royal guard team.”

The messenger responded worriedly, “They went with our top village guard and went into the cave, we waited for a full day, or maybe two, and they didn’t come back.”

T5 looked down with his hands to his chin saying “Not much information we could ussse... where issss thissss cave?”

The messenger then says, “I could take you there, but I’m not going in.” T5 nods in understanding, and he beckons Squadron G and S to follow him and the messenger. While they walked Jauil noticed they were getting closer to the dark swirling cloud she noticed before. After an hour they reached a cave’s mouth which was right below the center of the dark cloud.

The messenger then turns towards T5 and says nervously “You go on ahead I’ll be out here waiting for you to show you the way back.” T5 looks at the messenger and nods, he signals to squadrons G and S to follow him as he enters the cave. The uneven and wet floor of the dark cave made traversing the cave more difficult than originally anticipated, but T5 seemed to be doing fine thanks to his three legs and his dark red jewel generating a tiny fire. After a while of traversing Jauil and the other guards reached a fork, but one of the ways seemed to have caved in a while ago, T5 attempted along with a few other castle guardians to use yellow jewels to levitate the rubble out of the way; Jauil watched as the pieces of rubble turned and glowed yellow and floated out of the way. Once all the rubble was moved and T5 lit another fire with his dark red jewel, Jauil saw a man in white and gold armor without a head, and the jewels that should be on his neckpiece were missing, his body was slumped against the wall.

T5 signaled silently to be ready for an ambush and he moved forward, after a bit of cautiously walking Jauil's vision disappeared. Jauil then heard the sound of three screams. Then Jauil saw G5 holding a fire lighting up the tunnel, but T5, S6, and S9 were missing. Jauil started panicking, but she convinced herself to continue forward, but she felt a hand on her shoulder, Jauil turned and saw G8 with a worried expression.

G8 stomped her hooves sternly and said "We need to head back this is too dangerous-" Then the way they just came collapsed and their vision was cut out again. Jauil heard two screams and when her vision returned she did a head check in the firelight and noticed S1 and S4 were gone.

Jauil turned towards G8, who was freaking out, and Jauil said to the entirety of G squadron "We need to trek forward and defeat this evil, that is our duty that is what we are born and trained for." then Jauil waited for a response, and when there wasn't one she screamed and ran further into the cave, drawing out her spear in prime position to injure anyone in her way. Jauil heard several other voices scream forward behind her. After a while, it seemed she had reached a dead end but in her rage, she didn't stop and she kept running, and strangely she went through the wall. On the other side of the wall was a giant dark open area that was nearly the size of the lords' room. As the other guardians entered the room she saw a large dark object on the other side of the room which when lit up by fire light resembled a crooked dark throne.

Jauil then noticed that something was sitting on the throne with five figures standing around it. Two of the figures seemed to be trolls and three of the figures were human though one of them had an extra joint in their legs.

Then a dark voice came from the figure on the throne saying "I'm pleasantly surprised you got here, so very, very interesting." Before Jauil could respond or even try to understand, the figure then stood up and

held out his hand, and dark tendrils came from it grabbing G3, G10, and G14 and impaling G2 and G5. Jauil and G8 got into attack positions with Jauil in the front, before Jauil could do anything one of the figures near the throne ran past her at remarkable speed slicing the throats of G5 and G8. The tendrils holding G3, G10, and G14 crushed them and threw them to the side as an arrow from another one of the figures hit Jauil in the leg crumpling her into a bow.

The sinister figure from the throne chuckled and said “I’d think two castle guardian squadrons could’ve at least lasted a little longer, how disappointing!” Jauil thought *I’ve got a green jewel but It’s too far away, maybe... no that won’t reach either... It could work but I don’t know if it’s close enough* Jauil then closed her eyes, closed her hands around her light purple jewel desperately, and teleported herself to the entrance of the cave.

Once Jauil opened her eyes she cried out “Messenger!” but there was no response when Jauil observed closer she saw a burnt lump on the ground motionless. Just then purple lightning came from the sky and nearly missed Jauil making her fall over. She lay on the ground looking up and she saw that the dark cloud had grown. As Jauil lay there helpless she could only focus on the pain in her leg as the arrow stuck out of it. When she looked back up from her leg to her horror there stood the dark humanoid figure, now she could make it out, it wore a coat that covered its entire body and a tophat, it had strangely shaped glowing eyes and a large crooked smile the teeth were void black blended into the darkness of the it’s skin.

The figure started speaking while brandishing a cane with a purple orb at the top like it was a sword “Smart, but-” Before it could finish Jauil used her green jewel to shoot a burst of corrosive gel out of her hand, but purple lightning came from the orb on the cane and stopped the gel. The figure laughed maniacally and said, “Alright I’ll have to give you that,

literally.” Then the figure dropped the gel on top of Jauil slowly melting her away.