

Novel

Part 1

Chapter 1: Inception

It was dark. Only the goosebumps rising through my clouded breath interrupted the uncomfortable stillness. The cattails swung in a sparing breeze as a foreboding silence engulfed the marsh. There it was, a dark figure floating among the reeds. It turned about until it had spotted me. The dark silhouette glided in my direction, steadily gaining speed. I tried to run, but my feet were stuck in the black mud of the marsh. It pulled at me like a living creature. I ripped one foot clear and tried to run, but the deep sphagnum moss grasped my ankle and yanked me down. The figure approached me. What little light the feeble quarter moon could give was quenched as a shadow fell upon me. It spread formless dark limbs and prepared to engulf me, as it had done to so many others. I could not see them, but this hopeless struggle was one we shared. We couldn't lose again. I had one last weapon, one last chance to finally defeat the shadow. I thrust out my arms, focusing my energy to my very fingertips. Sparks leapt from my hands, dancing to surround me. They viciously attacked the fingers of darkness that probed for a weakness in my defense. However, the shadow was relentless and I could hold it back no longer. The fingers amassed into one reaching arm. The dark figure swooped in, ignoring the sparks that stung at him like wasps. I gave one last heave, willing for a great blaze, a raging inferno, even a single flame. I was simply too exhausted. The sparks slowly petered out. The indefinite shadow grew into a hood, then a tall and ever-growing wave. It began to wash down upon me. I felt no pain yet, but I knew it could come soon and in ample quantities. We couldn't win this. I had always tried to convince myself we could. Convince myself that I was the one who'd break the trend and finally defeat this foe. Somehow, though, I felt no fear. From the start, I knew the outcome of this battle. It was inevitable. I wasn't the one to break the trend. No, there would be another. My revenge would be years in the making, but it would come all the same. I closed my eyes and smiled. It was over. I let myself fall back into the dark arms that embraced me.

Kegan woke up, breathing heavily. That was the fourth time he had had that same awful dream. Who was this mysterious person? What was this shadowy being? Most importantly, why, why was this terrible battle occurring? For a reason unknown, Kegan felt an inherent familiarity with the ill-fated protagonist of his dream. Almost unconsciously, Kegan brought up his hands, willing the power to them as the victim had done. He got the same effect as he always had: a

single, weak, uncontrollable spark floated into the air momentarily, then silently faded away. Kegan looked around to make sure no one had seen and began to get up. He sighed as he stretched out his aching muscles, still tense from the nightmare. Kegan whistled for his sparrow, Aetos. The bird floated in along a beam of sunshine streaming through the hole-in-the-wall window. It was the only feature gracing the otherwise bare wall on the interior of the hut. Aetos perched upon an edge of the crude cot and gently preened back his wayward feathers. After hearing Aetos's quick chirp of consent, Kegan pushed aside the bark door and stepped outside.

The welcoming sun met his eyes as Kegan stretched out his arms. Aetos let out an irritated squawk as Kegan's arm narrowly avoided clipping his wingtip. Kegan paused to survey his home, a humble village in a clearing in the middle of the woods. He saw young Basim running across the garden, laughing, his hair a greasy mess of chocolate brown waves and his meager cheeks stretching his face into a grin. A few seconds passed and short, adorable Becan waddled past to join his peer. Kegan winced as Becan clumsily bowled a pebble at Basim. It whipped past and glanced off the edge of Kegan's hut. Both children gasped and stared with wide eyes at Kegan. He glared at them, then lunged and roared. As the hoodlums made their escape, Kegan shook his head and broke into laughter. He had a perfect home and a perfect life. A life with no difficulty, no struggle, no adventure, no excitement.

Nothing important ever happened to Kegan. It was the same general routine every day. Get up and eat. Go play with the attached-like-a-limb, four years younger Hadwin in the woods, then eat again. He had to do a few chores around the village, as did everyone who lived there, before the last meal of the day. Before Kegan knew it, the day was over and the elders insisted everyone settle in for the night. Most days he didn't let thoughts of his parents intrude on his day. Kegan had never known them. People said that he was found curled up in a basket, sleeping. For some reason the questions, the insecurities, the sense that he belonged elsewhere woke up with him when the dreams began. Maybe it was the dream. He always felt awkward and disconnected afterwards.

Hadwin's voice interrupted him from his thoughts. "Kegan, you're up!"

Kegan replied, "It's good weather. Let's go explore the woods after we eat."

The young boy jumped up with excitement and ran for the Main Hall. Kegan jogged to catch up to him. The Main Hall was the center of the village. With a packed mud floor and a wooden roof, this was the place where people ate and meetings were held. As Kegan approached

the building, he sensed excitement in the air. Then he saw why. The foragers had found a field of kueregacre, the plant whose sweet leaves no one could ever resist. Kegan watched as they powdered the fire-dried leaves and sprinkled them over the meals. There was Hadwin at the front of the line, eager for the first serving. Not far behind were Basim and Becan, jostling to get to the front. Everyone was lining up, even the adults, to get some kueregacre. Only the elders had the patience to wait for their share. Kegan sighed and ran for the line.

“Hey Kegan. Took your time coming,” Hadwin teased. “Are you getting slow?”

“No, I’m just mature enough to let the young ones get their treats first,” Kegan replied.

Hadwin just scowled and turned back to the servers. Kegan, ignored him as his thoughts returned to the dream that he had. Why did it keep returning? Why was it so vivid? Kegan couldn’t dismiss it as just a dream, as he was left with a tangible relic of his experience. Each time he had the dream, he awoke to a handful of sparks floating above his head. Kegan would lift his hand, one finger up, into the disappearing flurry. Each time, with a push of energy, he would force another spark out and into the air. Could everyone do that? Kegan was sure if Hadwin could, there was no way he could keep it to himself. Kegan wished that everyone could create sparks. He didn’t want to be different. It made him feel alone, in this village full of people that welcomed him and made him their own. Kegan wanted to tell someone. But then, everyone would know that he didn’t belong. So he kept his little spark to himself. Absentmindedly, Kegan held up some seeds for Aetos. The sparrow let out a cry and kicked them from his hand. Kegan looked up at the bird and saw a glimmer in his eye. Aetos wanted a challenge. Kegan turned around to face the tables.

“He’s going to do a trick with Aetos!” Becan whispered to Basim. Together, they nodded.

Kegan winked, then disappeared out the door. He watched in satisfaction as a crowd of children gathered around. He whipped his arm back and flung it upward, releasing the seed into the sky. Aetos flew through the branches of trees, darting here and swooping there, catching every seed in his beak. Not a single seed touched the ground. The children's eyes were hooked on Aetos as he took a final dive before returning to Kegan’s arm. Kegan gave him a sugar crystal as a reward, and the audience applauded. Aetos turned to face Kegan, eyes gleaming with satisfaction and pride as Kegan went back to sit down for his morning meal.

“That was amazing!” Hadwin praised as he spooned up his soup. “How do you train him?”

“I don’t,” Kegan responded, “he does it himself.”

“You’ve got to get me one of those birds,” Hadwin mumbled with little thought to the soup dribbling down his chin from his hungry mouth. He paused, then looked away from his food. “Kegan,” Hadwin ventured hopefully, “Do you actually enjoy hanging out with me? I mean, you’re eighteen and I’m just fourteen.”

“Sure, I guess so,” Kegan answered absent mindedly. “As far as little kids go, you’re okay. Anyways, the adults don’t seem to know the meaning of fun.” Reassured, Hadwin went back to eating. Kegan knew it was true. There were no other children in the village closer to his age. While Hadwin could be clingy and immature, Kegan felt comfortable around him and knew they’d always be there for each other.

Hadwin followed Kegan out of the Main Hall and into the forest. His eyes gleamed as he stared into the green, mottled canopy. He jumped up and clung to a low-reaching branch of a massive oak tree. Slowly, he pulled himself up. Hadwin reached for a higher branch, but missed as he almost stumbled from his seat. “Kegan, can you help me with this branch?” Hadwin grunted.

Kegan briefly yanked Hadwin’s leg down. Hadwin slipped down and fell into Kegan’s arms. Kegan dumped him to the ground and scrambled up the tree. He deviously chuckled as Hadwin unsuccessfully tried to pull him down. Finally, Kegan lowered his arms and pulled Hadwin up onto the branch beside him. Hadwin scowled, but still followed Kegan into the branches above.

Then they spotted a squirrel leaping among the branches as it searched for acorns. “Ooh, catch that one,” Hadwin exclaimed.

Kegan gave a sharp whistle and Aetos came zooming from the trees. He threw out his wings and gave a sharp shriek, momentarily stunning the squirrel.

“Once again,” Hadwin said, “You’ve got to get me one of those birds.”

Kegan leaped to the next branch and carefully picked up the squirrel. In fright, it opened its mouth, releasing the acorns that were inside it. All but one struck Hadwin right between the eyebrows. Hadwin climbed up to join Kegan. Kegan petted the squirrel, calming it down. Hadwin gave it a dirty look. As soon as it could, the squirrel jumped out of Kegan’s hand and flitted through the trees away from them. Simultaneously satisfied and bored with the squirrel hunt the two boys climbed down from the tree in search of something else to entertain

themselves.

Hadwin impatiently gouged a shaving off of the misshapen wood lump he held. Through the last hour of toil, it had come no closer to the frog he had tried to form. Instead, it had only grown smaller and more rounded. Hadwin sighed in frustration and observed Kegan's progress. Kegan seemed no nearer to an end project, but he carved his piece with a distinct air of satisfaction.

"What are you even trying to make?" Hadwin asked.

Kegan stared at his model and shrugged his shoulders.

"Then what have you been doing this whole time?" he demanded.

Kegan picked up Hadwin's model, examined it, then handed it back. "It's not just about having an end product." He continued to carve his piece. "I find it more relaxing to simply carve the wood than to have expectations for what it's supposed to be. Usually, I'll get inspiration while carving and I'll slowly move towards the final shape. It always seems to turn out better that way." He stopped carving and absentmindedly smiled at the lump of wood in his hand. "And if I can't think of something to make, I just keep carving until all that's left is a pile of shavings."

Hadwin looked at his piece, sighed, then continued to work towards his frog. Kegan tossed his model aside and looked to Hadwin.

"Hadwin, can I ask you something?"

Hadwin furled his eyebrows and answered absent mindedly. "Sure."

Kegan let his stream of thoughts from the morning flow back. He struggled to form the sentences that could explain his thoughts and accompanying feelings properly. What would sharing them even do? He wasn't sure he wanted to burden Hadwin with this strange and eerie secret. Kegan wanted and needed to tell someone. Then everyone would know. Maybe it wouldn't matter. But what if it did? What if they treated him differently? Maybe it just wasn't time to tell yet.

"Nevermind, it's nothing." Kegan tried to hide his worry from Hadwin.

"C'mon, let's go eat lunch," Hadwin said, throwing his piece of wood aside. "I'm hungry."

They went to the Main Hall and saw Chief Theodoric waiting for the people of the village to congregate before him. Even though Theodoric was not physically imposing, he exuded an air of safety and security. When Theodoric wanted to be heard he didn't yell, he stood still, and

people gathered around him ready to listen. Theodoric became a second, or first as needed, father to nearly every child in the village. He was the first person every man consulted when in need. Even the women felt comfortable confiding in him.. All in all, he was a near ideal leader for Igaezg. Kegan and Hadwin ran over to join the crowd that had gathered.

“There have been reports of raiders among the villages of the forest,” the chief spoke. “They have laid many villages to waste.”

“Let’s make ‘em take a bath!” a belligerent young voice shouted from the crowd.

Kegan turned towards the source of the voice and saw little Becan with a fierce expression upon his face and a stick in his hand. His damp hair and freshly washed face, evidence of a recent scrubbing. Many of the adults shook their heads and held back laughter.

“Thank you for your idea, Becan,” Theodoric replied indulgently, “We will definitely consider it.” He turned toward the rest of the crowd. “We will send scouts out to determine the location and the strength of the raiders. In the meantime we must all be cautious. No one should venture beyond the boundaries of our village. And absolutely no fires after dark.”

The villagers whispered and looked to each other in fear. They weren’t warriors. The fastest runners were the food gatherers who worked swiftly in fear in the woods after dark. The strongest men and women were the water-carriers who were used to carrying the heaviest burdens for the longest time. And the scouts were simply those seeking glory by identifying potential dangers. Hadwin looked at Kegan with a look of alarm as some of the adults in the group began to serve lunch. Kegan turned back and smiled, but his forehead remained creased as Theodoric continued.

“Do not worry. We should be safe for the time being, as the reports have been coming from distant areas of the forest. You may now eat.”

Lunch was silent with most everyone preoccupied by what they just heard. Kegan could tell that Hadwin was scared. Nothing dangerous had ever intruded in their simple village life. Kegan welcomed the distraction from his ruminations over his confusing dreams, but the idea of a real enemy coming to their quiet village was frightening. He went over and sat next to Hadwin to reassure both the boy and himself.

“Everything will be fine, Hadwin,” Kegan promised, “Even if anyone comes to the village, the adults can handle it.”

“I’m not scared,” Hadwin declared putting on his bravest face. “I could handle the raiders

by myself if I had to. But I know no one thinks I can do anything. Everyone thinks I'm a baby like Basim and Becan, but I'm not a baby." He spoke with a distinctly childlike pout, all his fear forgotten in his indignation.

"Cheer up," Kegan said, "After you eat, we'll go play Grabber."

Hadwin perked up at the thought of the fun to come and went back to his lunch.

After lunch, Kegan and Hadwin headed over to Kegan's hut to get the Grabber ropes. Kegan was the village Grabber champion. Hadwin could hardly put up a fair fight, but he didn't care. He liked to play against Kegan almost every day after lunch. They got their ropes and tied them to their feet. Each boy pulled a branch from a dying tree and tied it to the other end of the rope. Kegan searched Hadwin's eyes for clues of his first move.

"I'm just waiting for you," Kegan joked.

"Just you wait," Hadwin muttered back.

Hadwin immediately leapt back, barely avoiding Kegan's reaching hands. He swung forward his branch as a lure and pulled it back as Kegan dove forward. In response, Kegan swung his branch and it curled around Hadwin's rope. Kegan leaped back, pulling the branch with him. The twigs on Hadwin's branch snapped off and went flying as Kegan's rope scraped past them. Hadwin deviously grinned, realizing that the absence of twigs on his branch made it harder to catch.

"Getting tired?" Hadwin taunted all the while puffing and panting.

Kegan wiped a drop of sweat off his brow. He sneered, "No way."

Hadwin uttered a roar and leaped forward in a feint. He jumped back while swinging his branch forward to wrap around Kegan's feet. Kegan leapt into the air. As his branch came down, Hadwin's wrapped around it. Kegan leaned to the side, pulling Hadwin's branch away and effectively making him fall. Kegan picked up Hadwin's branch and held it over Hadwin's grounded form. Hadwin grumbled as he recognized his defeat. He lunged back and brushed leaves and twigs off of his clothing and hair.

"Let's go. Rematch," Hadwin grouched, "right now."

"Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere," Kegan laughed, "Are you sure you don't want water or something?"

"No, just watch," Hadwin muttered, "I'll beat you."

Kegan quickly felled Hadwin in the next few matches. As the sun fell from its peak, the

boys grew ever more sore, though both were loathe to show it. As they were about to start another game, the shift horn blew.

“Wheat planting time,” Kegan sighed. Though he did not enjoy it, Kegan understood the importance of the planting. They headed towards the field and started spreading seeds. As they quietly worked, the sun began to go down and the planters became impatient.

“This is boring,” Hadwin complained, “Why do we have to plant wheat?”

Kegan, tired himself and irritated by Hadwin’s daily complaints snapped back at him. “Would you rather starve through the goddamn winter or do just a little bit of stupid work!” His irritation quickly deflated by his outburst, Kegan felt guilty at the look of hurt on Hadwin’s face. “I’m really sorry Hadwin. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Maybe the pressure of the raiders around the village is getting to me.”

“It’s, it’s okay,” Hadwin stammered, “I’m fi-fine. I’m okay.”

Kegan ashamedly looked aside. “No, I’m really sorry.”

They continued to gather the wheat in silence until it was dark. Only the moon lit the paths the farmers traversed as they slowly made it back to their homes. Exhausted and surprisingly ready for bed, Kegan hurried to his hut where Aetos was tethered and waiting for him. The sparrow leaped from his perch and gave a quick chirp.

“Not now, buddy,” Kegan said, “I’m beat today. It’s time to sleep.”

It was a moonless night. A chilly breeze whispered through the marsh. My eyes adjusted to the light’s absence until I could see a dark shadow at the distant edge of the wetland. In an all too familiar motion, the shadow began to float over and engulf the air around me. My feet felt leaden in the sticky mud and by the weight of the shadow that came ever closer. A strand of weed wrapped its clutches around my ankle and I fell. I could feel the evil aura of the shadow coming closer and closer. Cries of previous victims echoed through my mind. Only they knew this all encompassing fear I felt. I could share this with no one else. I had to avenge them. I focused everything I had to my fingertips, desperate to do this for my wife, for my young son, and for all that had suffered in this terrible swamp. I had to survive to protect my family and avenge those victims. Sparks shot from my hands, instantly illuminating the night and forming a shield from the darkness. The fingers of darkness viciously probed at my defense, draining my energy. I was too tired. I couldn’t keep up my shield. The sparks gently dispersed and went out. I pushed all that I had left to bring out the great fire. I collapsed with fatigue, but I still pushed on.

A couple feeble sparks stung at the shadow, but it didn't falter. I couldn't win this. I couldn't avenge them. I wasn't the one to break the pattern. Wait, there was a way. It could be defeated. I'll be long gone, but my work will be finished. I was scared of death before. More, I was scared of dying when there was a chance to live. As the dark wave washed upon me, I knew there was nothing left to fear.

For the first time, the dream continued. Kegan felt himself rising and separating from the man's body. He finally was able to see the man's facial features. With the night setting and marsh fog, Kegan seemed to see a reflection of himself upon a lake surface. As Kegan looked more closely, he noticed some more distinguished facial features. The man had a stronger browline, a more chiseled jaw. Kegan felt a strange familiarity to him and longed for him to wake. The man seemed not to stir, but somehow he spoke.

"I await you in the forest, son."

Kegan woke up, sweating. Who was that? Son? What did he mean? The dream always bothered Kegan, but this time it left him desperate and restless at the same time.. He grew frantic. Kegan jumped out of his cot and looked around. It was still dark. The sun had not yet peeked over the horizon. The blood rushed from his head, and Kegan fell back to his bed. What had happened? He saw the man. He saw the man who was swallowed by a shadow. He saw the man whose consciousness he had been immersed in so many times. And this man. Who was this man? Kegan knew who it was. It was his father, and he had to go the forest and save him. But where? Where in the forest? Kegan didn't care He had to go. He had a father. And his father needed him.

"C'mon Aetos, we're going on a journey."

Chapter 2: Fishing

Kegan grabbed his fishing spear, rope and traveling pack. He ran over to the Main Hall where breakfast was beginning.

"Hey Kegan, you wanna play Grabber after eating?" Hadwin called.

"No, I'm busy. I gotta go." Kegan distractedly glanced at the dishes around him.

Hadwin stood up and approached him. "Why?"

"I'll tell you later."

"Can I come with you?" Hadwin pleaded, "I can help."

Kegan finally turned to face Hadwin. "No."

“Please?” Hadwin pleaded again. I am here

“No! And that’s final!” Kegan responded firmly, grabbing his gear and a forgotten bread roll and heading to the forest. He walked away quickly, turning back just in time to see Hadwin’s sad and confused expression. Kegan wanted to take Hadwin. He wanted a friend to confide in. But this would be too dangerous. Kegan came up to the edge of the dense forest. It looked so beautiful and harmless in the morning light. But Kegan knew better. He would be going beyond the safe zone he and Hadwin had been allowed to play in. He would be entering the areas that the elders warned were filled with wild animals. Suddenly, thoughts of his dream sent shudders of fear down Kegan’s back. There were worse dangers than wild animals in that forest. It had been little over a quarter hour since Kegan had left the safe boundaries of the village, and the lingering fear from his dream and considerable uncertainty of his direction made him abruptly pause mid stride. Kegan realized he had no idea where he was going nor did he have a plan once he got there. The forest was huge. What he was looking for, whatever it was, could be anywhere. As Kegan considered returning to the safety of the village, he heard a sharp explosive chink from behind him. Aetos swooped in and landed on a tree branch in front of him. Aetos had a twinkle in his eye, not his usual playful challenging one, somehow he seemed fierce and determined. The bird and his twinkle made Kegan feel less alone. Aetos began to fly through the trees and Kegan ran to catch up to him.

“He seems to know where he wants to go. Better than aimlessly wandering,” Kegan muttered to himself. I am here

The sparrow stopped at a large, rushing river a couple hours later. Kegan's stomach grumbled as a lone roll of bread passed from his gut to his memory. He grabbed his fishing spear and dove into the cool water. It parted to accept him. Clouds of minnows shot away and Kegan saw his target, a large river sturgeon, about fifteen feet away. Kegan focused on it and nothing else.

The roar of the current subsided to a gentle pulse and the water around him seemed to disappear. The fishing spear was an extension of Kegan's arm as it snaked through the ether. The sturgeon's metallic eyes were quickly riveted to Kegan. It slowly ebbed forward, mouth slightly ajar. The two hunters, neither afraid, came together, both envisioning an expected meal. Kegan felt a sting as he scraped his toe against a rock. It was a minor cut. He ignored it.

Then suddenly, the sturgeon darted this way and that and quickly dove away. Puzzled,

Kegan looked around for what had frightened the fish. Facing him was a school of hungry piranhas. Before he could think of what to do, they swarmed in, all desperate for a meal. He immediately reacted, lunging his arm forward. He speared one, but two more came forward to take its place. He started wildly swinging his spear in a desperate attempt at keeping the hungry fish away from his body. One got through his meager defense and bit his thigh. Another stung his shoulder.

The water began to redden from his blood. Kegan realized that the blood cloud would attract more swarms of piranhas. Suddenly he was surrounded by gnashing fish. He got bitten once, twice, too many times to count. He was too weak to do anything but flop the spear back and forth in the increasingly heavy water. He began to lose consciousness, but it was okay; the pain was going away.

This can't be it, Kegan thought as the river bottom loomed near, I've got to find my father!

Suddenly, a rush began to build inside Kegan's chest. Sparks fluttered from his fingers and burst into an ever-growing tongue of flame. The water spat and hissed as a bubble of boiled, evaporated vapor swelled around Kegan's arms. It grew to more than a foot in diameter. Then, the flames stopped. The bubble collapsed and a massive sonic boom decimated the attacking frenzy. Kegan was thrown back to the banks and consciousness once again began to leave him. With a final bout of strength, Kegan dragged himself from the water. Several piranhas had been cooked by the intense heat and pressure and now littered the river bank.

"Lunch's ready, Aetos," he gasped and fainted.

Young Kegan peered over the bush. Sharp twigs dug into his arms. The men sat around the table. Eating, talking, laughing. So tall. One gestured to him. Was it to join them? Was it a threat? Kegan ducked under the leaves. The man got up and starting walking over. Kegan ran out and away. He shot up a tree. He lost them. Kegan buried his head into the branch and foliage. Someone approached. Kegan curled his meager, young body tighter. They left something at the base of the tree and walked away. Kegan unraveled his neck and peeked at the base of the tree. It was a gourd filled with water and a dish of bread. Kegan slowly climbed down. As he was barely a foot off the ground, he reached a flailing arm out and snagged the food. He sprung back into his hiding place and began his meal.

As Kegan woke up, a wave of searing pain crawled down his body. His skin was

pockmarked with dozens of red, still bleeding piranha bites. Many were further agonized by jagged pebbles and pine needles digging into Kegan's flesh. He fought back a whimper and softly whistled out to Aetos. The sparrow faithfully hopped down from his perch to pull debris from Kegan's wounds.

“You hungry?” Kegan gasped.

The sparrow simply pointed his beak towards a pile of fish bones. He curled up for a nap. Kegan slowly sat up and reached for a fish. Newly forming skin stretched and broke. He collapsed back to the ground, taking quick, shallow breaths. Kegan's memory shot back to the moments before he lost consciousness. The fish were everywhere. He was dying. The rush of power and the tongue of flame.

What had happened? Kegan thrust willpower to his fingers. This time, a series of several sparks sputtered out. He pushed them with his mind and they reluctantly obeyed. He had more control than before the piranha attack. More intensity. Kegan pushed the sparks up again and felt warmth and strength running through his body. It was as if his underwater explosion had broken a wall running between the force Kegan pushed from within and its manifestation floating in front of him. The pain, hunger, and thirst all lay forgotten as Kegan created stars beneath the daytime canopy.

“I don't have to worry about losing my flint rock again,” he mused.

Kegan created a tent of kindling and stuffed a lump of thin bark in the center. He forced sparks out and guided them towards the tinder. They lazily floated to their destination, but sizzled out as they were engulfed in the tinder Kegan tried to set alight. He forced the sparks with more effort, but they simply refused to flow with more force. Kegan nearly collapsed as his little energy flowed away. It appeared as if the single broken wall was simply one in many. With regret, he pulled his flint rocks from his pack and began the slow, but familiar process of fire-starting.

With a roaring fire, Kegan heated the already roasted fish and sprinkled them with powdered herbs from his pack. Despite his best efforts, Kegan's meal still tasted quite unpalatable. However, as his stomach filled with protein, Kegan's strength began to return and the pain began to ebb. Kegan packed up and walked on.

As the night darkened, Kegan set up camp. He piled bushy evergreen branches against the side of a leaning sapling. Anything to cover his head. Kegan wriggled his body under the less

than adequate shelter.

“Let’s rest, Aetos. We’ve got a lot of walking to do tomorrow.”

But the bird was already asleep.

Kegan tossed and turned in his impromptu bed. He didn't want to need this rest. He wanted to keep going. What else could this journey hold? As memories of the familiar dream returned, the last question gained a noticeably darker tone. What else would this journey hold?

Kegan was an extremely light sleeper. A slight rustle wrenched his eyes open and threw him up onto his feet. He picked up his fishing spear and edged roughly in the direction he seemed to remember the noise originating from. Then he heard a low growl. What other deadly animals inhabited this area? Kegan vaguely recalled tales of fire and beasts. He pulled a stick out from the underbrush and set it ablaze. The growl had come from an unnatural arrangement of foliage. They couldn't have fallen in that manner. Kegan held up his flaming weapon and kicked the shelter aside. There lay a sleeping, snoring Hadwin.

“Hadwin!” Kegan yelled while shaking the boy awake. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, hi Kegan. You’re finally up. I’ve been waiting for you,” Hadwin said groggily.

Kegan sighed and pushed his hair back. “I just woke you up.”

“Wait, when?” Hadwin sleepily glanced around. “And how did morning come so fast? It was night one second and morning the next.”

“That’s because you fell asleep.” Kegan threw the still burning branch into the dirt and it simmered into embers. “Stop trying to change the subject. Why are you here?”

Hadwin scratched his head and guiltily looked away. “I wanted to come with you.”

“How did you find me?” Kegan stared at Hadwin's eyes, unable hold his gaze.

“Aetos.” Hadwin finally looked back, and a grin grew on the edge of his lips.

Kegan kicked the tree Aetos was resting in. He was rewarded with an annoyed chirp.

Hadwin sat silently, waiting. Kegan paced in circles around his shelter. Hadwin was like a brother. It would be fun to have him along. He did get this far. But Hadwin was young. Only fourteen. Hadwin couldn't handle the piranhas. Kegan couldn't let him try. Hadwin didn't have the fire, the strange weapon that saved Kegan's life.

“Hadwin, you need to go home,” Kegan insisted.

“But why?” Hadwin whined.

“You’re just a child. The village is probably worried and wondering where you are right

now.” Kegan held back his exasperation.

“I’m not just a child!” Hadwin yelled, “I know you don’t want to have to take care of me, but I can fend for myself.”

“What if the raiders come, Hadwin? You told me you didn’t think the adults could take care of everything. I need you to protect the village. For me.”

Hadwin looked away. “But I wanna go with you! You don’t understand. This is the adventure I’ve always wanted. You’re going on a journey and you can’t even take me?”

Kegan felt his face grow flush and his stomach contort. How could he deny Hadwin something he himself had longed for for so long? “Listen, Hadwin, I’ll make you a bet,” Kegan finally said.

“A bet about what?” Hadwin snapped.

“I bet you won’t need to worry about having adventure. Excitement’s always gonna find you. Just wait at home and prep for battle. Once those bumbling raiders show up, give them a whipping.” Kegan knelt and looked Hadwin straight in the eyes. “And if I find the village in one piece and you leading those creaky, old adults into battle, I’ll stand by you and help you finish off your adventure. Then we’ll go off and have a million more adventures of our own. How does that sound?”

Hadwin contorted his face into a glower and tried to hide the smile creeping across his face. “Those adults don’t need me! They’re all old and wise and wrinkled.” He smirked at Kegan. “But why can’t I go with you this time?”

Kegan sighed and combed his hair back between his fingers. “I’m really sorry, but this one is something I just have to do myself. Can I count on you to hold down the fort?”

“Well I s’pose.” Hadwin carefully thought. “But you better give me half your kueregacre next time!”

“Are you kidding?” Kegan laughed.

“No.” Hadwin tried to hold a straight face.

“Well, you’re not getting it. I expect to find the village safe and sound in one piece when I get back.”

Hadwin began to run back through the trees. “Bye Kegan,” he called.

“See ya.” Kegan watched as Hadwin disappeared through the trees. Kegan sighed as leaves slowly waved and fell around him. It just didn’t feel the same without Hadwin’s spirit and

enthusiasm. Slowly, Kegan moved from a trudge to a walk. He had places to go.

Before he passed into the thicket, Hadwin turned around one last time. It was fruitless. Kegan had already turned and began his journey farther into the trees. Hadwin sighed and marched back towards the village. As Kegan's calming influence faded with distance, Hadwin was left with nothing but the bitter disappointment. He sulked and kicked branches around. He was leaving behind a strange and mysterious journey he didn't even understand. All he had to go back to was the tension accompanying the possibility of attack. The part that bothered Hadwin most was that he knew Kegan wasn't too worried about the village. He knew Kegan wasn't sending Hadwin back to lead the attack against the raiders. Hadwin had known Kegan for too long. Why did people always treat him like he was some fragile baby? He was fourteen years old! Hadwin almost wanted the raiders to attack. He could finally get a chance to show people he could be treated like an adult.

The trees slowly swayed in the wind. The forest was silent as leaves floated down like angels and the sunlight streamed through the canopy of the forest. A bustling creek ran to the right. Young fish leaped and played in the calm waters unaware of the predators that lay in wait. A voice disturbed Hadwin from his reverie. It was deep and husky. It laughed and was quickly joined by many others. Hadwin crouched to the ground and stalked forward as Kegan had taught him. He was virtually silent as he approached the voices. As he came closer, the soft glow of a fire appeared. Closer yet and he could make out the large shapes of men gathered around with bottles and spears. One made an obscene joke and the rest burst out into raucous, roaring laughter.

"Raiders," Hadwin muttered softly.

One of the men spoke. "Why do we gotta stop for so long? I'm itching for some action. Food, fighting, gold, and women."

Another raised his ale. "With that belly, looks like you've gotten about too much of the first one, but shan't get a touch of the last!"

The other raiders clutched their bellies and roared. They gulped down swigs of ale and cheered, spears raised.

One raider pulled out a forest map. "Quiet, you thugs!" he snapped. "We're getting close to Igaezg. We don't want to wake 'em up."

"That's my village!" Hadwin gasped.

“Tomorrow we march!”

Hadwin slowly stepped back from his post. He barely started to turn around when a twig snapped underfoot. He winced, expecting a spear to fly at him, but the raiders were still throwing jokes and were engaged in hearty fits of laughter. Hadwin couldn't help it anymore. He turned and started sprinting back to his village. Each bird chirped at him to hurry. Each cricket another warning. Hadwin's lungs heaved as he approached his home. He burst into the village center, gulping huge breaths of air.

“The raiders are coming this way!” he yelled.

Chief Theodoric stepped out from his hut. “Hadwin, how do you know?” he asked.

“I was, um, you know,” Hadwin tried to force an excuse, “um, foraging. Yeah, foraging in the forest, and when I was coming home, I heard noises so I looked around. All of these big raiders were sitting around a fire. They didn't see me, but they said Igaezg was their next stop!”

“If this young child is correct,” the chief announced, “then we must prepare!”

“I'm fourteen years old,” Hadwin protested.

The chief had already moved on to more important matters.

Chapter 3: Battle

Some villagers began to usher children into huts. Others scrounged up sticks, rocks, anything that could be used as a weapon. The raiders were coming.

“Stop!” a voice cried out, “You're going to listen to the imaginings of a kid just like that?”

The crowd parted to reveal a thin, tall man. Glass clinked as he stuffed a half empty bottle into a loose pocket.

“Llywarch,” Hadwin spat out.

Llywarch smirked and rolled his eyes. “You're rushing around, going nuts, for this child's games?”

The villagers looked around, confused as they started to put down their weapons. A group of them began to gravitate towards and surround Llywarch.

“Continue with what you were doing.” Llywarch paused, pulled a louse from his hair, and flicked it towards Hadwin. “Don't pay heed to the young child.”

“Wait!” Hadwin cried. “They're really coming. I saw them!”

“Fine, don't believe me if you don't want to,” Llywarch sighed dramatically. “Just use

some common sense. This child was simply running around the trees and playing his games. That's all it must have been."

Some of the villagers tossed their sticks and rocks to the side. They began to drift away, many walking back to their huts. Others looked with guilty expressions at Hadwin, wanting to believe him, but following Llywarch's words instead.

"Stop," a deep voice resounded. Chief Theodoric stepped through as the throng parted. "We will ready our defenses. Hadwin has made an honest and helpful contribution to our community. I believe him."

The confused villagers looked to Theodoric. His words held much more authority than either Hadwin or Llywarch. A couple still clustered around Llywarch, but none simply returned to daily duties.

"Llywarch, I cannot understand why you do not have faith in Hadwin. If you do not believe him, do not expect any of us to have faith in you." A bottle fell and rolled over to Theodoric's feet. "If you wish to drink and stir trouble, keep it to yourself."

Llywarch laughed, "Waste your time. Waste your energy. I'm going home with anyone who follows me."

As he left, the people began to prepare weapons, trenches, and walls.

"Thanks for backing me up, chief." Hadwin said.

"We all must have faith in one another if our village is to prosper," he replied.

* * *

Kegan sharpened his spear with a stone as the day slowly came to an end. The shadows lengthened in the fading light as the sun slowly disappeared from view. Crickets' chirps sounded through the trees and fireflies darted around, each holding a tiny, green inferno in its posterior.

"Good start, aye Aetos?" he called.

The bird gave an affirmative chirp. The moon rose with Kegan's lean-to, and the trees slowly fell into silence.

The rising sun woke Kegan from his rest. It slowly peeked over the horizon as the red sky faded to purple, then slowly blue. Heat emanated from the air and ground without even a whisper of a breeze to carry it away. Kegan brought down the lean-to, covered his tracks, and packed his meager belongings. He was sweating before he even got on his way. Small birds flitted through the trees, but were driven off by Aetos. A line of tiny, black ants marched across the rotting

leaves, carrying their breakfast back to their tunnels. The day had started and a new forest had come alive. Kegan took a quick drink before continuing his journey.

A sudden and high-pitched cry echoed through the air. Kegan glanced in its general direction, but continued to walk. Just another hunter taking its prey. There it was again. Kegan crept up to the now continuing shriek. Finally he approached a barely visible a snare trap where a young rabbit was trapped. It screamed again and struggled as Kegan came closer.

He cooed and gently stroked the rabbit's fur down. It lashed back at him and squealed desperately. Kegan gently clutched its leg. The rabbit's racing heartbeat could be felt through each and every one of its muscles. Kegan slowly whispered to it and it began to reduce its struggles. He pulled the loop off. The rabbit bolted off into the trees. A rustle in the trees brought Kegan onto his feet. He twirled out his spear. A short, hunched hermit burst from the bushes. Kegan leaped back in surprise, but quickly stood back in place and tried to show a regained composure.

"Where's my game?" the hermit growled.

"I released the poor thing," Kegan coolly remarked.

The man stabbed his knife into a tree with an angry sigh. "That was my breakfast."

"It was in torturing pain." Kegan pulled the knife from the tree and gently rubbed the wood fragments from its rock face. "Didn't you feel any sympathy for it?"

The hermit snatched his knife back. "I was gonna kill it anyways."

Annoyed, Kegan felt around the edge of the gash in the tree trunk. "Look, I'll help you prepare another meal since I released your first one."

The hermit furled his eyebrows at Kegan. "Whatcha got on the menu?" he inquired, the rabbit quickly forgotten.

Kegan grabbed the knife, spun it around his slender fingers, and stuck it back into the tree. "Stew."

Half an hour later, sunlight shone on a canteen filled with boiling water. Watercress, berries, nuts, roots, and tubers swam under the dancing bubbles. Kegan took a swig of their concoction. He winced as it began to sear his tongue before it cooled down. He passed it along.

"I guess this ain't so bad," the man said.

Kegan grinned, "Better than what you were going to eat."

He glanced up. The sun was high. It was time for Kegan to go. He was satiated, rested,

and ready to go, against the searing heat.

“Thanks for the meal,” he called as he began to walk away.

“You’re leavin’ already?” the man called back.

Kegan looked up to the sky. “Yeah, I’d better get going.”

The man slowly started to step towards Kegan. “I never got your name.”

“Kegan.” A glimmer of recognition sparked in the old man’s eyes. His back straightened, his crooked fingers unclenched, and just for a moment, he seemed to cast off the image he had portrayed since he first came out of the trees. But before Kegan could internalize the shift, the man’s back regained its hump, his fingers curled once more, and he once again became simply a crazy hermit in the woods. Kegan had to wonder if he had truly seen this change. “Are ya really Kegan? No foolin’?” the man asked.

“Yeah, what’s the big deal?” Kegan tried to back away.

“Where’s your army? I’ll lead you to the village.” The man clutched Kegan’s arm and held him close.

“Army?” Kegan yanked his arm away. “And what village?”

The hermit scooted closer, his eyebrows furling in confusion. “You gotta know. Else, why would you be here?”

“Know of what?” Kegan’s heart started to thump as he wondered what this stranger was talking about. Could it have something to do with his dream? This man could be the link he was trying to find.

“We can’t talk out here with all them spies and stuff, but I’ll come with ya to show you to the village if you need it.” The hermit clasped Kegan’s arm once more, his eyes wide.

Kegan ran his fingers back through his hair. “What does this village have to do with me? Why do you want to take me there?” Maybe he would finally find the answers he was looking for.

“What did I say?” the man stressed, “I can’t say anything here. Come with me. We’ll go somewhere secure.” His hand twitched. He repeatedly clasped his knife.

Kegan wanted to find his father, but this crazy hermit couldn’t possibly be a real lead. “I don’t care about this village you’re talking about. Thanks for sharing my meal.” Kegan turned around and started walking away.

“Wait!” the man called, “You gotta come with me.”

Kegan kept walking without looking back. He needed to get to the end of his journey and back as soon as possible.

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Walls rose from stone and dirt as trenches formed through the digging of the same materials. Flaky obsidian and flint fragments formed a pile next to hardwood branches at the beginning of an assembly line. A first team expertly chipped fine edges into the developing leaf shaped spear tip. Each branch was stripped of twigs, and the bark was carefully carved away. Spear tip and spear shaft were joined together with a bundle of twine winding around carved notches in each piece. As fast as the completed weapons were placed in a pile at the end of the line, they were snatched up by ambitious young men, hoping to warm up before the big battle. The raiders were coming. It was time for them to be warriors.

Basim and Becan stomped around a mud puddle. They gestured to Dakarai to come over. Dakarai ambled over, frizzy black curls atop a cinnamon colored forehead. He fell onto his knees straight into the water. Freedom: the one good thing the advent of the raiders had brought them.

“Death to raiders!” Becan yelled, ready with a sharp stick in his hands.

“We gonna throw mud at em!” Dakarai cried.

“But that’s fun,” Becan replied.

“Oh.” Dakarai paused to think of a proper punishment, “Then we’ll throw soap ‘n’ water at them!” The three grimaced, remembering the stinging pain their eyes had gone through due to the past hygiene-related developments.

“You two are silly little kiddies.” Basim muttered while shaking his head. “The only way to really get them is with my sling!”

Both boys admired the crude, vine rope with a small pouch on the end for the ammunition. Basim proudly held it up along with a handful of pebbles. He loaded one, swung it around his head a couple times and released it at his target, a tree about ten feet away. A few leaves and acorns showered down.

“That was almost as cool as Aetos.” Becan said, his eyes wide with awe.

“Are you kidding?” Dakarai sassed.

“Yeah, I guess. But I want one!” Becan slowly reached for the sling, but Basim slapped his hand away.

“You have to know how to use it.” Basim puffed out his chest and strutted back and forth.

Becan and Dakarai giggled as Basim cleared his throat and spoke in a deep voice, "You two are just children and don't understand weapons."

Becan suddenly pulled Basim and Dakarai closer. "I got an idea!"

The three aspiring heroes gathered at the edge of the forest, each lugging cloth sacks bulging with rocks. Becan and Dakarai shot up into a tree while Basim tied the bags to a rope. After he joined the other two in the canopy, the three children pulled their stones up into the branches. They trekked through the trees, sliding the rock bag along the branches behind them.

"We're ready," Becan announced.

The three children saw a few soft, green glows shining through the trees. They were moving, but not much.

"You give the order and we charge," Becan whispered.

"Go," Basim whispered back.

They each threw a rock with all their force at the lights.

"Torches aren't green," Basim remarked.

After thoroughly enjoying the company of the newfound fireflies, the young warriors turned around and saw the real camp. They could hear the raiders laughing and joking in a huddled mass.

"Prepare weapons," Dakarai instructed in a whisper.

Basim loaded his sling and prepared to fire. Becan and Dakarai each took rocks in both hands. On a silent cue, they all unleashed their weapons in unison. The hurled stones zipped at the raider building with deadly accuracy. The projectiles delivered their devastating force upon their frail target. The three continued their barrage for several minutes. Slowly, their stash was depleted. Finally, the last stone flew with a swing of Basim's sling. The fighters looked upon their work and cheered. They high-fived and jumped with pride.

Slowly, a damaged section of the makeshift hut trembled and collapsed in and daylight streamed through the newly made hole. Basim, Becan, and Dakarai scurried into the brush and up the trees. The raider scout walked up to his hut. He looked to at the damage, then to the still rustling leaves.

"Damn squirrels," he cursed.

The three boys climbed along the branches and called out their war cries. They did it. They attacked the raiders. Without paying heed to direction, they crawled further and further

from the hut. Then Basim looked down. Starting just a few feet ahead was a collection of several huts and larger buildings. The raiders were walking about and holding an arsenal of weapons. The child's eyes widened. He whipped around and signaled to the others to stop. Becan and Dakarai looked down past the trees, and all three came to the same realization. They had hardly scratched the raiders. They had more work to do.

"How are we supposed to attack them?" Dakarai whispered, "We're all out of rocks!"

Becan grinned deviously. He pulled out a pouch he had been hiding. Slowly, he opened it to reveal a fire-starting kit of tinder and pyrite fire rocks. Dakarai reached to grab their new treasure. Basim gasped in alarm.

"We're not allowed to have these!" Basim cried as he pulled the kit away from Becan and Dakarai. "Where did you even get it?"

"I swiped it from the chief's hut," Becan announced proudly.

"Nuh uh," Dakarai argued, "You can't do that!"

"Fine," Becan sighed, "someone left it behind in the Main Hall."

"You didn't think to give it back to them?" Basim asked incredulously.

"I don't even know whose it is!" Becan retorted.

"You sure about that?" Basim questioned doubtfully. Becan looked aside.

"Well, I don't know them very well," he murmured. Basim slowly shook his head.

"Becan, that's stealing." Becan snatched the kit back.

"Well we have it now, so let's use it!"

"Absolutely not. It's way too dangerous." He took it back from Becan.

"Can't we at least try to burn down one hut?" Becan whined.

"No," Basim asserted. "We are sneaking back home right now." Dakarai grabbed the kit and leapt away from Basim.

"You go home if you want," he broke in, "but I'm taking out some raiders!"

Dakarai struck the rocks together. Golden sparks flew at the pile of tinder. They landed on the branch and sizzled out. Basim jumped towards Dakarai. Dakarai struck the rocks together again. The bits of grass and bark glowed orange and smoked. Dakarai started to blow into the flames. Basim landed on Dakarai's branch. The smoldering nest shook and tumbled to the ground. As it rushed through the air, the young, forming fire flickered and dimmed. It landed upon the forest floor and almost was quenched completely. A breeze blew. A dead leaf flew. It

landed upon the barely burning tinder. The leaf began to catch flame. The surrounding foliage charred. As the air grew even hotter, branches too burst into flame. Heavy, black smoke floated up.

“Dakarai! Our tree’s going to catch on fire!” Basim cried.

“I know!” Dakarai yelled, “Let’s run!”

Basim, Becan, and Dakarai nimbly maneuvered the interwoven canopy as they traveled away from the flame and back towards their village. Long mornings of escaping their parents had trained the children in navigating the treetops. After they had traveled several meters from their original tree, the three turned back to see the result of their handiwork. The flame had stopped its progress towards them as the towering trees proved too much for it to conquer. However, a large portion of the raiders' buildings were slowly, but surely burning away.

The village came into view and the returning heroes burst from the forest. Their confused and constantly worried parents scooped them up and examined their numerous cuts and scrapes.

“Where were you?” Dakarai’s mother asked him.

“We were out attacking the raiders,” Dakarai said. “It was a good attack.” Basim stepped in, tears welling in his eyes. “No it wasn’t,” he said, “I lost my sling and stubbed my toe.”

* * *

The leaves rustled in the soft breeze that rippled through the searing air. All life was still, hiding in shadows as refuge from the scorching sun. Kegan ran across the forest floor, attempting to stay in the shade of the trees. The comfort of the calm breeze was small, but was comfort nonetheless. The water in Kegan’s canteen was low and there wasn’t a stream in sight. He dogged on, rationing himself with the few sips of water he had left. The trees had begun to thin. No longer was the canopy providing an umbrella from the heat. The sun was at its hottest, glaring from the top of the sky. Kegan stumbled and fell, but could barely get up. He had no energy to go on. At last, he finished the final drops at the bottom of the canteen. He collapsed, empty and weak. The sun attacked, but Kegan could not protect himself. His head pounded and his vision grew fuzzy. Water. He needed water. There had to be more. Kegan dragged the bottle across his chest and held it up.

Chapter 4: Spears

A torrent came crashing down upon Kegan’s face. A stream of water made it down his throat and brought him partly back to his senses. There was an old man standing over him with

an upside down pot.

“Who are you?” Kegan croaked.

“No ‘thank you’ I suppose,” the man grumpily replied.

“Sorry.” Kegan wheezed. “Thanks. But who are you?”

“I am Einar, the lone warrior of the woods.” Einar examined the pot and drank the few sips of water left in it.

“Lone warrior?” Kegan grunted, “What?”

Einar turned aside and sighed. “I just saved your sorry ass, shut up.”

“Okay, sorry Einar, ‘lone warrior of the woods’.” Kegan weakly smiled and stared at Einar’s eyes, waiting for reciprocity.

Einar grunted, then tossed the pot onto Kegan's stomach. He chuckled as Kegan cringed and began to double up. "You coming?" he impatiently questioned. Kegan slowly nodded. "Good," Einar said, "carry the pot."

Kegan walked silently and slowly besides Einar for the better part of an hour. Then, Einar reached into the brush and pulled aside a clump of vines. He found himself at the edge of an oasis surrounding a sparkling pond. Kegan smiled as a couple squirrels came up to the edge of the pool for a drink. He spotted some movement in the depths. The tip of a beak-like object poked from the surface of the water. Suddenly, the head of a turtle popped out and engulfed one of the squirrels. Within the span of less than a second, all that remained was a slowly sinking tail.

Einar chuckled. “I wouldn’t go swimming if I were you. Whenever I do, I check to make sure I have all of my toes. Those snappers will bite one off for a snack.”

Kegan was still in shock. “That’s crazy! How could a turtle get that big?”

Einar skipped a rock across the water’s surface. “That shrimp was nothing. I’ve seen them get four feet long, head to tail.”

Einar slowly led Kegan towards his home. It was nothing but a humble straw hut surrounded by the numerous and majestic oaks. Kegan wanted to say something, but didn’t know what he could add to this curious, on-and-off conversation. Aetos flew to his finger, and Kegan anxiously ruffled the sparrow’s headfeathers. *Einar, the lone warrior. This should be interesting.*

* * *

“The attack by Becan, Basim, and Dakarai had quite interesting consequences. Although the raiders appeared to be delayed, they still seem to be preparing for the next attack,” Theodoric

announced. “We must work our hardest to utilize the valuable time that the children have brought us.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” Llywarch sneered, coming from behind a large oak. “Why did we have to wait for a bunch of kids to take the first strike? Let’s attack!”

Tzofi stepped out from the rest of the scout team. With dark skin and darker hair, she was what one could call average height. While the girls of Igaezg tended to be more tomboyish than those of other villages, Tzofi was unique even among her peers. Despite being of an age similar to Hadwin’s, she already journeyed out with the scouts and took pride in her spear fighting skills. She was the one girl Hadwin admired.

“That would be pretty stupid,” Tzofi put out. “Me and the scout team saw how defended they were now.”

Llywarch stuck his face right up to Tzofi and smirked, “A couple of *children* ambushed them.”

Tzofi’s eyes watered from Llywarch’s rancid breath and she shoved him away. “They’ve upped their defenses.”

“Ooh, now we need four little kids instead of three to attack them.” Llywarch wryly shook his head. He leaned forward and pinched Tzofi’s cheeks. “Hey! Let’s send you!”

Tzofi shoved him away and reached for her spear. “I’ll show you what four kids can do!”

“Stop it!” Theodoric shouted. “Whether we like it or not, those raiders are going to pop up on our doorstep one day or another. And that day, if we’re sitting around, bickering, about petty disagreements, those raiders will sweep through here with smiles on their faces. Now will you two please settle down so we can get something done?”

Llywarch rolled his eyes and looked around. No one stood around him. He slowly stepped away. “Okay, fine. You all can do your little sit-around-and-prep-forever strategy. Those raiders are going to attack and they’ll attack hard. Whether I’ll still be around to say ‘I told you so’ or not, you guys are going to regret this.”

“Llywarch, help or stay out of our way. We don’t need you disrupting our training and fortification. We already have the kids for that, though they seem to have their act together better than you.”

As Theodoric trudged back to his hut, the rest of the village dispersed and continued their preparations. The children of the village were corralled within a roped off rectangle due to the

recent escapades of Becan, Basim, and Dakarai. Every few moments another adult would walk by and smile worriedly at the children before looking around to make sure none were missing.

“Well this stinks,” Dakarai complained. “We helped them so much and now they won’t let us help anymore.”

“But we can’t get out,” Becan whined. “They’re always watching us.”

The group of kids sat thinking, wondering of a plan to escape. Becan, Basim, and Dakarai dragged over three large rocks and unsteadily tiptoed upon them to demonstrate their leadership.

“Anyone have an idea?” Basim asked.

A small member of the congregation pulled at her frizzy, black locks. As an idea struck her, she sprung up and shot her arm into the air. She jumped, wiggled, anything to get the attention of one of the boys. However, they stood upon their rocky thrones, peering right above her head and looking for one to offer a plan. She had one! She had a plan! She set her mouth to a pout and marched up to the three rocks. She reached up and poked at Basim’s shoulder.

“I have an idea,” she announced.

Basim pretended not to notice, then suddenly reached down and roughly tousled her hair. “Oh Folade, I didn’t see you.”

Folade slapped his hands away. “You are not nice,” she muttered. “I’ll never tell you my idea unless you ask nicely.”

Basim gave an exaggerated sigh. “Okay, what’s the idea?”

Eager to share, Folade quickly whispered into his ear. Basim whispered it to Becan and Dakarai and they eagerly nodded and whispered amongst themselves. Curious, the other children stepped closer and craned their necks to attempt to catch to any snatches of the conversation about this important plan. Finally, Becan lead the way as he whispered a version of the secret into the ear of one of his compatriots. The message flowed through and back around the group, twisting and changing until each conspirator harbored a different concept of their next course of action.

“We’re gonna knock them out with acorns and tie them up with ropes from our own hair?” one young girl asked.

Basim quickly stopped her before she could try pull out a clump of straight, black hair. The remainder of the group turned confused looks to one another and burst out into arguments over their perceptions of the message.

“But I thought-”

“What about the vines?”

“Let’s go poke the guards’ noses!”

“What acorns?”

“You are all silly little-”

“Stop!” Becan’s voice rang out through the crowd. “We need to find a way to tell everyone the right plan without alerting the guards.”

The hubbub died down and the flock silenced. Some unsuccessfully pondered. Othered traced spirals and monsters into the dusty surface of the dirt. The others scratched their heads, their nasal cavities. A single hand shot up.

“You!” Dakarai called.

Hidden beneath his taller peers, the child piped out, “Let’s draw it on a paper and pass it around.”

Dakarai furrowed his brow. “I guess, you know, maybe that could work. I mean, if it was that good, I should’ve thought of it.” He looked through the throng. “Who has any paper?”

The crowd hardly stirred. None could procure the required supply. Many hadn’t even acknowledged the recent exchange. The roadblocks and effort had tired them. Maybe someone would figure out something later. Maybe tomorrow. What was this for again? After the uncomfortably long silence, a single tanned boy hesitantly stood up.

“You have paper?” Dakarai barked.

“No,” he murmured. “I have to go. You know, go.”

“Oh” Dakarai turned away and gave another exaggerated sigh.

“But we could have everyone stand in line and have the plan told to them by Folade.”

Becan leaped up in joy and embraced the tot in a monstrous bear hug. Finally, something that could actually work.

“Stop!” The boy cried. “I gotta go the bathroom!”

* * *

The tip of the fishing rod arched back. Nearly snapping, it shot forward, flicking the hook-weighted string several meters into the lake. Kegan challenged Einar with a smirk. Einar snapped his wrist and sent his line nearly double the length of Kegan’s cast.

“How’d you get it to do that?” Kegan admiringly questioned.

Einar rolled the end of his fishing rod between his hands. “You can only do something so many times before you have to get better at it.”

Kegan recast his line. No better. “So how long have you been living here?”

“I don’t know. Too long.”

A few fish out of water blossomed on the surface of the boulder upon which Kegan and Einar sat as they pulled their dinner from the water. Though Einar was never talkative, the life he lived and Kegan sampled was everything Kegan wished he could have. Nothing but freedom. Everyday was another forest excursion just to have food for the day. Every evening, Kegan tossed seeds for Aetos, performing to an audience of only Einar and the trees. The only negative aspect of it was Einar’s silence, his quiet sorrow. Though curious, Kegan could never gather the courage to ask why.

One time as they were gutting fish, Kegan turned to Einar. “I should probably get going. I’ve already delayed too much.”

“Yeah.” Einar continued to stare forward, never acknowledging Kegan’s statement apart from his terse semblance of a reply,

Kegan looked down at his work and back to Einar. “You should come with me,” Kegan offered as he flicked toothpick bones into the water, “you know, on my journey or adventure or whatever it is.”

Einar’s head gave the faintest of turns and his eyes flickered towards Kegan however quickly. “I can’t. This is my home. It’s always been.”

“How could this be home?” Kegan pushed a pile of the slender bones into the pond. “Home is where you are surrounded by people that care about you. Not where you’re alone in some shack in a swamp.”

Einar finally sat up and turned his body towards Kegan. “Have they ever told you about trust? You know, slow to make, quick to break.” Kegan’s eyebrows furled and he slowly nodded. “That’s just it. Everyone knows they should be careful about trust. They know what happens when they break it. Nothing’s really dangerous when you know what it is.”

The speech paused as Einar looked away and Kegan looked into the drifting clouds, then down into the dark water and up at the clouds again. Einar looked to Kegan again and continued. “They never tell you about routine. I mean, they tell you about it, but never in the right way. It’s always ‘get into a routine, you’ll save time’ or ‘it’s easier when you get a routine going’. It’s

nothing like that. Routine's bad. It's like the exact opposite of trust. Too easy to fall into, but impossible to climb out of." Einar stared back into the water and took a deep breath.

He looked to Kegan again. "Truth is, you're screwed from the moment you know who you are. It's always easier to keep being yourself than to think about who you really want to be. I've been stuck here for dozens of years. I wish I could be something else, but I can't, I've been me for too long. I'm sorry kid. Maybe someday, something crazy will yank this rope and pull me out of this ditch, but it's just not you now."

Kegan left through the trees, lapsing from hidden oasis to forest in a step. Aetos flew to his shoulder as he trudged through the underbrush. The trees slowly swayed in the fresh breeze, the leaves rustling in an endless dance. The forest parted to allow Kegan to pass through. It invited him upon a path that never turned, never changed. He followed it, and it guided him. It joined with a stream, providing Kegan with food, water, cool shelter from the heat. They showed him the way, water with earth in a continuous path. The sun went through its graceful arch before slowly disappearing beneath the low horizon.

"Let's sleep, Aetos," Kegan grunted. "We've got a long way to travel tomorrow."

The stop at the oasis was a waste of time. He got nothing. That was just four more days longer it would take to get home. Kegan pressed on each hour, save for the few he used to replenish himself as the sky darkened. Much time passed, yet only days could mark Kegan's progress through the homogenous forest. Kegan forced thought from his mind and stopped only for food and water. His mindless march began to take its toll, and Kegan's muscles developed deep-seated aches and tensions. His chin grew a shaggy mane and his hair became matted. Even Kegan's spear and knife dulled and slowed his everyday routine. Finally, a strike against a stream bottom rock splintered the tip of Kegan's spear. It was enough.

"We need new weapons," he said.

Aetos gave a weak chirp of relief. Kegan hiked through the rest of the day. The sun had fallen long before he took his final step. Kegan set up a tiny shelter and started a fire. He lied back and stared into the stars. How long had it been? It felt like an eternity since he was last home. Absentmindedly, Kegan held up some seeds for Aetos. The sparrow let out a cry and kicked them from his hand. Kegan looked up at the bird and saw a glimmer in his eye. Aetos wanted a challenge. Kegan turned around, suddenly seeing the strong oak tables he had eaten at since childhood. He was in the Main Hall. The buildings of the village spread like a fan around

him. There was Hadwin, whittling the point of a new fishing spear. Theodoric looked over charts with advisors. The chief looked over and gave a warm, smiling wave. Kegan raised his hand to wave back.

The illusion withered away. Only the starry sky stared back. Kegan wiped away a crawling tear.

He had to get home. How could he have been so stupid. Kegan left the company of everyone he knew to go on some hare-brained quest based on some vague dreams. Yet, he had the nerve to lecture Einar on isolation. While Kegan had hardly socialized with a large majority of his village, the choice to be able to was something he missed most. The presence of so much life, energy, and dynamic interactions was present here in the forest too, but not on a scale Kegan could relate to. A rope seemed to slither toward Kegan, winding around his chest, and continuing on its way toward wherever Kegan's quest was to lead him. It pulled him both ways, slowly squeezing, squeezing. He had to figure this out and get home. He had to get home.

Kegan stood to the side. He had to. He wasn't allowed to join them. Each child stood tall and proud, flanked by one parent on each side. The children had seen their twelfth spring. They had come of age. It was time to leave their parents and begin their responsibilities. Each parent had tears forming in the corners of their eyes. The kids weren't leaving the village. Families would continue to see each other, but now the kids would begin to live alone, begin to contribute to the village, begin to care for themselves, begin to help care for the kids of the village, begin to think of raising their own families. The kids buzzed with excitement over the possibility of their new lives, but teared up over the completion of their old ones. Kegan looked up to them. Next year, he would be their age. He would join them. Maybe. Or maybe he would run away, hide. It would be easier. There would be no meaning to the ceremony of parting. He had already done it so many years ago, before he could stand, walk, or even remember. Kegan ducked beneath the trees and scurried away. He paused. There was a rustle behind him. A fierce, but familiar face popped out. Hadwin pulled at Kegan's hand and smiled up at him. Hadwin would always be there.

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Thuck! Hadwin's tossed pebble struck the nearly completed walls. Not a mark. Sticks, stones, and earth had come together to produce sturdy walls, five feet in height. Before them lay a three foot deep trench from which the dirt was dug.

“Nice job men.” he remarked. “The building is going well.”

“Ahem.”

“Sorry Tzofi. Nice job ladies and men.”

Hadwin continued his route to the kid-containing corral. He peeked over and they all fell into hushed whispers.

“Whatcha doing?” he inquired with amusement.

“We’re working on a plan to escape.” Basim had looked up just long enough to mutter his reply.

Hadwin smirked at them. “You probably shouldn’t have told me then.”

Basim glanced up with a dirty glance and went back to the seemingly nonsensical discussion. “Oh. We’re being good little kids.”

Hadwin peered into the center of their gathering. “What are you doing with those rocks? I hope those aren’t part of your escape plan.”

“We’re just collecting them. For fun.” Basim turned his shoulder to Hadwin to make it clear that no more conversing would occur.

Hadwin chuckled and shook his head as he left for the area where the more battle-inclined adults and adolescents sparred with spears. The warriors were split into two psychological camps. One group fought with smiles upon their faces. They laughed and danced around their friend-turned-foes. They fought enthusiastically, longing for the wait to be over. They would kill the raiders and emerge as men, ready to celebrate together at the end of the sunset. The other group fought with expressions of pale determination. They pondered the death that would follow the advent of a battle. They gently pushed their weapons through the motions of battle, but wondered what would happen when they were faced with real fighters. They weakly smiled and tried to soak in the still calm and pristine village before it would be marred forever.

Hadwin wandered into gathering of practice battles and up to a group who were enjoying a brief repose. “Can I join?” he asked.

One of the young adults sneered and tossed a stick over. “Yeah, sure. Why don’t you head over to the Main Hall? I heard the tots are learning how to pick up their spears there.”

“Shut up, Cain,” the man’s earlier foe interrupted. “He’s the one who saw the raiders coming.”

“Fine, he can join. He has to face me first, though,” Cain grunted, then narrowed his eyes as he turned to face Hadwin.

Cain’s partner fruitlessly glanced around for someone to spar against. “What do I do?”

Cain’s gaze was frozen on his new foe. “Go get me water or something.”

"I can fill your gourd up right here," Cain's former opponent sniggered, shaking the container teasingly near his groin. Cain huffed in annoyance, grabbing his gourd and tossing it aside.

"Just stay out of the way."

"Sorry," his partner grumbled.

Cain walked over to the pile of extra spears and picked out the heaviest one for Hadwin. He tossed it over to him and resumed a stance. Hadwin nearly dropped the weighty weapon, but he steadied his grip and stared Cain in the eye. Cain haughtily glanced at Hadwin’s uncertain stance

“Ready?” Cain asked.

“Ready,” Hadwin replied, gripping his spear with white knuckles.

Cain immediately launched into a series of attacks, each one pushing Hadwin back. Cain’s spear was a serpent, its strikes flying lightning fast. He feinted, bringing Hadwin forward into a strike that knocked him down. Each of Hadwin’s thrusts were parried and shot back. It was all he could do to dodge his own spear as it was sharply deflected back at him. Cain grabbed a handful of dirt and flung it towards Hadwin’s face, temporarily blinding him. Hadwin could barely ward off the rapid blows of his stronger, faster, and more experienced opponent. Hadwin stepped back. His heel caught on a wayward root. He stumbled to the ground, barely falling away from a vicious spear thrust.

“Just leave him, Cain!” Cain’s friend shouted. Cain refused to respond, instead continuing his barrage.

"Ready to give up? The children are still down by Main Hall." Hadwin forced words through his dry throat.

"Let me get some water. I need a quick break," he croaked. Cain finally ceased his attack. He scoffed, then growled,

"I'll ask you one more time. Do you give up?" Hadwin grumbled embarrassedly,

“Yes, fine. I give up.”

Hadwin looked around. Many had stopped to watch the battle. Most quickly surrounded Cain with back slaps and high fives. Few even gave Hadwin pitiful looks. Hadwin threw his spear back into the stack and took a long swig of water. Cain had turned to him and was grinning. Hadwin scowled and walked away.

Hadwin stormed back towards his hut. The whole fight was unfair. Cain was so much older. There was no way Hadwin could have won. Plus, Hadwin was using the most cumbersome spear in the pile. That's it, the spear! The raiders were coming. He had to show he could lead the villagers. Hadwin sprinted the rest of the way back to his hut. He burst inside and quickly dropped to all fours. He grabbed a spear from beneath his cot. Roughly carved in its base was Hadwin's name. It was two years old. Hadwin had begun with a fallen tree branch. He forcefully hewed a point into the forming spear. He lopped off the side branches and cleared away the bark. Hadwin lifted the spear over his head, spun it to his side, and stabbed it into a rotting log. Or at least he tried to. The unbalanced spin pulled Hadwin's arm aside, and he nearly tripped over his target log. The spear's tip slammed into a stone and snapped off. Hadwin's leg was caught between two roots, and he twisted his ankle as he attempted to right himself. As he attempted to walk, Hadwin's leg buckled with a piercing pain and he cried out. Kegan ran through the trees towards him. Kegan lifted Hadwin up and sat him down on a large rock. He picked up Hadwin's discarded spear and experimentally jabbed the air.

"Hadwin, it's not just about a point and handle," Kegan said patiently, "You need balance a spear so you can wield it properly."

He took Hadwin's rock knife and started to shave away at the spear's shaft. After every few cuts, Kegan closed one eye and carefully analyzed the weapon. Finally, he reformed its point and handed the spear back to Hadwin.

"Why don't you give it a try, Hadwin," Kegan ventured, "I think it should be a bit better."

Hadwin gently accepted the spear. While sitting, he twirled it and thrust the point at a dead tree. The spear flowed effortlessly with his arm. It was perfect, absolutely perfect. Kegan carried Hadwin on his back to Hadwin's hut. He carved an 'H' at the base of the spear and handed it to Hadwin. Hadwin looked at him questioningly.

"It's yours isn't it?" Kegan chuckled, "You have to sign your weapon."

Hadwin carved an 'A' after the 'H' and handed the spear back to Kegan. Kegan carved the 'D' next. For the next three letters, they continued to alternate. Then Hadwin's weapon was

complete.

He knew he couldn't use it. He couldn't use it for now, at least. Hadwin loved that spear; no other could ever match it. That's why he had to keep it hidden and safe. It would be ready and waiting when it was truly needed.

Hadwin marched up behind Cain. His right hand covered a crude 'HAD' at the base of his spear. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tapped on Cain's shoulder.

"What?" Cain snapped.

Hadwin put on his best air of sincerity. "That was a great fight we had there. You know, I'd kind of like to use my own choice of weapon once though. How do you feel about a rematch? No harm in that, right?"

"Whatever you say," Cain replied undauntedly, as he winked at a group of girls clustered nearby. "Besides, we have more of an audience now."

The two boys circled, looking for a chance to strike. Hadwin took up a defensive pose, holding the spear sideways. Cain leaped forward with a jab, aiming to push Hadwin back. Kegan's fighting skill seemed to flow through Hadwin's body and push his spear itself. Hadwin leaped to the side and deflected Cain's spear, sending him falling to the side.

"You're a quick little mouse, aren't you?" Cain menacingly whispered.

"Faster than you."

Cain struck the back of Hadwin's knees and pulled his shoulders down, sending him sprawling onto the ground. He leaped up and ran towards Hadwin. Hadwin dodged to the side. His spear made short work of Cain's strike. Hadwin tripped Cain and dived under his falling body.

"Now who's in the dust?" Hadwin called.

Cain leaped up with a roar, spinning his spear into a shield. He knocked Hadwin's spear away and came in for a strike. Hadwin picked up a stick and smacked it hard against Cain's knuckles. Cain dropped his spear and Hadwin picked it up.

"I fight fairly," Hadwin said.

Hadwin went to pick up his spear and throw the other spear back to Cain. They both got up and into a fighting stance. Then Cain turned and ran. He climbed up a tree and waited. Hadwin came closer, ready to defend himself. Cain leaped down, spinning his spear to come into a jab. Hadwin struck with his spear and hit Cain's. It hit a knot directly at a right angle. Cain's

spear splintered and split.

“You little brat! You broke my spear!” Cain threw the halves of his weapon aside and desperately searched out a replacement.

“Do you surrender?” Hadwin held his spear over Cain, but did not attack. Cain stood up and slowly began to back away.

“I’ll never surrender to you, kid. Llywarch’s plan will surpass any of this pathetic excuse for preparation.”

Chapter 5: Hunting

Kegan sat with a rock, whittling the point of a spear. The wind rustled his hair, pushing it into his eyes. He sighed as he raked it aside over his scalp. The days flew by, bringing a change in him that never would have happened in his village. He needed new weapons. Wood could work, but bone would be better. The villagers had occasionally made bone spears in the past for hunting. They had much more piercing power due to bone’s strength, but simple wooden spears were easier to make and repair. However, Kegan needed the best for whatever foes he would face in this quest. He needed to find a large animal that would provide him with his new tools to complete his journey. Kegan looked to the river and scanned his surroundings for new raw materials. At the very least, he would have to remake his wooden spear.

Aetos sat upon the branch of a riverside mangrove and chirped a fit. Kegan followed to where the sparrow had perched and found a dying trout in the river.

“Perfect,” he whispered.

The fish was being eaten alive from the inside by small parasitic fish that it itself had accidentally ingested. The fish floated at the surface of the water, weakly twitching in the last throes of life. Most of its tissue was gone and Kegan could see many of the bones, surrounded by bits of rotting flesh. He grimaced as he swiftly ended its misery. Kegan pulled several of the slender rib bones from the fish’s body. He experimentally prodded one against a tree trunk. It bent and quickly snapped in two.

Kegan caressed the trunk of a young sapling. He grasped the tree and pulled its branches aside. The specimen was perfect. He dug dirt away from the base of the tree, slowly revealing its intricate root structure. The rock knife hacked away. The tree was slowly freed from the earth. Kegan chopped away the clump of tangled roots and formed the cut end into a spear point. He carved grip lines along swatches positioned for his hands alone. However, the weapon was not

quite ready for battle yet. Kegan gathered dry sticks and started a small fire. He held the point of the spear at the top of the flame for several seconds until it began to black and char. Before it caught on fire, Kegan quickly pulled his weapon from the reaching orange fingers. He grasped a course rock from the ground and slowly smoothed away the burned wood. Beneath the crumbling layer, the wood had formed a point as hard as stone.

“This looks like it could work,” he muttered. “Now for the fun part.”

The dark eyes of a crocodile peered above the water’s surface. It had smelt rotting flesh. It saw a small figure standing across the river. Prey.

Kegan looked back and forth, throwing pebbles into the water. Each one made a small ripple that reverberated across the calm river. He saw nothing but small fish darting in the shallow, but still murky water.

A river bird called. Kegan turned towards it, but no beast materialized. Soft breezes rustled the cattails. Kegan nervously tightened his grip on his spear. Several minutes passed. The spear’s point fell into the mud, and Kegan leaned on his weapon’s end. He splashed around a bit, trying to get something to come.

The hairs on the back of Kegan’s neck stood up. He turned around and raised his spear. A crocodile was leaping up at his throat. The reptile was nearly six meters long and covered in old scars. Kegan’s spear was immediately thrown aside. The crushing jaws loomed closer. Kegan closed his eyes. He pushed his hand forward. His palm connected with the crocodile’s chest. Some primitive and mysterious force swirled through Kegan’s torso. It rushed into his head, through his senses, and down to his shoulder. It flooded up and down his arm and ignited his every muscle, tendon, and ligament. This burning energy erupted into the scaly chest of the saurian. It flew back, landing in the murky river water. After it righted its orientation, the crocodile hissed and glared at Kegan with barely visible eyes.

Kegan ran all the way back to where Aetos was sitting. His breath came in shallow spurts. He lied back among the underbrush and pointed his hands to the sky. Kegan forced energy to his fingertips. A cloud of sparks burst into the air. Kegan closed his eyes. With his mind, he pushed left. He imagined turning left, walking left, falling left. He pushed his consciousness left in every sense possible. And when he opened his eyes, the sparks obliged and swooped to the left. Kegan grinned and pushed right. However, somewhere inside him, a tiny, piercing pain struck Kegan. He winced and the sparks disappeared away. Maybe this ability, this

power, was like a muscle. A muscle he had just overworked. Another wall had broken, but many still remained.

Where could this strange power have come from? Kegan recalled times in his youth when he had overheard tales of powerful magic being used by mysterious warriors. Some could draw lightning from the sky. Others could lift and crush enormous boulders. And some could even heal the most dire wounds. One thing they all had in common, however, was their belonging to one of two groups. Some of these warriors quickly used their newly found powers to help themselves and countless others around them. Others would try so hard to prove themselves worthy of this gift that they would destroy themselves. These groups were not always exclusive. But these were simply stories. How could they ever describe a situation Kegan was facing right here and right now? Regardless, he wanted more than ever to know what challenge he was to face for which he was given this power.

The putrid, dead trout had been cleaned of all flesh and was nothing but skin and bones. Kegan's stomach growled and he regretted leaving the fish meat unguarded. He went to a small stream, away from crocodiles, and fished himself lunch. The wooden spear would have to do.

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Hadwin knocked on Theodoric's door. The thick wooden slab had been embellished with bas relief carvings of the history of the tribe. Hadwin gently ran his fingers over the illustration in a top corner. It was the large tribe of Ifgia, powerful and prosperous. Ifgia had rows of rich farmland, stores full of food and gold, and warriors who could overthrow the armies of nearly any village. The village's population seemed to grow endlessly, being cut down neither by starvation nor war. However, it couldn't last. The village was choked by its own success. Disease ravaged the overcrowded population. In desperation, the village leaders sent a contingent of 50 villagers to start a new village and carry on Ifgia's legacy. The new village, Igaezg, struggled, but eventually established a stable population. In a time of drought, they sent messengers back to Ifgia for help. However, the messengers found their mother village falling to the combined forces of three enemy villages. By the time Igaezg could return with soldiers, Ifgia was destroyed and abandoned. The members of Igaezg prevailed through hardship, sickness, and war, but never quite reached the level that Ifgia had been at during its prime.

"Hadwin, what is it?"

Hadwin's reverie was interrupted as Theodoric walked up from behind him. Theodoric

gazed upon Hadwin with a gentle smile, a bowl of dandelion salad in one of his large, calloused hands.

“Um, oh yeah. We need to do something about Llywarch. He has some secret plan, and he’s somehow convincing people to follow him. I heard Cain say something about it today.”

Hadwin searched Theodoric’s face for concern or emotion.

Theodoric placed his bowl down outside his hut and invited Hadwin in. The hut had nothing to differentiate it from Hadwin’s except for the door and it’s larger size.

“Cain has always been one to stir up trouble. I wouldn’t give it too much thought.” Hadwin pleaded, “But he has friends. He can start convincing them, and we need everyone fight off the raiders.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure it’s fine,” Theodoric assured, “Whatever they’re planning has to deal with the raiders one way or another. Whether or not they agree with our methods, they most likely agree with our goals. None of us want the raiders here.”

“Shouldn’t we do something?” Hadwin beseeched.

“What I need is more people watching the children. They somehow sneaked about half their group out and into the trees.” Theodoric paused and suppressed a chuckle as he shook his head. “They kept dropping pebbles and whispering from the branches. The scouts swore the raiders were here.”

The chief closed the door, leaving Hadwin standing at his doorstep. The boy was bright, but he didn’t understand that a little dissent here and there was natural. A leader could never expect perfection among his people. However, even Theodoric could tell something about Llywarch was off.

Hadwin sat at the tables eating lunch. The salad wasn’t very tasty without the usual kueregacre chunks that were put in. Why wasn’t Theodoric being more receptive? Llywarch’s scheme was obviously growing and it would be a problem soon if it wasn’t already now. Hadwin swirled the leaves around his bowl. Finally, he stood up and left the dish on the table. Hadwin wandered out of the Main Hall, around the village, and finally towards the trees. Hadwin slipped out through the wall’s gate. He picked up a branch of dead wood and climbed up into the canopy. He pulled out his rock knife and began to carve. With no goal in mind, Hadwin knew he simply wanted to carve nothing at all.

The length of the piece slowly diminished. It began to take on a torpedo shape as both

ends were hewed into points and chiseled away. Hadwin forcefully hacked away large pieces of the dead wood. It became no larger than his middle finger. Then, the leaves of distant trees began to shake. The rustling noise grew greater as it drew closer. Hadwin sat silently from his perch and waited. A village scout popped out of the trees and ran for the wall gate. Hadwin resumed his work. The wood piece shrunk down. The gate opened and closed. Hadwin nicked his fingertip, but he continued. The crackling swish resumed from far away in the forest. Hadwin shaved away one last curl of wood, until all that remained was a shaving itself. Hadwin tossed it away. His time was up. He began to descend from the tree. Suddenly, a horn sounded and a call rang through the air.

“The raiders are here!”

Chapter 6: A Man in Black

Hadwin leaped up and ran for his hut. He grabbed his fishing spear and his bark shield. Around him, men and women were preparing for battle while the elderly and children were shuttled inside. The trenches were covered and a final layer of mud was applied to the wall. Many of the men set up mini turrets, layered bark walls with shooting slits, supported at the base by stones. Each warrior reviewed their training and the archers loaded their bows. They waited for the call to attack. Voices fell to hushed whispers. The villagers stared at the wall, wide-eyed, waiting for the first raider to surface. All courage and heroism melted away as the seconds ticked past and the raiders drew closer. Soon even whispers fell to silence. The men and women sat and stared. Their minds raced. No more would they hold back their strikes as they had while sparring. No more could they expect their opponents to do the same.

“Aaagh!” a man screamed. Hadwin saw that an enemy arrow had scraped his arm before burying itself in a mini turret. The men stood stunned, staring at first injured warrior.

“Attack!” Tzofi yelled.

The men snapped back to their senses and joined Tzofi as she slung numerous stones over the wall. The first enemy scream came, accompanied by a heavy *thunk*. Many more followed.

Many of the raiders had grabbed a few sticks and stuck them into the wall. They used these as footholds to climb up and past the trench. The first man over was immediately disarmed by Tzofi when she slammed his knuckles with her spearbutt. The raider howled in pain as his spear tumbled over the wall. Tzofi picked up his spear and used both weapons to force him back

into the trench, knocking down several climbers. All of the villagers kept the raiders down where they were attacking. However, the valiant fighters did not notice that their defense at the back of the village was quite easily traversed. A man in black leapt over the trench and rolled over the wall. He approached the two guards. The first one saw the hidden man in black and reached for a spear. Before the guard could touch his weapon, the assassin had stabbed him in the stomach and the guard fell to the ground. The sound alerted the second guard. He turned around and saw the first guard, dispatched and prone. Crimson blood spewed from his stomach and his innards slowly oozed out onto the ground in a red flow. His face was distorted in a final grimace of fear. A black shadow rushed past the corpse and into the fight.

“Blood,” the second guard fearfully whispered. He swayed a couple times before falling to the ground in a dead faint. The hidden man in black left him and continued towards his initial task. He swept past the buildings, hiding, running. He stayed in the shadows. Many looked his way, but none saw him. He ran to the clearing where a battle was taking place. He chuckled. The raiders were thoroughly inept. How else could they be kept down by these buffoon villagers? However, the raiders had something that the village did not. The man in black rushed forward.

Hadwin chucked rocks over the wall and heard many screams. It was very satisfying, receiving auditory feedback for the help he was providing. He lugged rocks as big as his head over the wall at the raiders and threw smaller ones at any thing that came over the wall. Everyone around him was either throwing stones as well, or waiting with spears in the uncommon case of someone getting over the wall. He heard a small rustle under a bush, but saw nothing. He threw a last rock over the wall and decided to investigate. He held his fishing spear in an offensive stance and came closer. Suddenly, a black shadow leaped out and struck Hadwin on the head with a spear butt. The edges of Hadwin’s vision grew blurry and started to pull together. The whole world began to darken and fade into static and Hadwin reeled, the ground rising ninety degrees to meet him. He pushed it away, but his vision darkened and his muscles grew ever weaker. Nothing but a tunnel of dim light remained. He collapsed a final time to the ground.

“Help,” Hadwin rasped before everything became dark. Tzofi looked back and saw Hadwin slowly falling to the ground. His head was bleeding and he was falling into unconsciousness. He groped at the sunlight and his eyes slowly closed.

“We got a man down!” she yelled. Many of the men stopped fighting and turned around.

They had shocked expressions on their faces. This battle had barely begun, yet one of their own had fallen before them. They had expected to celebrate, every single one of them, together, at the end of the day.

“He’s unconscious,” Tzofi sighed, watching as the warriors shook themselves from their stupors and resumed the battle. The raiders had taken advantage of the distraction and increasingly forced their way up the wall. The villagers now fought harder both for revenge and through necessity. She looked around, searched for who had done this. She saw the culprit. A black shadow ran at Theodoric. Acting on instinct, she broke out in a sprint and leaped at it. At the same time, it leaped at Theodoric. Tzofi knocked the shadow to the ground and grabbed a spear. His mask slipped down an inch and Tzofi could see clear brown eyes, full of regret, but edging with determination. She lunged at him in a flurry of attack. She attempted to disarm him, but he jumped back, deflected the spear, and slashed her arm.

“Back up!” she called.

A couple men ran over, each with a spear. They all descended upon the man. He bounded into the brush and disappeared. The battle continued as Tzofi and Hadwin were brought into the Main Hall to recover from their wounds.

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Kegan ran farther into the forest, continually looking back for the crocodile. The morning’s events had caused him to break camp and hurry on. Aetos seemed satisfied and suitably rested after the brief stop to the flying. Kegan could feel a tingling sensation in his fingers. He knew that they were close to their destination. He felt energized and rejuvenated. The end to his endless journey was finally near. Aetos seemed to feel it too. He flew on with such speed and determination, Kegan had to run to keep up with him. He felt so much energy, so much power, he couldn’t contain it. He leapt up and pushed it all out to his fingertips. Hordes of sparks flew out, like buzzing insects. They took the shape of a sparrow and swooped through the sky. They compressed into a tiny ball and burst apart before sinking down.

Aetos flitted through the multitude of sparks around him. They darted around like tiny insects. They were so bright. Aetos darted ahead, bursting through a cloud of the glows and looping back to Kegan. Aetos shot straight up and dive bombed back to the ground.

“Slow down, you crazy bird!” Kegan shouted, laughing as he ran forward.

The sparks playfully followed Aetos’s path into the sky, continuing long after they were

no longer visible. Then they whizzed down around Kegan to the ground, disappearing as they made contact. All they left behind was a perfect circle of charred earth.

“Woo hoo!” Kegan yelled.

He pushed the sparks out again. This time they were a bit tired and reluctant, but they came. Kegan let himself fall back to the ground. The sparks caught him. They didn’t burn him as they had done to the earth. Kegan held up his hand and one spark hovered into his hand. It seemed to possess a gentle warmth rather than any sort of burning heat. Kegan released the spark to join the others behind him. They massaged his back as they carried him. He did not feel pain, but rather soothing pressure on the tight muscles. It was comforting, easing both his tired body and mind. Slowly, Kegan was lowered to the ground and the sparks dissipated. He did not need to try to realize that the sparks wouldn’t return. As Kegan’s journey progressed, he was growing more powerful, but not enough to fully control this strange power he contained. Kegan wondered if he’d ever be able to truly control it. He regretfully continued, feeling a bit less energized and more down to earth. He jogged forward as Aetos flew ahead.

Kegan ran, further and further, feeling wind whistling through his hair. The sun was shining through the canopy of trees. The temperature was neither stifling, nor frigid. It was perfectly invigorating. Kegan whistled Aetos to set camp. He did it with energy and liveliness for the first time in weeks. He felt good, he was almost there. Kegan didn’t know where, but instinct told him he would find something soon. Then he would be done with this, and he could go home.

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Everything slowly faded into view as Hadwin woke up with a pounding headache. Where was he? Enemy possession? No, this was the shaman's hut. Not somewhere Hadwin had frequented in his youth. He saw Tzofi near him, sleeping with her arm bandaged up. Hadwin gently ran his fingers through his scalp. He winced as they came across a large and tender bump. What had happened?

He was throwing rocks into the trench. He saw a shadow and went to investigate. It leaped out. It struck him on the head. Everything slowly faded away.

It must have been an invader. The real brains of the raiders. Hadwin had been confused at the relative ease with which they had held off the raiders. Whoever he was, this curious man in black, he was a threat that needed to be addressed.

“Hey, Hadwin?”

Hadwin turned around and saw that Tzofi had woken up. She was investigating her bandaged arm. The actual wound was nearly hidden, but dried blood caked the edge of the bandage. Tzofi seemed more curious than disturbed, however.

“Yeah?” Hadwin replied.

“Who was that guy?” Tzofi abandoned her inspection. “He was such a fighter! Where’d he come from?”

Hadwin absentmindedly stared at the wall.

“I don’t know. I thought the battle with the raiders was starting off a bit too easy. You think he’s with them?”

“He seemed too skilled to be one of the raiders,” Tzofi pondered. “Of course they could have just been a distraction. He was trying to kill the chief!”

“Either way, I feel like we’re going to see much more from the raiders soon. They probably expected us to be defenseless.” Hadwin paused and deflated slightly. “Next time, they’ll hit harder.”

The door opened and the shaman walked in. She quickly tidied up the area before turning to her patients. She narrowed her eyes in frustration as she saw Hadwin sitting up.

“You children don’t understand that you must get your rest if you are to get any better. Why are you sitting up? Lie down!”

Hadwin quickly obeyed. The shaman's huge, black eyes never simply looked; they stared. No one, save for perhaps Theodoric, could comfortably carry on a conversation with her. In the years past, when Hadwin would play near her medicine hut, he would occasionally turn around and catch her bottomless void eyes staring, analyzing. Goosebumps and shivers could prevail even in the brightest of sunlight.

“Stop daydreaming, child. Didn’t you hear me? Take your medicine!”

Hadwin grabbed his glass of water, spilling a few drops in his haste. He grabbed the medicine powder and mixed it in. He chugged it down under the intent watch of the shaman.

“Now don’t you go pushing yourself around. Lie down and rest your poor body.”

She slowly walked out leaving Hadwin and Tzofi on their cots. They lied there, staring at the ceiling, neither accustomed to the lack of movement.

“I don’t think the guy in black was with the raiders,” Tzofi finally voiced.

“Why not? The raiders were attacking us and he was attacking us. Their goals were in

line,” Hadwin chuckled darkly, raising an eyebrow at Tzofi.

“You didn’t see him like I did. When I stopped him mid-leap, I tackled him and was able to pull down the top of his mask. I looked into his eyes. He was regretting what he was doing.” Tzofi stared at the ceiling and breathed heavily.

“An empathetic raider?” Hadwin bit his lip, but still couldn’t hold back a smile.

“You don’t understand. Stare into his eyes from six inches away for two crucial seconds and then try to tell me he’s with the raiders.” She turned away. Hadwin knew she wouldn’t sleep, but for all intents and purposes, would pretend to do so.

Hadwin sighed and turned the other way. “If you want to, you can say he’s not with the raiders. I’m sure he is, but it doesn’t make a difference. He’s attacking us either way.”

Llywarch lied back in his cot and gently let his head down. It had been a tiring day. Suddenly, his door swung open. Llywarch quickly sat up to greet the intruder.

“What did you get?” Llywarch asked in excitement. Cain proudly lifted up a cloth-wrapped bundle, unfolding the covering presentationally.

“Three spears, two bows, fifteen arrows, and a knife.” Llywarch sorted through the bundle.

“What’s a knife?” Cain picked up the knife and playfully twirled it between his fingers. “Take a look if you want. The handle’s only for one hand and the rest of it has sharp edges down the sides.”

“Why would we use that? Fishing spears have more range.” Llywarch watched as Cain stabbed and slashed at invisible enemies.

“It’s made out of some kind of metal. It’s not gold or copper. It’s much lighter in weight and more resistant to bending. Whatever it is, it makes an impressive weapon.”

Llywarch rolled his eyes and snatched the knife away from Cain. “I’m guessing you got this from those foolish raiders and everything else from the bumbling villagers?”

“Actually I got it from the assassin who almost killed the chief. It must’ve fallen from his belt.” Cain stared longingly at the knife and fiddled with an arrow.

“Excellent.” Llywarch tucked his black mask a bit further beneath his cot.

Chapter 7: Hermit

There he was. A small, sleeping shape. And his bird. The target muttered and rolled around. The target was helpless at the moment but could be dangerous if he awoke. First, kill the

bird. He positioned an arrow at the center of his bow. He pulled back the string and let it fly. The bird flapped its wings in its sleep and blew the arrow to the side. The next arrow was heavier. He pulled back the bowstring. An arrow soared through the clearing, sharply striking a branch. Acorns fell in a golden-green shower. One of the tiny projectiles struck the target upon his forehead. He started to wake up.

Kegan felt something knock his head. He looked in confusion at the acorn that rolled off to the side as an arrow suddenly whipped past his shoulder. Kegan glanced in the direction from which the arrow had come from. He saw the tip of another arrow being loaded into a bow and pointing at Aetos.

“Aetos!” Kegan cried.

The sparrow woke just in time to see an arrow whizzing at him. Kegan watched on in fear. The poor bird was petrified in terror and could not move away. The arrow zipped forward. Then, as fast as it had been shot, it became lodged in the bark behind Aetos. It had missed by a mere inch. Kegan realized he wouldn’t be so lucky next time. He picked up a couple rocks and weighed them in his hand. The tip of the next arrow peeked through the trees. Kegan whipped a stone into the brush.

“Aaack *ptoo*.” Kegan saw something small and white shoot out of the brush. A man stepped out with his mouth bleeding and holding a broken bow.

“I was told to bring you unharmed,” he hissed.

Kegan peered into his attacker’s eyes. They were cold, calculating. The two men carefully circled each other. How was this mercenary supposed to capture Kegan unharmed? Somehow, the statement made Kegan feel ever more fearful.

Kegan’s attacker gave him a serious stare, then chuckled and winked. “Better you’re hurt than missing.”

Kegan jumped back, barely out of the way of the man’s strange weapon. It had a one-hand handle instead of a shaft. The point was extended to three hands’ lengths, was flat, and had sharp edges running down both sides. The thing whipped over Kegan’s hand, and he ducked. Kegan rolled to the side and grabbed his spear. The man chuckled,

“Well done, but poor choice of weapon.”

He twirled and swung his blade down precisely as Kegan stabbed forward with his spear. The sword lopped off the sharpened point of Kegan’s weapon. The mercenary turned his weapon

ninety degrees and whacked the side of Kegan's cut spear. The far end began to crack, but held fast. The mercenary gave an overly sincere smile and nod.

"Nice spear! Held up pretty well. How'd you keep the shaft from snapping?"

"Fire-hardening." Kegan remained focused on the battle. The mercenary spun his blade around his fingers.

"Still's got nothing on cold, hard steel." The man leaped forward, then ducked back and sliced an out-of-place vine. Kegan barely rolled to avoid a falling weighted net. Kegan relaxed his stance.

"Well that was pretty fancy."

His attacker sneered, "Oh, just you wait." The mercenary pulled a second weapon from a boot holster. He lunged forward at Kegan, thrusting with both blades. The target parried several attacks with his staff. However, something seemed off. The target wasn't fighting quite like before. He was jerkier, slower. He almost seemed distracted. With both blades, the mercenary bit into the staff's exterior. The mercenary pulled his arms back and flung the target's weapon away. The target fell back to the ground, defenseless.

"So, you wanna just give up and come with me now? I promise I won't have too much fun," the mercenary snarked. Kegan rolled his eyes.

"Yeah right." The man curiously searched the ground around Kegan's arms.

"What do you have to protect yourself?"

"This."

Kegan swung out a rope that was tied to his ankle. On the other end of the rope was a branch he had tied on with his feet while on the ground. The mercenary jumped back, avoiding the rope. The man laughed, though quite worriedly.

"What on earth? You're using your feet? Like a monkey? Where'd you learn that?" Kegan looked at him incredulously.

"You've never played Grabber?" The man smirked.

"Never heard of it. Care to educate me?"

"It's nothing. Just a game." Kegan swung the rope at the man, hitting his legs. He leaped back, swinging and tripping the soldier. The soldier jumped back up and ran at Kegan, the longer weapon in hand. Kegan jumped to the side and swung the branch at the mercenary's stomach. He ducked to the side, avoiding it, but getting hit in the back of his head as it swung back.

Temporarily stunned, the man could hardly resist as Kegan leapt on his back and tackled him to the ground. Kegan glanced to the sky at the sound of a sharp chirp. Aetos dropped twine fetched from his pack. Kegan grabbed the mercenary's legs to bind him, but the man leaped up and kicked Kegan away, knocking him flat. Kegan rolled out of the way as the guy swung down with his weapon. His leg swung back with the grabber rope. Suddenly he felt the weight disappear from the rope on his foot.

“Whatcha gonna hit me with now?” the mercenary sneered.

Kegan looked back and saw that the guy had cut the rope. He dived down and grabbed the branch. He held it up and swung.

“This.”

Kegan packed up camp, leaving the warrior tied up against the tree with nothing but undergarments. He looked at the stick, and tossed it back at the guy. He looked at the strange, metal weapon. It was nothing if he couldn't use it properly. Kegan slammed the edge into a tree trunk. It was lodged in solidly.

“C'mon Aetos. Let's go.”

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“Meeting in the hall!”

The villagers slowly milled towards the Main Hall, the source of the announcement. They gathered to fill the cavernous space. Theodoric stood at the front of the hall, holding a strange and shining object.

“Do any of you know what this is?” He shouted.

Becan jumped up and started pointing and yelling. “It's shiny! It's shiny! It's food!”

Theodoric chuckled, walked over to Becan, and kneeled down to him. “No, Becan. Please don't try to eat this one. It might hurt a bit once it's in your tummy.” Tzofi stood up. “What is this metal it is made from? It is colored like neither gold nor copper. By the way you wield it, it appears much lighter as well.” Theodoric spun and stabbed invisible foes.

“Indeed, it is much lighter in weight. Additionally, it seems to maintain its sharp edge much better than gold or copper do.”

Tzofi slowly walked over to Theodoric. She gingerly took the weapon from his hands and swung it around. In awe, she handed it back. “Where is it from? How did they get this metal?” Theodoric looked gravely back at the weapon.

“I don’t know. But it’s much stronger and more effective than our fishing spears. Bring the stump.” A fishing spear was brought along with the fulfillment of Theodoric’s request. “This stump is hard oak. Watch the difference between hitting it with a spear and this strange, metal weapon.”

Theodoric leaped back in an offensive stance. He held the spear back and prepared. In one leap, he drove the fire-hardened tip half an inch into the stump. Theodoric pulled the spear out and investigated its condition.

Theodoric faced the crowd and announced “As you can see, the one strike damaged the tip quite considerably. The spear would not be half as effective for the next strike.”

He was next handed the metal weapon. He raised it above his head and stepped back. He leaped up and swung the weapon into the wood with all of his might. It slid one and a half inches in. Theodoric pulled the weapon out and held it up. It was barely dulled.

Hadwin opened his mouth to speak, but Tzofi voiced his concern first.

“Whether the man in black was with the raiders or not,” she blurted, “how did he get such an advanced weapon? Do the raiders have these?”

"I don't know, Tzofi," Theodoric stated, "from what we saw last time, they simply used spears." Tzofi bit her lip and looked aside.

"Okay, even if we ignore these weapons, how did they get so powerful?" she paused and looked to Theodoric. "The raiders. Just stop and think for a second. There's never been a decently coordinated raider army. What happened?"

"I wish I could tell you. From what we've heard, they simply seemed to appear out of nowhere." Theodoric said, his voice trailing off into thought.

"There's nothing we can do about that now," Hadwin interjected, "but if they do have more of these, these powerful weapons, how are we supposed to defeat them?"

"There's no trick or shortcut. We simply have to build faster, train harder, and fight smarter than we have been." Theodoric stared longingly at the gleaming blade in his hands, but the weapon sat alone.

A low murmur ran through the throng. Many of the audience seemed stunned at the sudden change in circumstances. No longer were they on any semblance of even ground with the raiders, rather, they had to fight harder just to catch up. Tzofi spoke up.

“Well, we have one of these weapons. Can we make more?”

“I don’t know, Tzofi.” Theodoric gravely replied. “I just don’t know.”

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Kegan slogged through the thick weeds, the heavy, humid, air. He casually swatted aside swaying branches, cursing as one swung back and struck him with rough bark upon his face. Aetos flitted through the air, pausing for the occasional berry or insect before whizzing back ahead of his master. Kegan watched as Aetos zipped ahead and disappeared into the trees. He zoomed back, then zigzagged into the trees again. Kegan chuckled and watched the streak of brown slowly fade away among the tree trunks.

Kegan saw Aetos return once again, but this time he was chittering urgently. Probably a weird bug or something. He kept going, but Aetos became more frantic. Kegan readied his spear, just in case. Then an arrow flew through the air at him. Kegan crouched back, his spear in one hand and a good, heavy rock in the other. A rustle. The sound of a small footfall. Kegan knew these sounds and he took aim. The rock flew from his hand, hitting something with a thick, solid sound. *What kind of armor does this guy have?* Kegan snuck up behind where he threw the rock, another rock in hand along with the spear. He saw a still, twisted, human-like figure among trees. Slowly, he snuck up behind the leaves and struck. His hardened speartip buried itself in the warped body of a long dead bristlecone pine.

Another rustle sounded, five meters away. A few soft footsteps, a brush against a tree, a tumbling pebble. Kegan sprung back and readied himself. He prepared to lunge when he felt a striking pain on his right wrist. He saw a blunted arrow on the ground, and his whole arm was growing numb.

“Who are you?” Kegan shouted, “Show yourself!”

He tried to pick up his spear, but he could barely move his fingers. He took a good branch and quickly tied it to his grabber rope before hiding in a bush. Who was this unknown assailant?

Kegan snuck behind a tree, his eyes peeled for unnatural movement. He saw another rustle. Kegan charged into the underbrush, punching and swiping his one good arm at an intangible opponent.

“Tut tut tut, if you kept yor temper, and di’n’t make so much darn sound, you maybe woulda almost hit me,” a voice jeered from the trees.

Kegan's wrist still lacked feeling, so he retrieved his spear with his left hand. Clumsily, he stalked through the forest, whacking aside wayward branches.

“Yor great at bein’ all quiet and such,” the voice called from a spot at least ten meters from its previous location.

“Shut up!” Kegan snapped.

Two more blunt arrows zoomed through the trees, from different directions, and hit Kegan, on the back and chest. He collapsed to the ground, then slowly pushed himself back up. A weight was suddenly gone from his foot and he saw his Grabber rope was cut.

“Seriously?” he yelled. “I just fixed that!”

Three more blunt arrows came, striking both ankles and his left wrist. Kegan’s left arm fell limp and his spear again fell to the ground. His ankles and feet seized up and he tripped into the dirt. Kegan tried to squirm towards his weapon, but his disobedient body remained prone in place.

“What do you want?” he gasped in desperation.

“Don’t move if you value your life,” a voice whispered into his ear. Kegan felt a spear point pressed to his back. Then suddenly, a hearty laugh erupted.

“Ha ha, I still got it good as before. Ha ha.” The man laughed. He lowered his spear, and Kegan turned to face him. He saw a short and tubby man.

“Who are you?” Kegan asked.

“Remember, the rabbit and watercress stew?” he chortled. “When I saw your little birdie, I ‘cided to pay you a little visit to see how you were. I mean, I’m purty sure you’re Kegan, so I wanted to see if you were ready for the battle.”

“What battle?” Kegan resisted the urge to massage the multiple bruises quickly forming across his skin as he began to regain control of his arms.

“Ooh, I see you’ve done some trainin’. You’re right, the forest ain’t safe. Anyone can hear ya. We should head back to my hut.” The hermit eagerly motioned to Kegan and began walking away from the clump of trees where their battle had taken place. Kegan slowly began to stand. His jellied muscles struggled even to let him sit up.

Kegan gave his attacker a skeptical stare. “Are you telling me that I’ve gone in a big circle and I’m back at your hut?” He gave a forced chuckle. “Besides, give me one reason why I should trust you.”

The hermit winked and grinned. “Well, I just showed you how badly you are matched up to some other opponents you are going to soon face. I’m sure you realize your helplessness by

now.”

“I actually thought I was getting somewhere.” Kegan broke off a tree branch and chucked away. It simply snagged hardly a meter away in the dense cover.

“Not with those fighting skills. You just got beat up by a pot-bellied hermit in the middle of the woods.”

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Chapter 8: Songbird

Hadwin woke up, his eyes open to the dark of the enclosed hut. The village was hard at work, the sounds of weapons being made and the wall being re-enforced resonated through the air. Hadwin slipped out of bed, creeping towards the door. He wanted to be ready if the raiders had taken over during the night.

The bright daylight met Hadwin’s face, as he walked out into the village clearing. As his eyes adjusted, he saw the chief and Llywarch, arguing and surrounded by other villagers. Llywarch had most of the strongest men behind him, and Theodoric had women, children, and a few of the spear men with him.

“This is an outrage! Llywarch, you are disgraceful!” Theodoric had a true expression of rage upon his face. It was an expression Hadwin had never seen upon Theodoric’s face before. Theodoric had always been cool-headed, an unchanging mediator for conflicts. It would take something very powerful to shake him.

“I’m trying to save the best of the village!” Llywarch tried to express authority, but even he seemed visibly shaken by Theodoric’s stirred up anger.

Theodoric yelled in disgust, “By leaving the rest to die?”

“Survival of the fittest.” Llywarch muttered.

Theodoric scoffed. “The youthful must take care of the elderly as they took care of you.”

Llywarch began to recover his nerve. “I was thinking about taking you, I mean, you’re pretty strong. I just didn’t realize you would be so disagreeable.”

Hadwin quickly strode up to Theodoric. He watched as the chief struggled to keep his composure. Everyone was tense, worried, angered, or even saddened that one of their beloved tribe members could turn into this. The men behind Llywarch were armed and looking like they were ready to attack at a moment’s notice. At their head was Cain, holding a strange metal weapon and trying to look aloof. He sneered contemptuously at Hadwin, then returned his

attention to Llywarch.

“What’s going on?” Hadwin asked.

“Llywarch plans to leave with the strongest warriors and make his own little fort to hold out in.” Theodoric replied. “He plans to hold defense until the raiders are worn out from taking Igaezg over. Then he will attack them.”

“Yes, and we will save the strongest of Igaezg.” Llywarch replied.

“How do you know the raiders won’t come after you?” Hadwin asked.

“We gave them a tribute of food and weapons.” Llywarch snapped back.

“I thought you wanted to save at least some of our people.” Theodoric growled.

“Do you still think I care about anyone I haven’t already recruited for my village?” Llywarch smirked. “Besides, I poisoned the food and spear handles.”

“We’re running low on supplies as it is! We can hardly send people out to forage anymore.” Theodoric frustratedly combed his hair back between his fingers. “Don’t you think the raiders will notice when their men who eat your food begin dropping like flies?”

“It’s a slow acting poison. They’ll just get slightly sick for now. Later, they’ll be really incapacitated. Not like you can stop it. I talked to the raiders myself yesterday, and I’m sending the supplies out now. Two men are already on their way.”

“You thought this out well, didn’t you Llywarch?” He said, lingering long and with contempt on the last word. While Llywarch’s motives were misaligned, even Theodoric had to admit his initial attack was quite efficient.

Hadwin’s face leapt into a look of surprise and horror. “You sent men?”

“Yes I did.” Llywarch furled his eyebrows in confusion.

“Tzofi!”

She was already up and running. As she rounded a house and went out of sight, a scream pierced the air.

“Hopefully the other guy will have the sense to stay put and wait for Tzofi to come.” Hadwin muttered.

“What is this about?” Theodoric menacingly asked.

“Oh, we made traps. They’re just pits lined with sharp sticks.” Hadwin replied.

“When?” Theodoric spoke now with more curiosity than anger.

Hadwin looked away. “Two days ago.”

Theodoric sighed and pulled his hair back. “Without telling me?”

Hadwin murmured, “We thought you knew.”

Theodoric took a long, deep breath. Yet, his voice held exasperation. “How would I know?”

“We told Becan, Basim, and Dakarai to tell you. We hoped if one forgot, the other two would remember.” Hadwin looked hopefully to the face of his chieftain.

Theodoric marched out of the clearing with Hadwin close behind. They walked between some huts, through the archery practice area, and over to Becan’s house, where Becan, Basim, and Dakarai were tossing pebbles around and at each other. When they saw Theodoric and Hadwin arriving, they stopped their game and tried to remember what they knew they were supposed to remember.

“Chief,” Basim yelled. “Hadwin and Tzofi made traps.”

“You told them, of all people.” Theodoric whispered to Hadwin.

Hadwin softly whispered back. “Sorry chief, they were the only ones around.”

Theodoric hissed back at Hadwin. “There are so many other people you could have told!”

“Sorry.”

Tzofi sprinted over to Hadwin and Theodoric with Llywarch’s second messenger. In a disheveled bag, she held the poisoned food and weapons.

“Great,” she shouted. “we lost a perfectly good trap, a perfectly good man, and they probably know about our traps now.”

“When were you planning on telling me about these traps?” Theodoric queried.

“Didn’t Basim tell you?”

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Kegan followed the grubby old man through the forest. Slowly, the trees became less frequent. Landmarks Kegan had noticed on his last trip through these woods stuck out. A stray branch, a clump of brush, all insignificant flora that convinced Kegan of the circular nature of his exploration. What he noticed most about this sections of the trees, however, was the intense greenness of his surroundings. The air seemed to glow with a more emerald tone than it ever had during Kegan’s wanderings. What this color may have foretold, Kegan was not privy to. Though before he could have much time to ponder it, Kegan’s new guide had brought them before their destination. Kegan blindly trudged on ahead of his partner to a clearing in a final grouping of

trees. Before he could pass through, Kegan's escort grabbed his shoulder and yanked him back.

"Patience, little one," the mysterious fellow said, "patience."

Kegan scowled and brushed the hand aside. "What's your name, anyway?"

Kegan's companion grinned and winked. "All things come with time, little one."

"Just shut up." Kegan silently glared at the ground.

The chubby old man reached into the dirt and pulled out some vine loops. He attached these to some branches, pulled off some loops that were already hooked on to branches, and lashed out at a section of the wall with a quick punch. It slowly lowered down, and the man walked in.

"Well come on, whatcha waitin' for?" he yelled. "Hurry now, you don't want the traps to reset."

"What traps?" Kegan sneered while looking around.

"Let's just say I'd rather have you with me than at the bottom of a lake."

Kegan jumped in, seconds before the piece of the wall rose again and closed the door to the outside. Right as Aetos hopped onto the wall, a sharp rock launched at him. He flew off just in time, landing on Kegan's shoulder. With a couple of sad chirps, the sparrow warily looked around.

Inside, Kegan saw a two small, stone huts surrounded by a ten foot tall stone wall. Gracing the center of the clearing was a tepid, murky pond, surrounding by wilting cattails. Burnt stumps sat rotting by moss and fungi, their trees having been removed in times long past. Nothing within the looming walls seemed to warrant their presence.

Kegan furled his eyebrows and smirked. "You have all that protection for this?"

"'Tis my own little spot of paradise in these lonely ol' woods," the man lamented.

Kegan followed the man into one of the stone huts. He eagerly searched his surroundings for some hint of his fate. No barren corner would relinquish a single clue. He entered the hut and saw it was bare, holding nothing but a small table with two connected seats. The old man gestured Kegan towards one of them.

"Siddown, woncha?" He whispered, with a smile on his face.

Kegan sighed, and took a seat. The old man stood upon his seat and jumped down hard. After a second, the stools and the table lowered down into the floor a couple inches, and a patch of the floor across the room and under a cot, rose. Kegan nearly leaped out of his seat, but kept a

cool demeanor, not wanting to show fear in front of this strange man.

“Great lever system, aye?” The guy said, smiling.

Kegan followed him to where the floor lifted. The man slid aside the lifted portion of the floor and gently lowered himself into the newly uncovered passageway. Kegan apprehensively looked into the hole and saw nothing but an endless path of black.

“Woncha crawl in?” The old man called from somewhere down in the passage.

Kegan tried awkwardly sticking his head in, then quickly pulled it out. He couldn’t see anything he could hold on to. He sat on the side of the hole and reached his legs in. Still nothing tangible. Kegan finally reached his hand into the hole, desperate to find some hold to base his descent on.

“Hurry up now, child!” the man shouted.

Kegan shoved a mop of hair back. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then, he stood up, stepped back, and jumped straight, feet first, into the hole.

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The man in black checked around the tree. The coast was clear. No one but the target. He sneaked up a tree, and climbed down a branch. The target was still unsuspecting. He prepared his knife and got ready to attack. He jumped down, stabbed the target once in the back, and quickly left, before he could be seen. As he left, he heard a soft thump, and seconds later, the far off cry of a songbird. He chuckled as he left, his work done.

Hadwin calmly sat and stared down the trees. Sitting guard was a unique role. Hadwin treasured the responsibility bestowed upon him to spot the raiders and warn the others. However, without raiders to spot, his duty involved little more than simply watching the grass grow. The trees swayed from no force but the wind. With nothing to address, Hadwin allowed his mind to wander. Within simply weeks, the calm village life Hadwin had always known had been entirely replaced by a life of preparation and defense. The raiders had not attempted a second attack since the failure of their first. Perhaps they were preparing too. Without doubt, they must have been surprised by the defense Igaezg had mounted. However, Hadwin wondered how long it would take them to attack back with enough to overcome whatever he and his few fellow warriors could muster.

Suddenly, Hadwin felt as if he was punched in the back. His back, it began to feel cold and moist. Hadwin looked back over his shoulder. His shirt was stained red. It was blood.

Nothing else could hold such a deep red hue. Yet, it could not be his. Who's else could it be? It had to be his. Where did it come from? Hadwin groped at his shoulder. He desperately searched his back. There, a slit-like wound pumped his life essence from his body. Hadwin became dizzy and lightheaded. He could not tell whether it was from the shock or the simply from the blood loss. Hadwin fuzzily perceived a shadow disappearing into the trees. He slowly began to collapse to the ground. A pair of ghostly arms tried to catch him, but their lack of tangible substance seemed to render them a figment of his oxygen-starved mind. Hadwin's body fell to the ground with a soft thud. He gave his emergency birdcall, throwing his voice as he'd practiced all those days in the forest. The assassin chuckled. As he lay there, wetting the soil with his blood, Hadwin knew the chuckle was a sound he would never forget for the rest of his conscious life. The only question was whether his time remaining would be sufficient to utilize Hadwin's last memory.

Basim, Dakarai, and Becan all looked up at once, their eyebrows up. They all knew what they heard, and they all knew what it meant.

"Hadwin's emergency call!" Becan yelled.

"We gotta tell someone!" Basim hollered.

"Tzofi!" Dakarai shouted.

Tzofi came running over and saw the looks of alarm on the kids' faces.

"It was Hadwin's emergency call!" Dakarai quickly said.

"How do you know it wasn't just some stupid game?" She asked.

"He drilled it into us and told us to use it only in emergencies." Basim pleaded. "I know that's what it's for!"

"Fine." She sighed. "We'll go see."

Tzofi followed Basim, Becan, and Dakarai as they led her to where Hadwin had been standing guard. It was probably just nothing. Another stupid game. What else could a single bird call signify? Tzofi gasped as she saw Hadwin. He was lying in a pool of blood and unconscious. Tzofi ran to his side and felt for his pulse. His heart was only barely beating.

"We have to take him to the shaman!" She cried.

"Told ya." Basim timidly said.

Gently, the four picked up Hadwin's limp body and carried him into the village. No one was out as they rushed through empty paths. Hadwin was quickly brought straight to the

shaman's hut, one of the more distinctive buildings of the village. Smaller than the chief's hut or the infirmary, the shaman's hut seemed to exhibit a greater presence, almost a magnetism, than either of the former buildings. This magnetism was twofold. In times of crisis, even the youngest members of the village could find themselves at the shaman's front door to have their most lethal wound healed. However, when one was in any condition less than critical, the aura of the hut pushed pedestrians to pass several meters away. The building itself was constructed of sturdy, engraved oak. However, besides the shaman, not a single villager was privy to the meaning of the sprawling, enigmatic symbols carved on both sides of the wooden walls.

Tzofi knocked on the door, but received no response. She nervously waited a few seconds then quickly opened the door with a sigh. The shaman was crouched in a corner, breathing fast with her eyes closed. Tzofi gingerly reached over to pat her shoulder, but Becan beat her to it.

“Missus shaman! Missus shaman! Hadwin's hurt real bad!”

The shaman slowly opened her eyes and saw the dripping blood. Her eyes shot up, then squinted into a look of determination. She put on a thick cloak and picked up a handful of herbs. She gestured towards the door and they walked out.

“Whatcha think she's gonna do?” Dakarai asked.

“Magic!” Basim whispered, as they all nodded.

Tzofi worriedly stared into the horizon. Without Hadwin, she was alone to direct the men, alone to set the traps, alone to help win this war.

* * *

Kegan fell onto something soft, and bounced off, landing on something like a slide. He glided down for half a second before sliding off and landing on a lever-like object. As he was slipped off, he held on the edge. Then he started feeling something like hundreds of tiny needles on his fingers. He let go with a yelp, a fraction of a second before a large rock landed where his fingers were, a second ago. He then landed flat on his back on the ground, three meters below.

“Fool! Who told ya to jump? I just slid in!” The man yelled.

Kegan stood up cringing, as he felt the pain throughout his body. He looked up, wincing as his neck cramped and saw nothing but darkness. The space he was in was a small room, circular and about five meters across. The walls and floor were made from hard packed dirt. There was no visible way out. Kegan turned to the man with one question.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“Too much information might not be right at the moment,” the man countered.

“Oh yeah? You think I don’t deserve to know anything? You know my name, though I have no clue who you are. You’ve brought me to some isolated place, stuffed me in a hole, and trapped me underground in a tiny room. I think I deserve information, and I deserve it now!” Kegan yelled. He punctuated his last word with a jab to the man’s chest. The man didn’t flinch, or even blink. Later Kegan would realize what happened in that moment. The man’s bearing changed. The hunch in his back disappeared as he straightened his body. He no longer resembled the bumbling hermit Kegan had met in the forest.

“Very well then,” the man said. “I am Acarya. I was your father’s friend.”

Chapter 9: Dreams

Kegan blinked twice, stunned. His whole quest had been on instinct. But this, this was a real lead. This was something concrete, tangible. Acarya stood there, still, waiting for Kegan to gather his bearings.

“M-my f-father?” Kegan stuttered.

“Yes, your father.” Acarya sighed. “He should have been here.”

“Should have?”

Acarya’s face hardened. “He would’ve been disappointed to see the entitled, disrespectful child his son turned into.”

Kegan’s face contorted in anger as he faced his insulter. “Child? What could *you* do to me? You’re just a fat, crazy hermit.”

Acarya pulled out a staff from a shadow, whacked Kegan’s stomach, lashed his back, and kicked his face, all in a fluid motion. Kegan fell to the ground, cringing in pain. Acarya looked at him, and his face softened. A tear fell from his eye as Kegan writhed on the ground. The boy seemed to morph into his father and Acarya’s chest ached. He picked up Kegan, climbed up into his hut, and laid the near-unconscious boy onto a bed.

Kegan woke up on a soft bed in a spacious hut. Sunlight streamed in through a small window and a cool breeze flew through the slightly open door. Aetos flew in and landed on the side of the bed. Faint sounds of bird calls and cicadas sounded through the air. Kegan closed his eyes and rested back onto the pillow. It had all been a dream. He was back home.

Acarya peeked through the window at Kegan and shrugged his shoulders. The boy was just stirring with the morning light. With his fresh catch of giant catfish, he headed towards the

door.

Kegan gently got up and stretched his arms. His feet treaded upon the dirt packed floor as he trudged to the door. As he opened it, he saw Acarya with his hand where the knob had been.

Kegan quickly closed the door and stepped back. The events of the past weeks came back to him. He put his fingers on his forehead and sat down on his bed. As he remembered the night before, every bruise and bump began to ache. He picked up his fishing spear and crept towards the door. He waited for a second behind the door before striking. He yanked open the door and jumped out, twirling his spear. In front of him was Acarya. He attacked, stabbing and slashing with fury. Acarya dropped all of the catfish except two. With one, he deflected a stab to the side, while using the other to slap Kegan's knuckles. Kegan barely held onto his spear as he stepped back. He dived at Acarya's knees with his spear, but Acarya stepped to the side and whacked the spear with the fish. The spear went flying into a rock and cracked.

Kegan ran to the other side of the pond and pulled out his sling. With a cry, he let loose a barrage of sharp rocks at and around Acarya. Acarya tossed up two bone knives from his belt and chucked both of his fish. The first one was split into pieces, each perfectly blocking some of Kegan's projectiles. The second fish slammed Kegan in the chest, knocking him to the ground. Acarya picked up two more fish and ran to Kegan. Upon seeing Acarya with new weapons, Kegan snatched up the fish that had been thrown at him and held it up to attack. He looked back at it and with a sigh, threw it into the pond.

"Fine, I give up. Beat me up with a fish." He muttered. "Not like I can do anything about it."

"I don't want to beat you up," Acarya said.

Kegan cynically chuckled, "Sure looks like you do."

Acarya tossed the fish aside. "I'm just trying to help you!"

"Yeah, I can tell." Kegan stared into the pond.

"I need to train you." Acarya focused his gaze intently the side of Kegan's face, but received no acknowledgement.

"To do what? This doesn't seem like any training I've ever heard of!" Kegan yelled.

"I need to train you to fight by my side." Acarya began to regather their breakfast. "I guess you can call that your first lesson."

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Hadwin stood up and looked around. He stood in the middle of his village. Everything was happening quickly. He saw himself running around stations as people prepared weapons. However, when neither he nor Tzofi nor Theodoric was watching, work seemed to cease. The villagers dropped their tools and began to joke around. Hadwin planted himself in their path, but they simply ran past. One ran towards Hadwin. Hadwin stood fast, he called to announce his presence. The villager simply ran right through him. What was happening, where was he? Hadwin wandered the village, but none seemed to acknowledge his presence. He was walking as a spirit. Then, he noticed himself. An oblivious and distant Hadwin wandered to a guard position. Hadwin followed himself to the stand of trees. Then it came. A dark silhouette approached the tangible Hadwin from behind and stabbed him. Hadwin tried to identify the attacker, but all he could see was a blur. He tried to catch himself as he fell, but he passed through his own arms.

The days sped along after his death. After several days of shock, the village slowly started to recover. However, the work ethic had dropped to an even lower level than it had been previously. The weapon piles grew more and more slowly until they stopped growing at all. Without a second raider attack, the villagers grew overconfident and lazy. Tzofi was the only one who could whip the village into shape, but Hadwin's death had traumatized her. The black shadow came in the dead of night. No one was about. It opened the door and crept in. A yell echoed through the air. Hadwin saw Tzofi run in and come out with the heavily bleeding chief of the village. Others joined Tzofi in carrying their leader to the shaman's hut, but it was too late. Half the village fell into shock and the rest were helpless against the invaders. Hadwin saw the last few warriors surrounded by raiders and then falling to the endless onslaught. The whole village was overtaken and the raiders passed on to their next victims. Igaezg had fallen.

"Did he wake up yet?" Becan pleaded, tugging on the hem of Tzofi's shirt.

"No." Tzofi conceded.

"How 'bout now?" Becan implored.

"No." Tzofi said again.

Tzofi sighed as she looked down at Becan. "He's not going to wake up right now." She looked at the medicine hut, then away. All the projects she and Hadwin had collaborated on since news of the raiders had struck lingered through her distant memory. Would they never be completed? Tzofi wasn't sure she could finish setting the traps, finish pushing the weapons

teams to work, finish fighting the raiders away. The glory of battle brought fun and excitement. In the back of her mind, Tzofi knew there would be loss. She just never expected it to be so close. She heard a small rustle and looked back. Hadwin dazedly walked out of the hut. His wound had disappeared to nothing to a scar.

“Hadwin, you’re okay!” Tzofi exclaimed.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Hadwin muttered.

Tzofi felt like she was seeing Hadwin through a film. He was dull, almost faded. All of his actions seemed slightly delayed. No, those were just a part of it. He just seemed so distant. It must have just been the stress.

The shaman peered into Hadwin’s eyes and saw the reflection of his recent experiences. Seeing his village destroyed had motivated him back to life. The dream powder hadn’t always worked properly. Nobody could predict what a tortured mind would concoct in its dying throes. Sometimes the visions brought the victims closer to death than before. Only occasionally could the experience motivate them to life. She rushed back into her hut and poured the powder back back into its wooden container. As the powder disappeared behind the bottle’s wooden cap, it gave a single twinkling glow. The shaman opened the door out of her hut and glanced at Hadwin’s now distant frame. Yes, this Hadwin was a rare one.

* * *

Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Kegan’s fists slammed into the sand back in synchronization with his already speeding heart beat. Rivulets of salty sweat ran down his face, burning his eyes and crusting his lips. The sun glared down onto the bare spot of dirt where Kegan trained. After a couple minutes, he collapsed to the ground, his heart thumping through his shirt. He grabbed his canteen, pouring half of it in his mouth and the other half all over his face. The temperatures were reaching over 90 degrees and the ground was baked. All around Kegan, the plants drooped and wilted. Nothing stirred under the scorching sun.

Kegan felt a tickle along his ankle. He looked down and saw a line of ants marching across his leg. He jumped up and brushed them off. Leave it to Acarya to send him to train next to an anthill.

The punching bag shook with Kegan’s punches. His knuckles were cracked and starting to bleed. He jumped up and landed a kick to the top, knocking the sandbag over and splitting the side. The sand flooded a lone anthill, wiping out weeks of the insects’ work. Kegan

absentmindedly stared at the little hill of sand when a torrent of water crashed down on his head.

“Training’s done for today!” Acarya yelled out from a tree branch overhanging Kegan’s training spot. He held an empty bucket and had a smirk on his face. Kegan’s annoyance faded as the cooling water mitigated the waves of heat coming from seemingly every direction. He laughed and started jogging back to the hideout.

It was day four of training. Any fat on Kegan’s body had hardened into muscle. Every day, he ran five miles around the forest. Then he did strength training with various rocks Acarya had collected. He finished training with two hours of boxing. The first day, he had collapsed out of exhaustion four times and Acarya had to get him up every one. His baby fat quickly disappeared as Kegan continued his grueling exercise. By day three, the muscle started growing. Kegan got into better shape than he had been in his entire life.

It was day ten, and Kegan could run the track with ease. He boxed for his two hours and ran back. He looked around, but couldn’t find Acarya. The wily bastard had to be up to something. Kegan started walking toward his hut when something whacked him behind his knees, sending him sprawling in the dirt. He turned around in disbelief only to see Acarya with a hefty wooden truncheon.

“Training’s not over yet.” Acarya retorted.

He watched Kegan sprint into the forest, not knowing whether it was a fight or flight response. Whatever. If he was coming back, the best he’d have would be a couple sticks. Acarya waited a few seconds before turning around and heading to his hut. He gave a quick glance back just in time to see Kegan emerge from the trees. Kegan held two sticks; one almost staff-like in proportion and one more in tune to the size of a one-hand weapon. The larger one seemed far too heavy to use with two hands.

“How are you going to use those?” Acarya smirked.

“Like this.” Kegan snapped the longer stick across his knee, leaving two sharp ends. He quickly tightened the ends of his Grabber rope around his ankle and the shorter stick. Then he attacked.

Kegan’s skill with hand weapons was feeble at best, but Acarya hadn’t factored in Kegan’s skill with the Grabber rope. Kegan caught Acarya’s legs with the Grabber stick and pulled him forward, stabbing downwards as Acarya slid towards him. Acarya spun his stick, deflecting Kegan’s jabs and slashing at the Grabber rope. It frayed, but stayed intact. Acarya

mimicked Kegan, snapping his weapon and forming two spears. He attacked once more, but this time aiming at the rope that held Kegan's most dangerous weapon.

With three expertly-aimed jabs, the rope snapped and the Grabber stick flew into the forest. Acarya quickly disarmed Kegan and cornered him against a tree. Kegan desperately looked around for something to use to defend himself, but it was in vain. He put his hands up and chuckled.

"I guess you got me," he laughed. "What was that about anyway?"

"You're done with basic training. Combat training will now be added to your daily training." Acarya took the splintered halves of his previous staff and carefully wrapped them inside a cloth bundle.

Exhausted, Kegan started jogging back to his hut when something struck him between the shoulder blades. He looked back and saw Acarya holding a carved boomerang. Acarya smiled as he noticed Kegan's surprised expression.

"I never said combat training was over."

An hour later, Kegan stumbled into his hut, aching and covered with bruises. Those fights were unfair. He was already exhausted from the start. Kegan dropped into his cot, immediately sinking into the soft feather mattress. His last thought before he lost consciousness was a feeble wonder as to what the state of his wounds would be tomorrow.

Chapter 10: Newborn

Hadwin staggered around the village, a thick bandage wound around his shoulder. He yelled out encouragement, but everywhere he looked, he saw weaknesses. The wall was crumbling and breaking, arrows were running low. The pile of broken spears was growing, yet hardly anyone was working to replenish the weapon supply. Their prior victory had misled the villagers, and they didn't realize the threat they were up against. Hadwin wasn't sure he understood what they were facing, but he at least tried to prepare for the worst.

Hadwin walked around a hut and saw even more people out and socializing. Ever more spears were broken in playful combat. Drinks were passed around. Laughter was shared. Normally he would have joined them. Today, he wished he could.

A small snap came a second before the swoosh, which simply foretold the thunderous smash. A giant, flaming rock came hurtling through the air. It struck a clump of huts, burning them down and injuring those left inside. Before anyone could react, another rock flew through

the air and burst through the roof of the Main Hall. The dry wood burst into flame. The walls crackled and hissed as the flames slowly ate them to the ground. Burning splinters shot onto the tables and chairs. Each turned into a small inferno, burning itself to soot. Within a matter of minutes, the dry wooden frame had flared into a nest of orange flames licking the bellies of the clouds.

Not a single villager could tear his gaze from what had just been the largest building in the village. The Main Hall was above just a meeting place and cafeteria. It was the center, the heart, of the village. Within its walls, stones were traded, spears were carved, and lovers were united. Within its walls, harvests were collected, children were reared, elders had passed.

Nobody paid attention as another missile whistled through the air and decimated another group of huts. Nobody could even comprehend the screams coming from under the blazing rubble. Tzofi finally turned away from the Main Hall and to the grounds upon where her childhood hut had once stood. All that was left was smoldering debris. It was gone. All gone. It would never return. Never could Tzofi retreat beneath the roof with a just sense of security. Smoke surrounded her eyes. Tears welled up and slowly rolled down the edge of her jawline. This was a line that never should have been crossed. They couldn't get away with this.

"Hey!" she yelled, "Get up! Stop staring!"

Slowly people started to look up from their trances and they noticed Tzofi standing straight and tall. She roughly dried off her face. The smoke began to clear.

"We can't let them destroy our village!" she shouted.

The men split into groups. One escorted the elders and children to a close hideout, a forested valley. Another started digging survivors out. The last group picked up their weapons and prepared for battle. Tzofi grabbed two double sided spears and stood at the head of the group with a grim look of determination on her face. As she was about to start talking, Hadwin limped out of the front of the throng towards her. In addition to a bright red blotch on his bandage, he had a giant gash across his calf.

"No. You are not coming with us. You need to be escorted out with the others." Tzofi declared.

"I'm fine. I don't need escorting." Hadwin asserted. "Besides, there's not much else I can do now."

Tzofi bit her lip and looked around. "You could put out the fires."

“Tried already. They’re burning on some weird liquid thing that keeps them going even after being doused with water.” Hadwin glanced back at the roaring flames. “Actually, the water makes it even worse.”

“Ooh. Well you could go, um, I don’t know!” Tzofi rolled her eyes and held back a grin. “Fine! Come with us if you want!”

Hadwin grabbed two hefty sticks and dipped them in the liquid fire. Their green outer layers smoldered, but resisted burning. Better to go prepared.

* * *

Kegan quickly opened his eyes and scanned the dark hut warily. After his first combat training yesterday, he wanted to be ready for any surprise Acarya threw at him. Once he determined that he was safe for the moment, he jumped out of bed and grabbed his spear. Aetos flew to his shoulder and chirped urgently. *Not now, buddy.* Kegan absentmindedly ruffled his feathers and set the bird down upon his cot. He tiptoed over to the door and put his ear to it, listening for any sign of movement. He yanked open the door and jumped out, his spear ready for attack. What he didn’t count on was having his hut floating in the middle of the pond.

With a giant splash, Kegan fell a meter down from the door, past a high wooden raft, and into the pond. His spear flew out of his hand, and he blindly groped around for a handle. As he cleared the water from his face and opened his eyes, Kegan saw he was in the middle of the pond. Beside him floated his house. As he was about to start swimming to shore, Kegan felt a tug on his foot. Suddenly, he was pulled underwater. Kegan thrashed around and loosened the grip on his ankle. With a final kick, Kegan freed himself. He swam to his floating spear, grabbed it, and dived down.

Underwater, the world seemed to move in slow motion and everything appeared blurry. Kegan searched around for his adversary, but he couldn’t locate anything in the dark waters. Sparse fish darted around his toes, but nothing materialized that could have attacked him. Suddenly, his spear was gone. Then his head was yanked down and he was pulled down to the bottom. Kegan lashed out with his fists and feet, but though his blows never landed, he was released. In a final bout of strength, Kegan swam to the shore and ran onto land. He stopped, panting heavily and gulping up air as fast as he could. There was only one explanation. Acarya.

A smiling head popped out of the rippling waters. Acarya calmly doggy-paddled to shore and walked out. Kegan’s surly expression quickly melted as Acarya’s chuckling turned into

contagious laughter.

“What was that?” Kegan yelled.

“Just wanted to surprise ya.” Acarya winked and grinned.

“I thought we could be stable at basic combat training for at least a few days.” Kegan groaned as he tried to force the water from his ears.

Acarya slowly started to dry himself. “Nah, that’s boring.”

Kegan sighed as he walked back to where his hut had been. After a couple seconds, Kegan chuckled and shook his head. Knowing Acarya, moving the hut back would just be called another piece of training for Kegan. He turned around, just in time to dodge an attack from Acarya, who was wielding a pair of nunchucks. Kegan ran to his spear floating in the pond. He swung it around to attack. Despite wildly flailing around his spear, Kegan was bludgeoned multiple times. He pushed on, ignoring the pain, until Acarya was in front of a knee-high rock at the pond side. With a sudden tackle, Kegan pushed Acarya back, making him trip over the rock and into the water. He turned to look at his arms and winced as he felt the multiple sore spots ranging across biceps and forearms. As he watched, they slowly turned to reddish-brown bruises spread across his tan skin. He looked back down to check on Acarya, but he wasn't there. Kegan turned around just in time to see Acarya push him over the same knee-high rock.

Doused, elbows and knees bleeding, and arms covered in bruises, Kegan finally succumbed to the pain. The edges of his vision became fuzzy, and black and colorful splotches seemed to appear. Before he lost consciousness, the last words Kegan heard were, "You did it first."

The horn called. A new baby was born. Kegan swung down from the branch. He ran to the village. He stood behind the crowd gathered around the birth hut. The shaman walked out, accompanied by a midwife. The baby was a boy, but the name was still to be determined. The two returned inside and brought the baby out to take to its home. The naked, pink creature screamed as sunlight hit its pale skin. It cried out and squirmed. The crowd flowed around it and admired the creature. Kegan peered at it. Babies were such strange people. So tiny and fragile, yet with such huge heads, such huge eyes. What did they see? What did they think? Yet, within a few years, it would become a normal child. Then, so many years later, it would become a tall, boring adult. People changed so much, how could they even be called people the whole time? The knot began to disperse and the baby was finally left in peace. The shaman placed him inside and

returned to the birth hut to care for the mother. Kegan looked around. No one was watching. He slowly opened the door and slipped inside. The babe sniffled and occasionally cried out. Kegan approached it. The baby grew silent and stared into Kegan's eyes. He gently lowered his finger in front of the baby. It clenched it and swayed Kegan's hand back and forth. Kegan grinned and laughed. The baby's mouth lay agape as it stared directly into Kegan's eyes. He almost shyly looked away, then glanced back. The baby was still staring back, almost frozen in an expression of silent wonder. Kegan's head whipped around. Footsteps were approaching the hut. He pulled his finger away and edged towards the door. The baby's smile faded. Kegan gave it a last beaming grin and slipped out the door. The shaman and mother stood just a couple meters away outside. The mother gave him the look. The look he had always been given. He knew what it was. Disapproving and pitying. Then she started to scold him. Kegan sprinted away. He knew what it would be. What was he doing there, why wasn't he with an adult when he was with the baby, he could have hurt the newborn, all information Kegan had known first going into the hut. He didn't need to hear it. He paused for a second. Just to hear the announcement. "The child's name shall be Hadwin!"

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The team silently whizzed across the forest floor, barely leaving a mark in the slowly swaying branches. As they approached the raiders' camp, they began to see and hear the enemy they had been searching for. Finally they came up to the edge of the clearing where the raiders were attacking from. They were dipping large rocks in a container of vile-looking, slimy, green liquid, lighting them ablaze, and launching them from one of two giant catapults. Additionally, their spears were replaced by an arsenal of shining metal weapons like the one Theodoric had demonstrated.

"How are we gonna destroy the catapults?" Tzofi whispered.

"The fishing spears won't leave a mark." Another said.

The group turned into a frenzy of whispering as solutions were brought up and shot down. There were too many raiders around to take the time to cut the ropes. No distance weapons they had could do much to the solid wood structure. With a wave of a fire stick, Hadwin silenced them all. Without uttering a word, he stepped forward and hurled both sticks at both the catapults. Hadwin expertly aimed them at the flammable ropes and supports at the base of the war machines. While the dense wood only blackened, the ropes and pitch sizzled, cracked,

and burned away. Slowly, the intricate frame of the catapults collapsed and the wooden struts fell to the ground. The liquid fire quickly spread across the war machines and decimated the flammable wood they were made from. Hadwin stood still and watched the destruction with a vengeful delight. No longer could the raiders burn his village.

After a couple moments, the raiders realized that their liquid flame had decimated their catapults. They scanned the tree line for their assailant. All at once, they noticed Hadwin, who stood still dumbly staring at the leaping red peaks. As the raiders yelled and charged, Hadwin turned around to grab his spear. Unfortunately, all he had carried was the two fire sticks. He hobbled as quickly as he could into the trees, but the raiders were less than ten meters behind by the time he had reached the others.

"Attack!" Hadwin screamed as he ran through the ranks. Everyone leaped up and charged. Within seconds, the battle had begun. Hadwin frantically searched the ground for any dropped weapons, but his efforts were fruitless. As he looked up, he and a raider suddenly locked eyes.

"You killed our catapults!" The raider shouted

Hadwin's eyes widened. He backed away, then began to run towards the trees.

The raider quickly halved the distance between him and Hadwin, his steel blade glinting in the sunlight. Hadwin tripped on a wayward root and fell into a spiky bramble. Tiny cuts covered his face and arms and the gash on his calf was streaming blood. The raider was barely three meters from Hadwin, and his sword was raised. Hadwin grabbed a handful of the bramble and threw it at the raider's face. Then he snapped a branch off a tree above him, stuck it in the bramble, and pulled out a clump of the vines. He slammed the thorny twigs onto the raider's exposed feet, then chucked his makeshift weapon at the side of the raider's head. Before the raider could react, Hadwin hobbled away and disappeared behind the bushes. He heard a scream as the raider tried to pull the spikes out.

Hadwin emerged from the bushes among the rest of his group. All had minor cuts and injuries. Some had lost fingertips to the raiders' shining weapons. Tzofi had a cut across her forehead that was dripping blood down the side of her face.

"How'd your fight go?" she asked.

Hadwin looked again at the state of the other warriors. "Quite decent, actually."

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Chapter 11: Village

As the days came and went, Kegan slowly became impervious to the beatings Acarya set on him. He could never win a hand to hand combat fight, but sometimes, he almost proved a match to Acarya. After many days of combat training, Acarya came to his hut one evening.

"There's something we need to talk about." Acarya said. "Have you ever made fire?"

Kegan immediately knew what Acarya referred to, yet he automatically dodged the topic. "Yeah, with my flint."

"No no no, just like that." Acarya felt flustered. How was he to explain the phenomenon if Kegan had not experienced it? "Without anything."

Kegan's first reaction was to want to say no. He'd been hiding it for as long as he'd had it. But the fact that Acarya was asking him this meant he had to know something. Maybe it was time to reveal his strange ability.

"Why are you asking?" Kegan peered into Acarya's eyes to try to deduce an answer.

Acarya knew he was close to gaining an answer. However, he knew that the only way he'd receive the truth was to give it first. "Well, your father could. I wanted to see if you could and if you were good at it."

Kegan pointed his fingers at the wall and pushed at the sparks. He expected to see a small flurry like the last time, before he had met Acarya, but to his surprise, they blazed out. They hit the stone wall in a giant stream and even made small marks in the wall. Kegan could feel that his power now drew from a much larger reservoir. Perhaps this was a result of his recent training regiment. As his onslaught continued, in those few seconds, Kegan felt as if his body was being dragged through the entire day's workout once more. His lungs heaved and he grew out of breath, muscles aching. Finally, Kegan collapsed and the hut became dark again. Acarya sat for a moment, silent, as he tried to comprehend what he'd just seen.

"You've got it! You can do it!" He exclaimed.

"A lot better than I could before." Kegan gasped.

"Wait, before? How long have you been able to do this?" Acarya inquired incredulously.

"Just a couple months." Kegan sat up and stared into a corner of the hut. "Ever since I started having the dreams."

Acarya began to voice his inquiry, but Kegan did not seem like he would answer it. Besides, there was only one thing the dreams could be about. It was time to follow up on

Caedmon's promise.

As he stood up to leave, Acarya placed his hand on Kegan's shoulder. "It is time to enter the last stage of your training."

Kegan woke up the next morning, wary of what might be waiting for him out the door. He stood to the side of the door and slowly creaked it open. Good. Nothing came flying in. He took a quick peek at the ground. His hut was in its normal place. He came right up to the door frame and jumped out with his spear. To Kegan's surprise, Acarya was standing, facing the hut, barely ten meters away with a stack of throwing sticks.

"No surprises today?" Kegan exclaimed.

Without a word, Acarya hurtled a throwing stick at Kegan. Kegan jumped back and ducked out of the way.

"Block it!" Acarya shouted. He threw another throwing stick. This time, Kegan lazily flicked it away with his fishing spear.

"Use the fire." Acarya barked.

This time, Kegan pushed the sparks at the projectile. The bright sparks burned tiny black splotches in the wood, but they hardly hindered its path. Kegan flinched as the throwing stick struck him in the chest.

Acarya grew frustrated. "God dammit, use your fire and block it!" He shouted hoarsely.

"I can just use my fishing spear." Kegan picked up his spear and swung it around.

Acarya grew angrier. "Kegan, both of the other two states of your training were difficult, yet you know there were benefits. Just trust me and stop trying to find an easy way out."

Kegan threw his hands up in frustration. "Why'd you teach my how to use my spear then?"

With a sigh, Acarya slowly walked over. The cheer that he'd had the previous night had left and disappointment echoed across his face.

"Knowing how to use a spear will get you out of tight situations," he said, "but the people you'll face are used to fishing spears. It doesn't matter how good you are with one."

Kegan started to calm down and looked to Acarya. "Who are these people you keep saying I'm going to fight?"

"You know the dreams you have?" Acarya watched Kegan nod his head. "It's the people who did that to your father."

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The team staggered into the village, blood streaming from their wounds. Then they noticed what had happened in their absence. Nearly the entire village had been burned down. As Hadwin watched, the supports of the chief's hut slowly crackled and snapped one by one, until all that was left was the giant door. The door that contained all of the history of the entire village. With nothing to hold it up, the mighty door fell. The cursed flames licked the door, then rushed in for the prospect of a new meal. Hadwin ran forward and tried to put out the fire, but it was too late. The great treasure of the village had been destroyed. Hadwin collapsed to his knees. They had destroyed the village. There was nothing left. They had won. His dreams came back to him. Even him returning from near death wasn't enough. Hadwin walked around, numb, unable to comprehend what he was seeing. The village he was born in, had grown up in, that had always been a home for him, had been destroyed. He walked to where his hut had been. All that remained was a small, stone stool. Hadwin dug through the rubble of what his cot had been. Gently, he pulled the spear from the dirt. He twirled it and stabbed at the air. The balance was still fine, however, one end of the spear was nicked and the center of the shaft was singed. Perhaps it was for the better that the weapon had lost its perfection. Hadwin needed a tool he could use and abuse in the inevitable battles.

Hadwin felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked back and saw Tzofi. Her face seemed different, as if the attack had changed something in her. There was a glint of steel in her eyes and her mouth quivered between sadness and anger. Silently, they walked to where the people of the village were hiding. The many injured looked up to her with hope in their eyes. Tzofi wiped a tear off her cheek.

"They destroyed everything," she murmured. "Everything."

"Tzofi, don't," Hadwin pleaded. "We're already all shocked and hurt."

Tzofi snapped back at him. "Hadwin, they've seen their homes burned to ash. They've seen loved ones crushed and burned. Nothing we say will change that."

"We need to stir them back to action." Hadwin desperately grabbed her shoulders and turned her towards himself. "We need to find a new place to hide. We need to rebuild."

Tzofi sighed and turned to the people in front of her. "We have to attack them back. We have nothing to lose."

Llywarch stepped out from the trees, a smug expression on his face and two spears in

hand. “Attack, we can. The question is how we do it.”

“Tzofi, don’t do it!” Hadwin implored. “We can figure something out that’ll be better than anything Llywarch could do.” He turned to Llywarch. “Besides, what happened to Iwarch?”

“Raiders are idiots who can’t keep promises. I think we should go back to attacking them.”

“Hadwin,” Tzofi said, “Llywarch is right. We can’t just sit and hide. We have to attack.

With a sly smile, Llywarch led Tzofi out of the clearing and towards the destroyed village.

Hadwin and Theodoric turned to the people, and then to each other. “I don’t suppose you have an idea?” Theodoric asked.

“I think,” Hadwin tentatively began, “uh, maybe the first priority should be finding another safe area. One that Llywarch doesn’t know. I don’t trust him,” Hadwin replied.

Theodoric chuckled darkly. “I think I might be with you on this one.”

Hadwin and a few others scouted around the area, searching for somewhere safe the villagers could hide. Nowhere seemed contained enough to be safe, yet large enough for the whole village. Even as the hours passed, the search remained fruitless. Hungry, tired, and covered in scratches, Hadwin and the other scouts returned to the village, only to find everybody gone but two men.

“We found a place!” they exclaimed. “We were told to stay behind to lead you to it.”

With a shrug, Hadwin and the other scouts followed the two men. They ran through bushes and over streams. By the time they arrived at their destination, Hadwin felt much more out of breath than they seemed. What was in front of them was a large, grey rock. It was weathered smooth and didn’t appear to be anything but a rock, albeit a village sized rock. It had no caves, nor tunnels, nor any other indicator that it could house Igaezg. .

“We’re gonna live on a rock?” Hadwin asked. “Wait, where is everybody?”

“Follow us,” the men replied.

With an exaggerated sigh, Hadwin jogged after them as they began to run away from the rock. Before they were twenty meters away, they stopped by a large badger hole. Without hesitation, they promptly crawled in. Hadwin and the other scouts looked at each other with disbelieving glances, then followed the two men into the tiny tunnel.

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After a long day of getting repeatedly hit with a throwing stick and getting yelled at by Acarya, Kegan was done. Seeing the throwing stick fly at him again, Kegan's anger finally broke through. With a roar, he pushed out all of the sparks left in him. They came out in a barrage that nearly reached Acarya and shot up ten meters in the sky. After a few seconds, the sparks stopped and were replaced by fire. The outburst was reduced to a single jet reaching two meters out, though Kegan could feel a particular step up in his exertion. The tongue of flame enveloped the throwing stick and burned away at it. All that came through the fire was a burned half of a throwing stick that barely tapped Kegan's knee.

Acarya slowly clapped as he walked towards Kegan. Kegan struggled to remain standing and his head felt faint. Acarya ran forward and supported him. Kegan felt a rush of pride as he realized what he had done, but it was quickly smothered by his previously existing annoyance.

"Kegan, you did it. You made fire!" Acarya declared. "I'm so proud of you!"

Kegan sighed angrily and turned around to head for his hut. Acarya grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "Listen. You've done something amazing. We didn't have time for any other way."

Kegan nodded his head and looked down. He couldn't hold it in any longer. "I went through your physical training. I got in the best shape of my life. I went through your combat training. I've learned how to truly fight with a master. I've even done whatever training this is and I've made you true fire. How much longer do I have to wait before I can find out who or what I have to fight?"

Acarya sighed. "Tomorrow. I promise."

Kegan slowly walked into his hut. Tomorrow the whole mystery would be cleared up. Tomorrow he would find out everything. After tomorrow, Kegan would finally reach a threshold in his quest that he'd been waiting to find for so long. He would finally discover what had happened to his father. Aetos flew down and perched upon Kegan's finger.

"Not now," Kegan whispered beneath the dark, straw roof, "not now, we gotta get to sleep."

After tossing and turning for an hour, Kegan sat up on the edge of his bed. Facing the wall, he pushed tiny fires from his fingers, then quickly pulled them back. He was entranced with the rhythmic flares. Shadows of the room's contents danced across the walls, appearing, then vanishing just as quickly. A short time later, he dropped quickly to sleep.

The next morning, as the first rays of light leaked through Kegan's window, he jumped out of bed and ran to Acarya's hut. He looked inside and saw Acarya sitting on the edge of his bed. Acarya's eyes were red and crusted as if he had had a sleepless night.

They locked eyes, and Acarya began his tale.

"Many years ago, your father and I lived in a village not far from here. We had a perfect life. Everything was always there when you needed it, but we never had to do any work. We all loved it, but your father was always the suspicious, curious type. I mean, I was curious too, like about where our food came from and how everything was mysteriously cleaned, but I didn't care enough to worry. One night, your father came to my hut. He told me he discovered something, but he wouldn't tell me what. He told me to meet him under the bridge at midnight. I waited, but he never came. The next day, our chief told us that there had been a terrible accident and we had lost a member of our community. Before he even said the name, I knew it was your father. They said he drowned and went on to deliver a lengthy eulogy. It all seemed so fake and I felt that something wasn't quite right. Right then, I decided your father wasn't dead and I was gonna find him. I ran around all night looking everywhere, but my search was fruitless. I couldn't afford to ask anyone. He was dead in everyone's eyes. After six sleepless nights, there was only one building I hadn't checked: the Administration Hall. There were guards at all times. I created a tranquilizer from local plants and injected them into hollow blow darts. I won't bore you with all the details, but I made it in. Nobody had ever been in this hall except village leaders and their executives. If I was caught, I could have been exiled. I was in a musty, dark, circular rotunda. Around me were three doorways identical to the one I came through. I trusted my luck and stepped through the closest doorway. In front of me was a long hallway before another door. Then another long hallway and doorway. I was about to turn back at the third hallway, when I heard heavy breathing. I cautiously ventured forward and saw a barred cell at the end of the hall. Your father was inside. His clothes were tattered and his hair was grimy.

I whispered. 'What happened?'

'I figured it out,' He said back, his eyes shining. 'They're taking other villages!'

As I was about to ask what he meant, the door slammed open and two guards jumped in, each wielding spears. I pulled out my dart gun and quickly shot both of them. Now out of darts, I dropped the dart tube and picked up a spear. We didn't know if we had been discovered yet, but it was time to get moving. I kicked the wood bars, but they wouldn't break. They were

fire-hardened. Then your father did his little fire thing at a spot of the bars until they were glowing red. All it took was a quick kick and the section snapped open. Your father took the other guard's spear and we were off. We ran silently through the empty hallways until we came to the last door. He asked me if I was ready. I nodded and we opened the door. Dozens of guards made a giant circle around the entrance. They knew we were here. We charged and attacked, but it was hopeless from the start. We were outnumbered at least thirty to one. We must have each killed five or ten and injured twice as many. Without sleep, I wasn't on my best game and your father had been starved for days. We just weren't gonna win this one. Then your father looked at me. He told me he'd cover me to let me escape. He told me to take his wife and young son to a different village. I wanted to say no, but he looked so sure of himself. I knew he meant what he said. I gave him a small nod. He jumped up and screamed and put the rest of his strength into a desperate attack to try to buy me time. I almost wanted it not to work so I'd have to stay by his side, but nearly all the guards jumped onto your father. I fought my way through the remaining few and escaped, running, through the door. I went straight to his hut and took his wife, your mother, and his son, you. Your mother didn't resist. She said that your father told her to trust me no matter what. I pointed her to a nearby village and gave her supplies. I had fulfilled your father's last wish. Now I could return to get back at the men who killed him."

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Chapter 12: Shining Weapons

Hadwin emerged from the tunnel and found himself inside a giant cave. All around him were the inhabitants of Igaezg, putting together makeshift shelters and making fires. Hadwin peered past the village to try to find an end to their shelter, but the tunnels of the cave seemed to continue indefinitely into the darkness. He turned around and saw Theodoric striding towards him.

"Hadwin! I hoped I would see you here. How do you like our new hideout?" Theodoric gestured around. "We're under the giant rock the messengers took you to first."

Hadwin incredulously gazed around the cavernous hollow. "How'd you find something like this?"

Theodoric grinned warmly. "It's actually one of the kids' past hideouts. I always wondered why we could never find them."

"It'll keep us safe from the raiders at least." Hadwin awkwardly stood silent for a

moment, then turned towards the back of the cave. “How far does that go?”

“It seems to have an almost endless labyrinth of tunnels. I was thinking of sending scouts to explore all of them, but we need to concentrate our efforts elsewhere.”

Another awkward pause. “So at least Llywarch doesn’t know where this hideout is,” Hadwin said.

Theodoric glanced away. “Yes.”

Hadwin started to walk towards the rest of the huts. “So see you around.”

“You too. Stay safe.” Theodoric left to attend to other matters.

Hadwin turned around and walked away. Everyone around him had already built interim shelters and were helping those who needed it. How could they recover so quickly after seeing everything destroyed? All he could think about is how they lost everything. Everything, burnt up and blown away with the ashes. He wanted to help out, but Hadwin knew he wasn’t the best at making shelters or finding food. As he was walking, a voice interrupted him from his thoughts.

“You’ll get back at those raiders, won’t you?” Basim asked.

Hadwin’s face fell into a grimace as he realized what his duty was. “Yeah. And I’ll make ‘em sorry they ever attacked our village.”

Hadwin grabbed his fishing spear and ran out of the cave. He crawled through the tunnels and emerged into the bright sunlight. Hadwin’s pupils contracted as he emerged from the darkness of the tunnels to the brightness of the midday forest. He looked around, trying to match his surroundings to the fleeting memories of the short journey here. His eyes picked out the faint signs pointing back to the village. Hadwin silently ran through the forest, passing by the old hideout, and finally arriving at the ruined village. Small fires smoldered in the remaining ashes that had been left behind from the prevailing wind. Hadwin stopped to pay one last tribute to his home. Memories danced with the floating ashes in the streaming sunlight. Hadwin saw himself racing to get to the main hall, playing tag around the huts. Then, a stray spark dissolved his fantasies and Hadwin once again saw the village for what it now was. A single, crystalline tear rolled down his cheek and splashed against the ash-charred ground. They would pay.

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“I decided to bide my time and hide out in the forest while I prepared for my attack. I hid out in the forest ‘cause I was sure they would kill me after I tried to rescue your father. I made dozens of the narcotic darts and even a couple lethal ones along with a couple more spears and

many sharpened throwing sticks. I kept putting off the attack and making more weapons, telling myself that I wasn't ready. Really, I knew I was just scared. Scared to do this alone. One night, I heard footsteps so I hid in some underbrush like usual, but then I noticed, this wasn't the usual. Instead of a two-man guard patrol, a whole host of men were going. To top it off, the chief was with them and they were holding a prisoner. He turned his head and I saw it was your father. How he survived the guards' attacks, I'll never know, but they were taking him somewhere. Alive. This was it. My last chance to save your father. I shot the back two guards with the tranquilizer darts then dragged them into the underbrush. I changed into one of their uniforms and joined the line.

As we walked, I noticed we were walking to the Fetid Mire. I almost turned around and left just then. This is where parents would tell their kids they would take them if they didn't go to sleep at night. And trust me, that would put them right to sleep. Dozens of people have come here to try to unlock its secrets and none returned. And on every waxing quarter moon, a moan would rise from the Mire and we knew if we weren't inside the village boundaries, we made sure we got there. It was a place you didn't want to be. I wanted to head back, but if I did, I never would have been able to live with myself. I looked up and saw the quarter waxing moon. Again, I almost turned around, but I just reached under my belt, put my hand on my reed dart gun, and kept walking. Finally we got there. We went in a zig zag path, avoiding some creepy looking puddles. The guard in front of me looked up at the stars and didn't see the turn we just made. He stepped into one of the puddles. Hardly a scream and he was gone. I started paying a lot more attention to the ground. Then we stopped and I looked up. The chief was standing on a large rock holding your father.

'Spirit!' he yelled, 'take your atonement.'

He shoved your father off the rock and onto the marsh ground. Everyone backed up about three meters but kept watching. I slipped away and went around the outside of the swamp to the underbrush near your father. I watched in horror as a black shadow rose up, not thirty feet in front of him. It spotted him and began to glide forward. I barely restrained a scream as fingers of darkness shot out at your father. Right when it all seemed over, he shot a giant cloud of sparks, pushing away at the shadow and illuminating the swamp. I saw an expression of surprise and horror on the chief's face. Your father formed a shield around himself and started attacking the shadow. I was waiting for him to shoot an inferno of flames at it, but all that came was another

burst of sparks. They must have starved him of food and sleep because he looked weak. For the first time in my life, I saw him look weak. He had always been strong and ready for everything. I loosed all my darts, even the killers, onto the shadow, but they merely glanced off it. I threw my spear and my boomerangs, but they were grabbed and thrown into the swamp by the shadow's dark tentacles. Your father looked to where the weapons came from and he saw me. He yelled out to me, telling me that his son, Kegan, would return and together, he and I would return to take back the village. Then it was done. The darkness overcame the light and the swamp returned to darkness."

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A glint among the dark ashes caught Hadwin's eye. He walked over to where the armory had been and saw something shining under the dirt. He picked up the strange weapon Theodoric had earlier demonstrated. It was weightier than a fishing spear but still seemed quite usable in battle. How had it not burned away with everything else? No harm in taking it along.

Hadwin aimlessly swung the weapon around, slicing through plants in the underbrush. It was actually pretty fun to use. He stopped in front of a hefty tree.

"Raider, you've come to your doom." He swung the weapon in broad sweeps and severed its side branches. Then two lightning quick strikes into its heart and head. Hadwin smiled with satisfaction at his work. A faint, but hearty laugh interrupted Hadwin's thoughts. Out of instinct, he dropped the sword and grabbed his spear. The laughter seemed like it was quite far away but straight ahead. Hadwin stuck the sword in his belt and cautiously advanced forward. The laughing seemed to get louder as he began to approach the camp. Suddenly, Hadwin heard a rustle. He looked up and saw a scared looking scout about to blow an alarm whistle. Hadwin grabbed a rock off the ground and whipped it at the scout's head, stunning the scout and knocking the whistle to the dirt. He bent down to grab another rock just as another alarm whistle shrieked through the forest. The laughing and clinking of glasses abruptly stopped and was replaced by the gathering of weapons. Now it was time to run.

This was nothing like what Hadwin planned. He had pictured himself covertly attacking and taking out just one or two raiders. Then he'd pull them under the bushes and repeat. How on earth was he supposed to deal with the whole mob of men? Hadwin sprinted around to the other side of the camp and stepped into the clearing. Good. They only left one sentry to guard the camp while they found the threat. Hadwin snuck up behind the raider and clobbered him with a

spearbutt. The coast was clear. Hadwin ran inside the first hut he saw. His nose was immediately bombarded with an eye-watering reek. He saw rows of cots and a door in back that he assumed led to the bathroom. He ran out and burst into the next building. This was what he wanted to find. The weapon storage. Shiny weapons like the one he found were lined up on racks next to spears, shields, and armor. He looked at the rack and saw something written next to the shiny weapons. "Swords," it read.

"So that's what they're called," Hadwin murmured.

Then in the corner, Hadwin saw vats of liquid that looked like the liquid fire that had destroyed his village. However, Hadwin couldn't not figure out how to safely light or launch any of the strange chemical. Next to the vat were small, fist sized balls. They were in the armory; they had to be weapons. Hadwin experimentally threw one at the raider's living quarters. As soon as the projectile hit the dry roof, it burst into flame, sending the liquid fire all over the building. First swords, then these fiery orbs. How did these raiders get such advanced weapons? Hadwin desperately looked around for some way to take them with him. There! In the corner, there was a cloth next to some oil and the swords. Hadwin stuffed as many of spheres as could fit in the cloth and slung the package over his shoulder. Next, Hadwin ran out of the armory and tossed one of the projectiles at it. As the walls began to burn away, fireballs followed resounding cracks as the remaining firebombs exploded. Hadwin then popped into the next hut just quickly enough to see the food and bottles. At first, the food hut burned slowly just like the other building. Then, the fire hit the first ale bottle. The entire building shot up in a huge fireball that singed the trees and buildings around it.

"Not the ale!" A voice cried out from the woods.

The raiders were back, Hadwin had to hurry. Judging by the smell, Hadwin found the other living quarters and destroyed them as well. As he was about to destroy the last building, Hadwin heard voices crying for help. He ran inside and saw rows of barred cells. This was the raiders' prison. Some looked like they were innocent villagers, dragged into a mess that wasn't theirs to start with. Others looked like raiders who must have rebelled in one way or another. Finally, in the last cell, Hadwin saw a familiar, but unexpected face.

"Tzofi! Wait, why are you here?" Hadwin shook the bars.

"Me? Why are you here?" Tzofi implored.

"I'm destroying the raiders' camp." Hadwin examined the bars for weakness. "You?"

“I’ll explain later. Let’s go!”

Hadwin finally sliced through the lock with the sword and Tzofi jumped out. They ran out of the jail and back into the sunlight. Besides the already decimated armory and pantry, the other buildings were burning, but much too slowly. At this rate, they could probably still be saved. Hadwin loosed nearly the rest of his arsenal at the buildings. They burst into flames and were destroyed once and for all. As Hadwin and Tzofi turned around to leave, they saw the entire raider army had amassed behind them. A leader stepped forward.

“Oh, you don’t get to go just yet,” he leered. “Not after you just destroyed our camp. Get them!”

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A tear ran down Kegan’s cheek as Acarya finished his tale. Everything that he had wondered about became clear. The dreams. Why he had no parents. Why his village was so quiet. Everything was planned to keep him safe from this evil village. Sobs threatened to erupt from his lungs. Kegan barely held them back.

“His name was Caedmon.”

Kegan gasped and a heavy breath escaped from his lips. He slouched forward and choked back tears. Finally, he paused and breathed deeply. “You said my dad was killed and my mom took me to another village,” he said slowly.

“Yes,” Acarya replied tersely.

“Then why wasn’t she there with me as I grew up?” Kegan searched Acarya’s face.

“I thought she would be,” Acarya paused and took a deep breath, “but I guess she sacrificed herself to help you.”

Kegan stood up. “What do you mean?” He gasped.

Why did this have to be so difficult? Acarya took two more deep breaths. “I don’t think her intent was ever to stay with you. She must have dropped you off and ran. Anything to lead the soldiers away from you.”

Kegan sat silent for a moment, trying to comprehend what he had heard. Both his parents sacrificed their lives to give him a life he never could have had otherwise. A quiet, peaceful life he had always just taken for granted. Both of his parents were dead.

“Let’s go then. What are we waiting for?” he yelled.

“You must complete your training,” Acarya replied.

"I'm good enough, see?" Kegan shot a flare of fire from each hand into the air. "I have to go now!"

"Kegan! Stop! The village isn't going anywhere and neither are you until you are done with your training."

Kegan sighed and walked to the other side of the field. This wasn't fair. Why couldn't he go? Now that he had heard the story of what the village had done, all he wanted to do was to go finish what his father started. Kegan looked across the field to Acarya and took a deep breath. He forced oxygen through his lungs and into the fire inside him. It raged in anticipation.

Acarya threw the throwing stick to his side. "Start by just shooting some small flames," he barked.

Kegan breathed deeply and channeled all his energy to his fingertips. With a lunge, he shot the flames out a meter before him. The waves of heat burned at his face and sweat dripped down his neck. After several seconds, Kegan let go and fell to the ground, completely out of breath.

"Good," Acarya praised, "much better than yesterday. Now do it again."

Kegan gritted his teeth and leaped up. This time, he visualized all the anger of what the village did to his parents and he intertwined it with the little energy he had left. The anger burned red-hot in his fingertips and it leaped with more power than he had before. Finally, he thrust his arms forward and shot the flames out. They blazed out twice as far as the last ones and felt twice as hot. After many seconds Kegan could feel his energy run out and he tried to pull back the flames, but the anger surged out. Kegan fell to one knee, and he was on the verge of blacking out. Then, suddenly, right as Kegan was about to collapse, the flames shot away in a fireball that landed in the pond and sent up a giant cloud of steam. Kegan felt the heat of the anger, raw, in his mind. As he started to get up, he collapsed, quickly losing consciousness, to the ground. The last thing he saw before the red conquered his vision was Acarya running over with a surprised, yet proud, expression on his face.

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Chapter 13: Bombs

As the raiders charged at them, Hadwin stopped and silenced the ranks with a single movement. He held the final unused liquid fire bomb.

"Let us go, or I'll decimate your army," he shouted.

The raider's angry expression turned to fear, then to a chuckling smile. "You won't throw it. If you do, you'll be regretting it for the rest of your life. Imagine putting so many people through so much pain. The pain of being burnt up by a fire that never went out. Imagine that happening to you."

Hadwin closed his eyes and tried to settle the conflict inside himself. This was his chance to take out nearly all of the raiders, but he didn't know if he could do it. He had to. It was the only way to save the village. Hadwin raised his arm and began his throw. The raiders' faces turned back to fear as they realized their leader's mistake. Some tried to run, though they realized it was too late. Hadwin saw their terrified faces and for that split second, remembered the villagers around him as the fiery rocks rained down from the sky. In that last moment before the fire bomb left his hand, Hadwin tilted his wrist and sent the missile flying over the heads of the raiders and into the middle of the ruined camp. Burning wooden planks from the surrounding structures were launched into the air with the explosion. The ground itself grew covered in the fiery gel. Hadwin looked to the flame in confusion as he heard a crackling sound. The sound of new wood burning. Hadwin, along with many of the raiders, peered towards the clearing at what appeared to be some mysterious wooden structure underground, uncovered by the blast. Then, not a moment later, the ground itself erupted. Fire rose in a towering column to extend past the canopy of the trees. Every remaining semblance of a building was simultaneously burnt to a crisp and blown apart by the shockwave. Hadwin crouched and braced himself as the air wave sent smoldering leaves and branches over the group. As the flame dissipated into the air, the raiders stood up and gaped at the massive crater in the middle of their former camp.

"Not the hidden ale supply!" A raider cried out.

"You idiot! Those were the fire bombs," the lead raider hissed at his underling. He turned back to Hadwin and Tzofi. "Ha! I knew you were too weak," he declaimed. "Now that that's out of the way, attack!"

Tzofi desperately looked around for a weapon. Hadwin saw her and looked down to his weapons. The sword's blade gleamed beside the spear's textured, reddish-brown shaft. His fingers brushed past the letters engraved upon the staff's handle. It was time to be creative. He pulled out the sword and tossed her his spear.

Tzofi looked to him in shock. "Wait, Hadwin, don't you need this to fight?"

"I've got a sword." Hadwin proudly shouted.

Tzofi scoffed at him. “Do you even know how to use that thing?”

Hadwin sassed back, “Yeah, I killed a tree with it.”

“What?”

The raiders quickly spread to surround Hadwin and Tzofi. Then the attack began. The whirlwind of spears and swords coming from every direction quickly began to take its toll. It was all Hadwin and Tzofi could do just to stay alive. Cuts and gashes started multiplying across their arms and legs and their weapons seemed heavier and heavier. The shocks of blocking heavy attacks were taking their tolls.

“We can’t hold up much longer!” Tzofi screamed. “Let’s go!”

Hadwin and Tzofi both suddenly started pushing out of the crowd as they stopped trying to attack and just focused on moving and staying alive. After several seconds, they burst through the edge of the clump of raiders and started sprinting away. The raiders followed at first, but soon gave up as their heavy weapons, armor, and shields slowed them down. Heavily panting, Tzofi and Hadwin finally reached their old village.

“Now that we’re safe, what happened?” Hadwin inquired.

“I made a mistake,” Tzofi confessed. “I trusted Llywarch.”

“Yeah, I knew that was a mistake, but what happened because you did?”

Tzofi glared at him, then started her story. “First, he took me to the raiders’ village. He was quiet and told me to be quiet too. He said that they had scouts that could spot us if we weren’t careful. He stood behind me and told me he’d watch for scouts and I should keep going forward to the raider camp. I crept ahead slowly and silently until I saw a clearing with some buildings in it. I turned around to get the go signal from Llywarch, but he wasn’t there. Suddenly, someone dropped down from the tree over me and two hands reached out of a bush and took my spear. I tried to fight back, but they bound my hands and legs and started carrying me into the village. I tried to escape but there were too many of them. They took me inside a large building that had barred cells in it. They threw me in one. Then Llywarch walked in.

‘Llywarch, they caught you too?’ I asked him. But he just chuckled and turned to talk to the jailer.

‘I brought the girl.’ He drawled. ‘Where’s my gold?’

The guard handed him a small bag of gold nuggets. I gasped. I’d never seen that much gold in one place at once. It had to be enough to buy an entire season’s harvest. ‘That’s it?’

Llywarch cried out.

‘Bring the boy and the chief and you’ll get more.’ the guard gruffly said.

‘Ah, don’t worry.’ Llywarch remarked. “The boy will come to free her, and you’ll have both of them. With them out of the way, I can get the chief.”

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Kegan came to, lying on his cot in his hut. He blinked a few times as he slowly woke up. Groggily, he trudged to the door and walked out. The late afternoon sun had just started to lessen its intensity and the day’s heat still lingered. Kegan jogged over to Acarya, who was quietly sitting on a rock and absentmindedly staring into the lake. As Kegan got closer, Acarya turned to face him.

“What happened out there today?” Acarya questioned.

“I don’t know. I guess I just pushed myself too hard.” Kegan just looked aside.

“No, I saw what you did. That wasn’t something you could simply push yourself to do.”

Acarya placed his hand on Kegan’s shoulder. “What actually happened?”

Kegan stared directly into Acarya’s eyes. “I was weak after my first blast. I didn’t think I had any energy left. I kind of subconsciously searched my mind for what the most powerful thing in it was. I needed something to draw my fire. I found my anger glowing in the back of my mind and I used it. It felt like it was burning me as I used it, but I felt powerful. I couldn’t pull it back when I tried and I realized I was losing control. I didn’t know what would happen, but I was scared. Then it all stopped, but I still felt the heat and power in my mind before I lost consciousness.”

“Kegan, don’t ever use anger to gain power. Anger is wild, reckless, and uncontrollable. It may give you power quickly, but it can destroy you just as fast.” Acarya lowered his voice and calmed down further. “That’s why your training is not complete. You must learn to derive your power from peace.”

“So, does that mean we’re still going for today?” Kegan jokingly groaned.

“Yes. Walk to the other side of the field. I want to you make a thin, controlled shield of fire and hold it for several seconds.” Acarya quickly added, “Without anger!”

Kegan took a few deep breaths then pushed the pure energy from his fingers. He formed the thin shield of fire and held it. It seemed almost like a glass shield, but with shimmering, orange currents running through it. The hot air emanating from the shield formed a blurry cloud

in front of Kegan's face. As he looked forward, he saw Acarya lurch back. Wait, that didn't make sense. Acarya had not brought out any throwing sticks. Suddenly a huge, fiery explosion in the middle of the pond broke Kegan's concentration and the fire disappeared.

"It wasn't me, I promise!" Kegan yelled out.

"I know!" Acarya shouted. "It's the village. They've found us!"

Kegan and Acarya sprinted to Acarya's hut and slammed the door shut, just in time to block a barrage of arrows. They quickly sat down to activate the lever and open the trap door before sliding into the basement. As they closed the trap door behind them, a giant explosion rocked the slide and the ground around them. Kegan did not expect to return to much of a hut above them. As he reached the underground room, Kegan realized how much he'd changed since he had last been here. Since he first really met Acarya.

"What do we do now? They've surrounded the area and have weapons that could destroy us in a straight out fight!" Kegan cried.

"We can't stay in here forever. We have no choice but to attack." Acarya answered.

"With what?" Kegan glanced around. They appeared to be in a barren room. "Besides, what happened to all your traps that were supposed to keep us safe?"

"Did you hear those explosions?" Acarya laughed dryly. "I made my traps to keep out people, not bombs."

Suddenly a loud squawk echoed down the tunnel, followed by a slightly singed, but otherwise unharmed Aetos. The small bubble of relief in Kegan's mind was quickly overcome by desperation as he remembered their situation again.

"What about all your," Kegan paused to search for the correct word, "I don't know, stuff, in the basement area?" he asked.

Acarya slowly opened a camouflaged doorway to a hidden tunnel. "I'm afraid that's our only option."

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"So Llywarch was actually with the raiders?" Hadwin asked. "I thought he was just trying to stir up trouble."

Tzofi silently nodded, looking off into the distance. After sitting for a few seconds, they both came to a realization. However, Hadwin was the one to voice it first.

"If Llywarch knew I left, he could be going for the chief right now!"

Hadwin and Tzofi immediately began to sprint back to the village. At first, Tzofi started off towards the old hideout, but seeing Hadwin go a different way, she turned to follow him. After running past their ruined village, they soon returned to the badger hole leading to the cave.

“What’s that supposed to be?” Tzofi confusedly asked.

“Just hurry up.” Hadwin barked.

After the short journey through the tunnel, Hadwin emerged into the cave. Upon hearing Llywarch’s voice, he ducked back into the tunnel and harshly shushed Tzofi. They peeked around the tunnel mouth and saw the flickering shadows from torches dancing across the walls. Farther into the cave, Llywarch was standing in front of the village, surrounded by a group of armed raiders. The villagers were tied up and forced on the ground. The few warriors seemed injured. No one seemed to be able to offer any resistance. All around the downed village were more armed raiders, though these seemed injured as if they had taken the grunt of the fight. Llywarch appeared to be saying something to the villagers, but Hadwin and Tzofi were too far away to hear it. They looked at each other in alarm and began to crawl back into the tunnel.

“This is a lot worse than we thought!” Tzofi angrily whispered.

“I know! He must have been led in by one of his little cronies back in the village,” Hadwin hissed back.

Tzofi slowly replied, “Well, it looked to me like he was standing alone at the front.”

They continued crawling through the grimy tunnels, until a bright circle of sunlight slowly grew in front of them. They made it out safely. For now, Hadwin and Tzofi ran quickly to the old hideout. Now that everyone knew where it was, no one would suspect it.

“What are we going to do now?” Tzofi cried.

“I don’t know!” Hadwin whispered. “What can we do?”

Tzofi looked at him desperately. “I don’t know! Help them? Or attack the raiders, or something!”

“Really? They took out all fifteen of our warriors and you think just you and I can do something?” Hadwin sighed and took a few steps away.

Tzofi followed after him. “Well, we have to try!”

“I know. Now that they’ve got the chief and captured all the warriors, we’re the only people that can make a difference.” Hadwin bit his worn down nails.

“The chief isn’t dead yet, though,” Tzofi noted.

Hadwin looked at her curiously. “What makes you so sure?”

Tzofi glanced back in the direction of the cave. “I saw him tied up at the front of the crowd. I don’t think we have long before they get rid of him, though.”

A rustle in the bushes disturbed their conversation. Hadwin and Tzofi grabbed their spears and cautiously walked towards the shrubbery. With a sudden movement, Hadwin leaped forward and yanked the bush away. Becan, Basim, and Dakarai were crouching down, trying to seem as small as possible. Basim raised his hand and meekly piped out,

“Can we help?”

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Acarya led Kegan around the basements, tersely describing the various defenses he had set up. First one was the supply of tranquilizer bombs. The exploded on impact, flooding the air with sedating chemicals and dulling the enemies’ senses. Next were the sting bombs. These sent out noxious chemicals out that burned the enemies’ eyes. Right next to them were the black eggs. They were hollowed out egg shells filled with crushed glass and chilly powder. Crush them in your hand and swish the insides into someone’s eyes, and they’ll be blinded for hours. Kegan examined his choices and made a plan.

“We’ll start with the two bomb types then continue.”

“Follow me.”

Acarya and Kegan ran through the underground tunnels until they approached what appeared to be a doorway. Acarya shushed him and cautiously peered around the outside. He gestured for Kegan to come forward and they looked out the door. It opened up at the base of a tree behind the lake. They brought forward the bombs and began to locate the enemies. In front and to the left was the main force, surrounding the stone hut and waiting for Kegan and Acarya to come out. More to the right was the group of catapults, surrounded by their powerful and fiery ammo. All around the area were archers, just waiting for the right moment to strike. Kegan heard a rustle beside him and looked, only to see Acarya running back through the tunnel, towards him.

“Where’d you go?” Kegan whispered.

“Forgot. One more.” Acarya replied, while smiling and holding up smoke bombs. They continued to view the area until they both nodded and prepared to begin the attack. They loaded the bombs into a giant slingshot and prepared to fire. They counted down slowly. 3, 2, 1, silence. Kegan and Acarya looked at each other in alarm then back at the slingshot. Finally, the trigger

hook released and the bombs were shot into the crowd of waiting assailants. First a quiet collection of thumps, as the projectiles slammed into the soldiers and ground. Then they delivered their payloads. Clouds of smoke flew up into the air, obscuring Kegan's and Acarya's vision of the scene before them. The smoke was followed by screams as the stinging chemicals spread and ate away at the enemy eyes. Acarya grabbed Kegan's arm and handed him a strip of cloth. They each wrapped a makeshift mask around their eyes, noses, and mouths and stepped into the confusion.

Chapter 14: Circles

Everything was quiet except the occasional scream as comrades attacked each other in the disarray. The smoke slowly swirled, almost seeming to taunt Kegan as he blindly ventured through the trees. All they needed to do was escape. A shadow loomed through the smoke. Kegan jumped away and grabbed his spear. It was just a tree. The gnarled branches seemed ominous in the noxious fog. Kegan looked back to Acarya for reassurance. Acarya just urged him on. Kegan held one of the black eggs in his left hand. Suddenly, the shadow of a walking man appeared. Kegan leaped to attack, but Acarya held him back.

"The tranquilizer bombs dulled their senses. We'll see them before they see us. Don't attack if you don't have to," Acarya whispered.

Kegan dumbly nodded and looked forward once again. As they walked, the smoke slowly thinned as they went farther and farther from the clearing. Finally, Kegan came into the thick woods and the smoke was nearly gone. He ripped the bandana off his face and took a deep breath. His eyes were red and smarting, but were still much better than those of the soldiers. He turned back to Acarya.

"We're pretty far from my hideout now," Acarya muttered. "I know somewhere else we can go, but keep on your watch. I still don't feel safe."

They silently continued, spears and black eggs at the ready. The last wisps of smoke swirled carefully around the dead, dark tree branches. A drop of sweat crept down the corner of Kegan's chin, and he nervously brushed it away. This was it. Not much farther. Suddenly, the whole world rushed around Kegan's head as he was violently yanked into the air. The blood rushed to his eyes and everything became red-tinted and fuzzy. Then, his vision cleared and Kegan saw where he was. A rope was wrapped around his ankle, and he was suspended from a tree branch. He looked behind him and saw that Acarya was in the same situation. Acarya facial

expression suddenly twisted into fear. Kegan turned back around and saw soldiers walking out of the trees. These ones didn't seem to have been hit by the sting bombs or tranquilized. Each one was carrying a sword and was suited in flexible leather armor. They quickly encircled Kegan and Acarya, then looked to their leader for further instruction.

"Eh, they're too dangerous. Just kill 'em."

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"How did you escape?" Tzofi quickly asked.

"Um," Basim muttered, "tunnels?"

Tzofi loomed down over him. "Wait, what tunnels? Why didn't we know about them?"

Basim shrugged and looked to Becan. "Well, we played in them a lot before the raiders came."

Tzofi thought for a moment, then turned back to them. "So you guys know your way through the tunnels at the back of the cave?"

The three boys nodded. Tzofi excitedly began to pace back and forth. "We can sneak through the back tunnels," she murmured, "they won't notice us. We could pick 'em off slowly until there were few enough to for the village to take them. It could work!"

"No!" Hadwin interrupted. "It wouldn't work. The raiders have the villagers as hostages and could kill them if we try attacking. Plus, how many times do you really think we could attack before we were found, captured, and probably killed?"

The smiles on the faces of the other four quickly dropped as they realized the truth in Hadwin's words. There was no easy, glorious way to save their village with what they had. They needed help to destroy the raiders.

"So, what do you think we should do?" Tzofi quietly asked. "Every person in our village is captured, every building in our village is burned down, and all our tools and weapons have been either stolen or destroyed."

Hadwin sighed. He turned to the direction of the old village. "Follow me." He didn't expect to find anything of value, but maybe, just maybe, there was something there. The ruins of the destroyed village soon came into view. The charred remains of various buildings lay rotten and overgrown. The underbrush had already begun its work to reclaim the area. A half burned away, giant slab of wood laid amidst the destruction. It seemed hardly disturbed by the plants despite the condition of the planks around it. Hadwin jogged over to it and flipped it onto its side.

He winced, noticing the hordes of maggots that had made their home in the board. Hadwin got up to look elsewhere, when something caught his eye. In the upper left corner of the board, there was an engraving that had remained unburned and uneaten. Hadwin looked closer and saw it was the first panel of the chieftain's door. The lone, undisturbed panel showed the rich, prospering tribe of Ifgia.

If this is the door, then I must be inside the chief's hut! Hadwin thought. *There has to be something here.* Hadwin started picking up blackened wooden planks and throwing them away from the hut. Anything he found could help take back his village.

"Hadwin, what are you doing?" Tzofi asked.

Hadwin continued to excavate the pile. "I'm looking for something that might help. This is where the chief's hut was."

Tzofi walked around to stand in front of Hadwin. "What do you think you're going to find."

"I don't know." Hadwin looked away and mumbled, "I guess maybe something that could maybe lead us to Ifgia."

Tzofi angrily sighed, "But Ifgia was destroyed and abandoned like a century ago!"

"I know! They've had a century to come back." Hadwin briefly glanced to her, his eyes shining with dogged determination.

Tzofi stopped and thought for a second. That was true. If their village, Igaezg, was built in hardly over a century, one of the greatest villages of all time could maybe return in that same amount of time. That is if they weren't all killed to start with. "What do you think we'll even find that'll help?"

"Well, there had to have been a map to Ifgia." Hadwin insisted. "I mean, our first chieftain probably had to make one before he left. Plus, they needed it when they sent messengers for help. Also, I don't think the chieftains wouldn't keep important things like these."

Tzofi bit her lips and glanced around the dirt patch. "What about the fire bombing. What's the chance anything's even left?"

Hadwin turned and sighed. "I don't know. I just have a feeling that something's here."

Tzofi skeptically looked Hadwin in the eye. "While you look for a map to a dead tribe that's probably not even there, I'll see what actual weapons I can find from our village and the

raider's ruined camp."

As Tzofi stormed off, Hadwin turned back to the dirt and burnt planks. Everything pointed against the odds of him finding anything close to what he needed. Hadwin threw down the burnt door and turned to follow Tzofi. He almost walked away from the ruins of the chief's hut, but some force held him back. He had to find it. There had to be something there. He would find this hidden treasure and save the village.

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The squadron leader's words quickly sparked Kegan and Acarya into action. In perfect synchronization they swung their upper bodies up to their legs and pulled themselves onto the branches they hung by, barely avoiding the first swinging swords. Acarya frantically picked at the knot, but the string was too tightly knotted for his adrenaline pumped fingers to untangle. Suddenly the branch he was on jerked, almost knocking him out of the tree. A soldier's sword was stuck in the branch, less than an inch from his foot. Acarya quickly cut his bonds on the open blade and looked to Kegan. He was just pulling his ankles out of the charred remains of his rope. Acarya chuckled and they both climbed higher in the tree, stopping on a clump of thick branches.

"What do we do now?" Kegan shouted in desperation. "We're completely outnumbered, weaponless, surrounded, and stuck in a tree."

"Well, you've got your fire," Acarya replied.

A twang resounded over the swinging swords. Kegan swung his head around in fright. Acarya was holding an arrow in his hand.

"Did you catch that?" Kegan asked incredulously.

"They only shot one," Acarya replied sheepishly.

"How are you so calm?" Kegan blurted, "We're being attacked by at least a couple dozen men and apart from my fire, their weapons seem to be way better than whatever we've got."

"Don't worry," Acarya said, "whatever these men may muster could never compare what I've put you through." He dismissively shook his head. "That's not important right now, though. What's important is that they're shooting arrows and we need to move!"

Acarya flicked the arrow down into the soldiers and was rewarded with a pain-filled shriek. He grabbed a sturdy branch off the tree and motioned for Kegan to do the same.

"Back to day one combat training," Kegan whispered.

“For me, yes. For you, send fire down the length of the branch and make a fire staff,” Acarya muttered.

Kegan shot tiny puffs of flame up through his fingertips, then grinned in approval. “Then why do I need the branch?”

“You won’t need as much of your own energy when the wood burns too.” Acarya chuckled as Kegan progressively shot larger and larger balls of fire into the air. “Plus, I’m sure you’re used to having some weight in your weapon when fighting like this.”

Kegan nodded and smiled. He grabbed a branch and experimentally twirled it around. A fine hefty weight. Seemed to be balanced perfectly. He gripped the staff at the middle and sent a pulse of energy through his weapon. Red flames leaped down to both ends of the stick, quickly engulfing it and shooting out from both ends. Leaves as far as a meter away on both sides were blackened and burned away.

“Not anger, Kegan!” Acarya yelled. “Draw your energy from peace.”

Kegan laughed incredulously. “Peace? Here?”

“Do it. I’ll cover you,” Acarya solemnly spoke.

Kegan close his eyes and took a deep breath. He remembered his calm village life. He and Hadwin running through the forest, laughing, playing Grabber. His journey through the jungle, lying down on the bare ground and looking up at the pristine, starry night.

As Kegan sat, Acarya leaped through the branches, attempting to stop as many of the arrows as he could. Acarya twirled two branches, knocking nearly all of the arrows out of the air that could have harmed him or Kegan. Acarya winced as one glanced off his ankle, drawing a stream of blood that stained the leaves below. Another one caught his shoulder just as he was about to turn around. Kegan better figure himself out quickly. Each arrow darted closer than the last. Another grazed past his leg. A hum zipped past his ear. Then silence. Acarya looked out from the tree to see the reason for the archers’ stopping. He barely avoided a line of arrows that shot past a brown blur that flew across the clearing. The bird! It turned out to be useful after all. Acarya stripped the twigs from a branch and broke himself a new staff.

Kegan opened his eyes and took a deep breath. He forced energy through the branch again. This time, bright, bluish-white flames ate along its length. They felt easier to control, almost quieter, but Kegan could feel his staff almost humming with power. “Let’s go.”

They jumped out of the tree at the archers, momentarily stunning them and stopping the

barrage of arrows. Kegan sent a pulse of flame out, burning and snapping away all of the bowstrings and charring the quivers. He jumped around the archers, twirling his staff and destroying the bows and arrows completely. At his side, Acarya darted around, whacking with his stick and quickly sending most of the archers into unconsciousness. Acarya and Kegan looked to each other and smiled. They had taken out the archers. Then they turned around and noticed the army spreading to surround them. Kegan pulled out his Grabber rope and tied it to a branch on the ground. He sent heat down the rope and the branch burst into flame. Acarya looked at him with a grim expression. The warriors were slowly closing the small circle they had left for the two. They were coming closer, only five meters away. Acarya looked again to Kegan and then looked to the point where the circle was thinnest. Kegan nodded and fearfully turned to the men. Three meters away, Acarya prepped himself to attack. Almost in range... “Now!”

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Chapter 15: The Forest

Hadwin winced. He struck his fingernail on something solid in the ground. It was probably just a rock. What else could it be? Hadwin stopped and thought. It could maybe be maps or weapons. Maybe it wasn't a rock. Hadwin resumed his digging with renewed vigor, quickly uncovering the sides of his find. The more he uncovered of it, the bigger it seemed to get. It was nearly half a meter across when he found the edges. He grabbed it and pulled it free of the soil. It was a rough, gray rock.

When he pulled it out of the soil, Hadwin felt a throb of disappointment spreading through his chest. He hoisted the heavy stone above his head and chucked it at a nearby tree. It fell less than half the way there and Hadwin turned around to go back to digging, when he saw something strange out of the corner of his eye. He walked over to where the rock had fallen and saw it had broken into two halves. Hadwin furled his eyebrows. This had looked like granite, and granite did not break that easily. He lifted the halves and saw the rock had broken on what looked like a clean, horizontal seam that ran around it. The strangest part was that the halves were hollow on the inside. Hadwin picked up each down-facing dome and looked at them carefully. They seemed to have had a hollow cavity the size of his head between them, which had been protected during the raiders' firestorm.

Hadwin looked down where the domes had been and saw their contents had spilled out. His jaw dropped as he saw the amazing treasures that had been stored in the safe. Half the space

inside the rock was taken up by a huge nugget of polished, shining gold. Hadwin had no doubt it was purer than anything they had had in their treasury. Beside it were drawings of military procedures. These must have been devised during the wars and kept for later reference. Next to those was a rolled up scroll showing a map of the forest for hundreds of miles around Igazeg, showing every village and landmark that had been discovered over the years since the village had been founded. A couple dozen miles away, Ifgia shone like a star on the grimy, off-white paper. Hadwin crumpled the map into his pocket and checked for anything else he missed. One last scroll lay untouched in the dirt. Hadwin picked it up and unrolled it. Before him was a detailed map, showing all of the jungles, canyons, and raging rivers that lay between him and his goal.

Hadwin looked up and sighed in frustration. He defeated the raiders in one battle, then they burned down the village. He saved Tzofi, then they kidnaped the village. He found a map, but its path would probably kill him before any sword.

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Kegan twirled his staff of flame, easily fending off the whirlwind of blades coming at him. He almost laughed. The soldiers flinched away with every flaring swing, pulsing blast. Kegan smirked. They were weak, cowardly. Kegan smiled as the army threw themselves at him and were mercilessly thrown off. Slowly, though, the corners of Kegan's mouth fell. A dull ache began to reside in the deepest tissues of Kegan's muscles. It had to be their sheer numbers, Kegan thought. They can keep sending fresh men, but I have to keep fighting. However, Kegan knew that wasn't it. That couldn't be the only reason for the gashes that proliferated on his arms and legs. Kegan looked into the eyes of his attackers and suddenly realized the truth. They lost their fear and were attacking with a fierceness that was quickly taking its toll. Kegan's strength was slowly ebbing from his muscles, and his face fell into a look of desperation. He had one last diversion left.

"Acarya, cover!" Kegan yelled.

Acarya nodded and switched from his more offensive style to a more defensive fighting style to protect he and Kegan. Kegan pointed his staff to the air and roared, shooting all the fire out of it into the sky. The fireball spread into a blanket of tiny, stinging flames and rained down on the soldiers, leaving a neat, untouched circle where he and Acarya were standing.

The soldiers had fallen to the ground in fright, but none received any major injuries. It was only a matter of time before they figured that out. Kegan and Acarya sprinted to and through a side of the circle. A few seconds after Kegan and Acarya cleared the circle, a clanking sounded through the trees as the garrison rose to follow them. Acarya and Kegan nearly doubled their speed as the army popped out the trees behind them.

"What do we do now?" Kegan yelled desperately.

"I have another hideout. Just follow me," Acarya grunted.

They continued the run, Kegan's short, staccato breaths overpowering the sound of Acarya's long, steady breathing. Dozens of questions lay in Kegan's mind. However, every time he opened his mouth to ask, the exertion of the day forced his words into another series of pants. Acarya turned to face him. "It's coming up in just a minute," he muttered.

An approaching tree line came into sight. Kegan doubled his speed. They were almost there. Almost to the next clearing hideout, where they could be safe. They could rest and then keep training. Almost there.

Acarya felt a similar feeling to Kegan, running beside him. The old ache in Acarya's bones began to ebb as he forgot the battles and chases they had been through this day. It had all worked. They were going to a new home. A home that would hold them for at least another few months. A small breeze blew across his face, soothing and cool. A leaf fell from a tree at the edge of his clearing. There was something different about it. It didn't fall the same way as the leaves on that tree normally did. Something about the spin, the flowing glide. It was different. It couldn't have been from that tree. Suddenly Acarya realized what it was. "Kegan, stop!"

Kegan heard Acarya's voice right as he burst into the clearing. He immediately turned around and saw Acarya jog through the trees. "What?" Kegan asked.

Acarya's started to respond, but suddenly, his eyes flew wide open and his lower lip began to tremble. Kegan turned around and saw hundreds of warriors step through the trees. He heard a rustle behind him and turned just in time to see dozens more climbing down from the branches. He turned to Acarya.

"We can take 'em, right?" Kegan asked weakly. "I mean, ten or a hundred, only a few can actually be fighting us at once."

Acarya sighed. "I don't know. This time, I just don't know." For the first time, Kegan noticed Acarya's bloodshot eyes, the gashes covering his arms, legs, face, and body. Kegan

noticed his arrow wounds, spilling blood onto the ground. Acarya looked exhausted, and Kegan didn't feel much better. They doggedly assumed their fighting stances as the army closed in. Before they knew it, the fight began. Everywhere around Kegan, swords were flashing and swinging, slowly working in closer to Kegan's body and past his defenses. This battle seemed oddly similar to the earlier one that day, but in this one, Kegan knew he couldn't win. His staff slowly began to fall apart as the metal swords easily cut into its interior. Kegan clobbered the nearest man with what was left of his weapon and grabbed their sword, swinging it back just in time to block yet another shot aimed at his neck.

Acarya noticed Kegan's new weapon and quickly followed, switching his breaking staff for an enemy's blade. The dull thunks of metal on wood were quickly replaced by the sharp clanging of swords.

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"Tzofi, Tzofi, I found it!" Hadwin yelled as he burst into the old raiders' camp. He proudly held up his prize, the map to Ifgia.

"Wait, what is it?" she asked.

"The map. The map to Ifgia!" Hadwin had a child's grin as he proudly held up his find.

"Wait a minute, let me see that." Tzofi grabbed the map and examined it. "This looks really dangerous. Are you sure we should take the chance?" she asked.

"It's our only chance," Hadwin said, "Whatever the risk, we have to do it."

"Excuse me?"

"This is the only way we can save the village."

"That's not what I was asking about. I was wondering when you suddenly became in charge and could decide exactly what we *have* to do and where we *have* to go."

Hadwin raised his eyebrows at Tzofi, incredulous, as Becan, Basim, and Dakarai popped out of the trees. "Go where?" they asked.

Tzofi sighed. "On some dangerous journey to an extinct village that Hadwin thinks will help us. But we're not going anyway."

"Why not?" Becan whined.

"Hadwin's smart," Basim added.

"And why do you get to decide?" Dakarai punctuated this remark with a fierce pout at Tzofi and a quick grin back at Hadwin.

Hadwin laughed. "I guess you're outnumbered now."

Tzofi sighed again, this time louder than last. "No. You can't do this." Another sigh. "You're so mean. Why do you always - " A third sigh. "Fine. What do we need?"

Hadwin smirked. "According to the map, a lot more that we're going to be able to get, but we can get started gathering now." He grabbed a stick and started scratching in the dirt. "A boat, some rope, something for fire, food."

"That's it? I guess that's doable," Tzofi murmured, as she ran off to collect for the journey she was dead set against just a few minutes ago. Hadwin turned to Becan, Basim, and Dakarai. Pictures of raging rivers, deadly jungles, burning valleys surfaced from the aging parchment to the forefront of his mind. "You guys can't come."

"Why not?" Becan whined again.

"It's too dangerous." Hadwin declared.

"If you don't let us go with you, we'll follow you anyways and you won't know where we are or if we're safe," Becan stated boldly.

Hadwin angrily sighed and stormed off. Becan tagged behind him, with Basim and Dakarai in tow. "So now that we're coming, what should we go get?"

"Go find food or something." Hadwin angrily muttered. Hadwin turned around just in time to see them run off into the forest. Now he knew how Tzofi felt.

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Kegan's leaden arms rung from the blows his weapon received. He no longer had the energy to raise his sword to take down another opponent. It was all he could do to sum up the power to block the strikes to his heart. Soon that would be gone too. He looked to Acarya, his eyes pleading for help, but Acarya just as bad off as he was.

Acarya saw the armies massing around the tiny circle of he, Kegan, and the soldiers immediately around them. They couldn't win this time. There was only one thing left for him to do. A vision from seventeen years ago flashed into Acarya's mind. He was younger, stronger, but less experienced. Beside him fought Caedmon, deflecting off all attacks with ease. The battle went on. Acarya felt his muscles start to cramp up and become sore. He flashed between his vision of the past and reality. Kegan became Caedmon, and Caedmon became Kegan. All he could see were the flashing swords and Kegan, no Caedmon. Caedmon told him to run and gave him an urgent look; now it was Kegan's desperate face. In that moment, Acarya knew what he

had to do. Caedmon didn't die for Acarya and Kegan to fall to the same fate. For them to follow him to the tips of the shining blades. Caedmon didn't die for Acarya to grow up and live forever as an old man in the forest.

"Kegan!" Acarya gasped. "When I say, you have to run. Fast. As fast as you can."

"Acarya, no!" Kegan pleaded. "I'm confused. I need you."

Acarya now saw himself where Kegan now stood. He remembered that same day so many years ago when he gave the same fight. And just like before, both he and Kegan knew what was to happen. "I've trained you well." Acarya smiled.

Kegan gave a weak smile and nod. Acarya gave him one last smile, then leaped and swung his sword with all his might. It clashed with one of the many blades with so much force, the battle-weary weapons shattered. Shards of steel dug themselves into the faces and bodies of all around the attack. Acarya winced as a dozen new wounds spilled blood from his body, but he couldn't stop now. Acarya went into a frenzy, clearing the stunned soldiers with his broken blade and making a path for Kegan. "Hurry!" He panted.

Kegan ran up behind Acarya and followed him as he beat a path through the men with his blur of a blade. Kegan clumsily fended off the soldiers as they rushed from behind to try to close in on Acarya. Finally, Acarya's last rush began to fade. The fire finally began to die from Acarya's limbs, and he knew this was it. Acarya's heart thumped in his chest, faster, faster. Swords sliced fresh lacerations into his arms and legs. *Thu-thump thu-thump thu-thump*. Acarya collapsed, blood pumping from far too many wounds. He wheezed a last breath. "Kegan, go!"

Just a few men stood between Kegan and the freedom of the trees. He looked back and saw Acarya fall to the ground. There, alone, he seemed small, weak. Almost deflated, as if the life he had possessed had just leaked away. Acarya weakly mouthed the word "go" before the soldiers closed in on him. The first sword swung towards him. Kegan turned around and ran before he saw the result. As he ran, he heard Acarya's scream as the sword strikes finally reached their targets. Tears blurred Kegan's vision, but the moisture was wicked away as he ran into the wind. Faster, faster. All Kegan could see in his mind was Acarya softly whispering his last word. Faster, faster. All he could hear was Acarya's last scream. The sword plunging into his flesh. Tiny, salty rivulets crawled down Kegan's cheeks, but he wiped them away with his wrist. Faster, faster. Sparks began to fly from his feet as Kegan ran faster, away from the soldiers and away from himself. A root caught Kegan's foot, and he stumbled, but quickly recovered. A stray

branch lashed his ankle and Kegan stumbled once more, losing much of his speed. A small rock finally brought him to the ground. Kegan tried to get up, but he was just too weak. His life leaked out through the blood of his wounds. They would find him and kill him just like they killed Acarya. Kegan's chest heaved as heavy sobs emptied the tears from his eyes. Soon, his chest stopped, his eyes stopped, and his mind was taken by the sheer exhaustion that had loomed over since the first arrow.

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Part 2

Chapter 11

Hadwin disappointedly scanned over what they had gathered. A bunch of vines, a wooden board, and some acorns. So much for rope, a boat, and food. Hadwin sighed and looked to the other four. "This is - " he started to reprimand them for the little they brought, but then he saw the bright and hopeful faces of Becan, Basim, Dakarai, and Tzofi. " - this is great. We can keep gathering as we go."

He looked to the yellow, fading map and started charting out their course. He turned in place until he had correctly oriented his direction with his old village and the forest. The black dashed line on the parchment led straight into the heart of the forest, after which it hit a clearing with a valley. Then more jungle. Then across a river. Then more forest. Then Ifgia.

Hadwin turned around. "Let's go. Bring everything except the board." He started walking into the forest, and the others followed close behind.

The eerie silence that had permeated the air quickly disappeared as they stepped into the trees. Chirping of crickets and cicadas came from everywhere around his feet, and the leaves above him always seemed to rustle in little bunches. Hadwin didn't know if it was the wind, squirrels, or something he'd rather not know about. He gently ran his fingers over the carved letters upon his spear handle. With no tangible enemies, it didn't serve much use in the forest. He shivered as a creeping cold sneaked down his back. The golden sunlight was all but gone from the new ground they walked upon. Hadwin took a quick glance back and saw the others were feeling similarly. Tzofi worriedly looked around as Becan, Basim, and Dakarai huddled up between Tzofi and him. Slowly, day fell to dusk, and dusk fell to night. The air turned to mist as the temperature dropped. They kept going, each shivering as the chilly air penetrated the thin clothes they wore. Suddenly, a tiny stream of water fell onto Hadwin's head. He turned around in

confusion, but none of the others seemed to have noticed. He turned back forward and continued walking. A few seconds later, Tzofi cried out.

“What happened?” Hadwin quickly asked.

“Nothing. Just some water fell on my head,” she said. She noticed the water dripping off Hadwin’s head, and they both looked up. The leaves of the canopy seemed to be under a barrage of tiny missiles, being thrown every which way. Silver drops of light collected on leaves and slowly converged as they fell from the lowest trees as streams of water.

Hadwin’s jaw slowly dropped. “It’s raining, and we hardly even felt it.” He murmured. Hadwin felt as if they were in the stomach of a gigantic beast. Neither the sun nor rain could touch them. Exhausted, the five curled up beneath the giant leaves of a low growing palm and dropped to sleep.

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Kegan’s mind slowly faded awake as his eyes fuzzily began to open. He looked around. Branches, leaves. He was sleeping outside. On bare dirt. “Acarya,” he cried weakly , “Acarya, where are we?”

Kegan’s eyes clamped back shut, and he sighed as he began to feel aches and pains throughout his body and limbs. “Acarya, where are you?” he croaked. Then it all exploded in his mind. Turning around and seeing Acarya saying his last words. All the battles, the death, the pain, but most of all, the deadweight feeling of loss in his chest. It seemed that something was empty within him, that something was missing. Then right next to it lay the heavy sorrow and anger that was slowly accumulating.

What was he supposed to do now? Acarya told Kegan they were close to the village, but he never mentioned in what direction it was. Kegan could be off by a tenth of a turn and miss it by a hundred meters. He sighed and just started walking. If he was going in the right direction, he’d hit the village. If he was going in the wrong direction, he’d go back home. If he was somewhere in between, who the hell cared. He walked for hours, never pausing for food, water, or rest. He tuned out every thought from his mind and just made himself numb to anything that had happened. Slowly, the little light that shined through the trees began to dim, but Kegan kept walking. It became dark, then pitch black. Finally Kegan stumbled over his own feet and collapsed to the ground. There would be no more traveling tonight. Kegan sat cross legged and cleared his mind. He tried to think of the happiest and most peaceful times of his life, but they

seemed to be marred by the scar left from the battle. He took a deep breath and pushed a pulse of fire from his hands. It came out red and raging. He tried to calm himself again, but the result was no different. Frustrated, Kegan sent a voracious tongue of flame into the ground until the very rocks glowed bright red. In that moment, Kegan realized he would never achieve those pure white flames again. He had seen too much, been through too much, and the only thing on his mind now was vengeance.

Kegan's eyes shot open in the morning sun. His stomach contracted with a loud growl, and his throat and tongue were almost too swollen for him to speak. He staggered down to a clump of ferns, sparkling in the morning dew. He yanked them out of the ground and squeezed them into his mouth, dripping out the few drops that had condensed upon the plants throughout the dawn. He needed more. Kegan lurched toward the faint sound of flowing water and soon came to a stream. He cupped water in his hands and instantly boiled it, sanitizing the river's juice. He then quickly drank it, ignoring the scalding burns on his tongue. Several minutes later, the thirst was satisfied, but Kegan's stomach felt worse than before with the extra effort he had exerted. He looked into the stream. Little fish seemed to look back as they darted through the water. Kegan absentmindedly turned around to take a branch to make into a fishing spear. No, he needed food now. He thrust a net of fire into the water and slowly drew it under the shimmering waves. The hot flames vaporized the water and created air channels through which the fiery strands could run. Fish inquisitively swam into the bright sparks and flames, but were quickly snuffed out as their delicate flesh was singed by the burning heat.

Kegan emotionlessly pulled the cold fish out of the now warm water. He slit them down their slim abdomens and engorged his raging stomach on the white meat. He picked up another one, about to cut it open. Swords flashed, cut. Acarya. He threw it back onto the soft dirt, but it lay stiff and cold. Kegan longed to gently place it back into the water. To let it swim once more. To give it another chance. But his flames could never bring life, only death and destruction.

Kegan continued to walk, ignoring the clenched knot in his stomach. Midday, he ripped a water vine from a tree and refreshed his throat. The hunger lessened temporarily, but the pain returned with a vengeance several minutes later. He started picking up acorns as he walked and finally filling himself with protein. He winced at the bitter taste of the tannin, but his hunger overcame any other feelings. If only he had learned how to leach the tannin from the nuts.

As dark began to fall, Kegan started to feel a sharp pain in his gut. At first, he assumed it

was the hunger that had continuously plagued him, but it grew much worse. He fell to his knees as he grabbed his stomach, desperate to find the pain, find the pain and pull it out. It grew and grew until it slowly began to consume Kegan. He whimpered as he curled up and tried to sleep. The toxic tannin from the acorns had accumulated within Kegan, and now he was about to pay for his latest full meal. He crawled over to a ditch and clenched his stomach. A train of vomit crawled up into Kegan's mouth and down into the pit. His throat burned as the acidic bile seared where he couldn't claw at it, couldn't fight it. Kegan collapsed, his throat still contracting, despite having nothing more to push out. Eventually, the pain began to subside. Eventually Kegan fell asleep. And eventually, the forest fell quiet once more.

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The rising sun shot golden beams of light through the tiny spaces between the millions of leaves. The very air was green from the tint of the chlorophyll that abounded all around. As the morning sun rose, the forest came to life. The still silence slowly swelled into a symphony of sound. Chirps of crickets and cicadas joined the intermittent croaks of frogs around the streams. Blue jays called out to their partners through the brightening skies.

Hadwin slowly peeled his eyes open. His senses were immediately bombarded by the sights, sounds, and smells of the forest. He looked beside him and saw Tzofi, Becan, Basim, and Dakarai sleeping soundly around him. Yawning profusely, Hadwin slowly stood up, stretching his now sore back as he slowly looked around. They were surrounded by an ocean of trees. He began to search the soaked ground for food and reasonable firewood. Neither seemed to be anywhere in sight.

Hadwin stumbled through the ground weeds as he searched intently for anything that could be edible. He spied a familiar looking bunch of tall grass. Hadwin yanked it from the dirt, and to his delight, found himself looking at a small onion. The young ones lacked the bitter flavor of the mature onions, and they were said to be quite refreshing. Hadwin tentatively nibble its edge. It had a fresh crunch, not unlike that of an apple. Hadwin took another nip at the onion. It wasn't very sweet, but had a fresh texture that quickly woke him up. Hadwin examined the grasses around where he had found the first onion and quickly added several more to his pack.

As he walked back to the others, a bright, yellow dot caught the corner of Hadwin's eyes. He turned and walked to them, quickly realizing he had found a dandelion patch. Hadwin quickly picked dozens of leaves and added them to the onions. Looked like they were having

salad.

Hadwin arrived back at the palm in time to see Tzofi, Basim, Becan, and Dakarai starting to get up, slowly blinking.

“What’s for breakfast?” Becan griped.

“Salad!” Hadwin smiled.

“With what?” Tzofi asked suspiciously, furling her eyebrows.

Hadwin dumped his packful of fresh onions and dandelion leaves. The hungry children lunged at the gathering and grabbed their breakfast. Tzofi jumped up and stopped them, nearly as fast as they went. “These are straight from the ground!” She yelled. “We have to wash them.”

She pulled a canteen from her pocket and started filling it with forgotten rainwater, dripping from the leaves around them. Within a couple minutes, it was full with sparkling clear water. She disappointedly glanced around their soaked surroundings.

“What do you want?” Hadwin impatiently asked.

“We need fire to boil the water and clean it.” She sighed.

“What are we going to make fire out of?”

Tzofi looked around, slowly shaking her head. She grabbed a waterlogged sapling and snapped it against a heavy tree. Though the water could not penetrate to the tree’s core, that area was still green and living. Hadwin scanned the branches above them. Water dripped from the sodden bark. Then he saw it. A small clump of moss precariously hung from a stub of a long gone twig on a high up branch. The thin tendrils hadn’t soaked up much water, so what they had taken was already evaporated out. Hadwin grabbed a handful of dirt and pebbles and chucked it at the branch. The shower of projectiles struck the branch, sending down a cascade of barely held up water droplets and just barely dislodging the moss. Hadwin ran as the light package gently drifted to the ground. Hadwin snatched it from the air, just before it landed in a puddle and was rendered completely useless.

“Becan, Basim, Dakarai, get twigs. Peel off the wet bark and try to dry them,” Hadwin shouted. He pulled his pyrite fire rocks from his pack and quietly admired their slight glint in the dim light. Hadwin placed the precious tinder on his dry pack and started to strike the rocks together. As the gold met gold, tiny sparks shot at the tinder. Many missed and sizzled out as they hit wet leaves and branches. Hadwin furled his brow and struck the rocks together with increased force. Showers of sparks replaced the singular specks that flew out before. A group

struck the center of the moss and it began to smoke. Hadwin gently lifted it and blew into its base. The smoke grew into a thick plume until the first orange flare appeared. The tiny ember grew to consume the easy fuel. Hadwin looked to Tzofi and the others. They had cleared an area of dry dirt and built a tiny cone of twigs. Hadwin ran to their work and quickly deposited the embers under the twigs as his palms began to burn. He directed a thin stream of air around the base of the glow, causing it to grow into a tiny flame. The flame heated the air as it licked the moss and twigs. The twigs steamed as the water was evaporated out of them. Then just as the moss was nearly gone, the first twig caught fire. The rest followed like dominoes until the speck of heat grew to a hearty fire that quickly dried and burned the damp twigs they gave it. Hadwin stared into the fire with a decidedly absent minded sense of accomplishment.

* * *

Chapter 2

Kegan pulled his eyes away. For the last hour, he had laid down, awake, staring at tiny flames he sent from his finger. He had to do something. Kegan sprung up, wincing as he felt the lightheadedness of blood draining from his head. He leaned against a tree as he fought for consciousness and his limbs came to life. Once his mind returned to normal, Kegan felt the hunger in his stomach. He turned to the trees. Tiny songbirds hopped between the branches. Kegan prepared to send a snake of fire, to capture a meal. Aetos. Kegan almost forgot the little bird. He hadn't seen Aetos since the bird drew away the fire during the first battle. Just another casualty of the battles that took all but his life.

No it wasn't. It wasn't just another casualty. Aetos was Kegan's only friend who had stuck with him throughout this crazy journey. The only friend who had always been there, trying only to help Kegan for so many years back at the village. A friend who sacrificed himself to save Kegan during his hardest battle. What if it wasn't a sacrifice? "Aetos!"

Autumn leaves swayed as they fell through the forest. Kegan stalked through the trees, spear in hand. There, up upon that tree. What was that clump? It leapt up. Kegan could see the bird now. It looked almost like a sparrow. And what was that vine, crawling ever so slowly towards that little, brown figure? The sparrow flew back out of the reach of the viper's jaws. The viper reared back for another strike. The sparrow flew up over the viper and clawed at its back. How long could this last? With each bite, the viper came ever closer to subduing its victim and attacker. Why was this sparrow relentlessly throwing itself at this fearsome reptile. For what

would it sacrifice itself so? Beyond the battle, but upon the same branch, lay a fragile nest. Kegan leapt upwards and grabbed hold of a lower tree branch. He swung himself up and scrambled up towards the melee.

The viper turned to face its new enemy. Kegan unsteadily crouched on the branch, his spear held ready. The viper coiled back, then lunged. Kegan hardly kept his balance as he knocked it aside with his spear. The viper flailed as it fell, and it caught itself upon a lower outreaching of the tree. The rope of green slithered through the twigs and back to Kegan's branch. Again, it sailed through the air, and only a spastic jerk of Kegan's spear hit it away. The snake rushed up the branch and zipped towards Kegan's leg. He swiped his spearbutt at the snake. He pushed aside the snake's tail, but the beast continued forward. Then it flew forward at Kegan's exposed foot. He spun the spear and stabbed down at the branch. The viper was pinned to the branch. Its eyes slowly grew glassy.

Kegan climbed up towards the still form of the sparrow. Its feathers were matted. Its eyes were dull. Kegan traced along its wing, quickly finding two twin holes. He continued to the nest. The eggshells were already cracked and strewn among the straw fibers. The bark below was damp with yellow yolk. As Kegan began to turn around, something rustled among the eggshells. His head whipped back around. One of the white domes shifted and fell aside. A tiny, pink form looked up at him with closed eyes and a gaping beak. He scooped it up into his palm and covered it with his other hand. It had no one else. He had to take care of it. He cracked his hands open and peeked at the baby bird once more. Aetos. Its name would be Aetos.

He came up to the edge of the clearing. The clearing where he had last seen Aetos. The earth was still scarred with arrows, swords, and the bodies of soldiers. Kegan gingerly stepped through the carnage. There, down among the tree roots. What was that clump? Kegan walked forward. The viper had caught its prey. A brown arrow protruded from Aetos's meager chest. Kegan stood and stared at that clump. When would it leap up? When would it fly into his outstretched hand?

Aetos was gone. He was never going to return. Kegan lifted the bird's still form. He plucked the offending arrow from Aetos's flesh and hurled it into the trees. The tiny ball of feathers nestled within Kegan's palms was so small, so cold. How could he have become like this? He had always been so vibrant, so alive.

Aetos fell from Kegan's hands, down onto the earth. Kegan fell to his knees. With short,

choppy actions, he shoveled dirt aside. There, it was complete. He gently lowered Aetos into the rough pit. Kegan then flattened the mound of dirt over the bird's body. It was too bare. He searched around the clearing. Kegan lifted a large stone and placed it at the head of Aetos's grave. No, that wasn't quite right either. Aetos never had been grounded like this. He always had been, deserved to always be, in flight. Kegan closed his eyes and brought his hands together. He pressed all of his anger and frustration to the tips of his fingers. Any walls that had still been present were shattered and washed away in the torrent. The flames gathered and grew into a shining sphere. Kegan finally opened his eyes to see the fiery object he had created. The golden orb shimmered with the force of some intense energy just waiting to shoot out. He took that orb, holding back the release, and thrust it into the earth above Aetos. The ground itself was incinerated in the fiery blast. Black ash floated into the blue sky. Aetos would forever fly among the clouds.

Kegan stumbled back to the stream from the day before. He once again set the bright net of fire in the sparkling water. He closed his eyes. He couldn't see the lives he took as the shiny fish floated to the surface. He couldn't see the blood that dripped down his fingers as he gutted the fish. Finally, he raised the white flesh to his mouth. He almost felt sick remembering the battle, the death. Hunger gnawed at Kegan's stomach and mind. Ignoring the horrible memories dominating his mind, he ate.

Kegan continued to devour the meat before him. With every bite he took, the hunger that had been restrained within him seemed to break out. He ate beyond his immense hunger, almost into sickness. There were plenty of fish. Why should he suffer and die just to save a few fish?

With food in his stomach, Kegan began to return to himself. He continued to walk. He almost smiled at an inquisitive squirrel, then remembered Acarya and stopped. He could be happy when he had killed the people who had killed Acarya and who had killed Aetos and who had killed his parents. Flames grew in Kegan's mind. It spread to fill his chest and limbs. With a roar, he released his anger into the ground. A patch of the ground glowed orange as it was burned by the intense heat. If only he had this strength at the battle. He could push the soldiers away and take Acarya with him. And he wouldn't be so lost.

Peace. Acarya's lesson ran in his head. Peace, not anger. Peace would bring strength and good, anger would take away control and leave destruction. Kegan sat cross-legged on the soft dirt and breathed deeply. He tried to remember his quiet, safe life back at the village. Tried to

forget the death he had come face-to-face with. The memories of Kegan's childhood seemed to fade and swirl, like fog in the morning sun. He tried to reach for the thoughts, but they just flowed around him. On the other hand, the battle burned fresh in his mind. The faces of those he had killed were chiseled in stone as Kegan tried to forget them. Frustrated, he yelled as he sent a torrential inferno up into the trees. Red glowed along the edges of leaves and branches around the gaping hole left in the canopy. The lightheadedness that had plagued him that morning returned. Kegan squeezed his eyes shut and panted as he tried to regain enough strength to once again stand. Kegan weakly smiled. Maybe the anger wasn't so bad after all. The "good" Kegan wouldn't have the stomach to kill. Even for him, the loss of control would be a welcome blessing. Without control, he wouldn't have to question his own morals. Kegan realized what he himself was thinking. He wished he could run away from the twisted thing his mind was becoming.

His strength having recovered, once again, Kegan ran. This time, not from the battle around him, but the battle inside. He could never use fire again. He had to use fire to avenge Acarya. He couldn't kill them. He had to kill them. Kegan ran faster. The anger at himself seemed to build up into fire that threatened to spill out. Kegan pulled it back, restrained it, with all of his might. He ran until the fire of fatigue threatened to consume him and pull him to the ground. Eventually it did. He laid on the ground and stared up to the trees. Slowly, the sky darkened. Slowly, it became night. Slowly, Kegan gained the resolve to sit up. The trees pushed at him with an oppressive darkness. He blindly snapped several branches off trees above him and piled them into a circle. He sent a small flame, just enough to light them. He stared into the heart of the fire. The red tongues snapped and crackled as they consumed the dry branches. Yellow light spreaded to fill every crack and crevice of the space Kegan hid in. The wood seemed to burn more purely than Kegan's flame. If only he could banish the darkness in his mind to the forest behind him. Banish it, then run away, and leave it behind.

A rustle disturbed Kegan just as he curled up to sleep. Had to just be the wind. Kegan curled up more tightly to brace for the chilly breeze. Then he realized it was still. There was no wind. He heard the rustle again, in the same direction as before. Something was coming. Kegan jumped up and faced where the sound came from. Regretfully, the only weapon he had was his fire. Kegan's stomach seemed to jump in anticipation of releasing the flames within him. The trees formed strange, dancing shadows in the flickering firelight.

The separated rustles slowly got closer until they seemed to be right in front of Kegan. He swallowed the non-existent saliva in his mouth and tensed his muscles, ready for whatever came. Slowly, a copper-colored triangle slipped through the bushes. Kegan froze in admiration of the deadly pit viper that emerged from the foliage. It was a muddy red color with black bands that ran down its back. Of course, everything seemed red in the light of the dancing golden flames.

The viper slowly slithered closer to Kegan. Inquisitive, it shot its tiny pink tongue out to taste the air. Terrified, Kegan accidentally let a weak pulse of fire shoot at the snake. At the last second, the reptile squirmed to the side. Now it was wary of his presence. Kegan tried to send a wall of flame, to burn it away, but the power he had was extinguished with the anger it relied on when his fear took over. Kegan started to run back, still attempting to send fire at the advancing snake. The weak flames faded into the air before they came close to their target. Then the snake shot forward. It happened in slow motion. The thin strip of copper appeared next to his foot. The triangle went right up to his ankle. Kegan felt a piercing pain, then numbness. The numbness spread around his leg, up his body and toward his head. His limbs grew red and began to swell. Kegan ran as fast as his aching, yet unfeeling body would allow. He yelled for help as loud as his frozen throat could. He collapsed. The world started to go dark. He shouted louder. A face suddenly appeared over his. It seemed familiar, but the venom had started to do its job and Kegan could not remember who it was. He weakly gasped for help before the world was taken by night.

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Einar ran through the dark trees. He had to go faster, faster. Death was seeping into the young body he held. He had to find civilization quickly. Someone with the anti venom. The muscles grew stiff against his arms. Desperate, he pushed on faster. His breaths came in random bursts. He had to go faster.

* * *

Mist rose from the canteen as the water boiled in the raging fire. Hadwin speared the onions and leaves and dipped them into the steam. He pulled out the plants and spread them across a flat rock. The rising vapour slowly lessened as they cooled off. Hadwin evenly divided them out. Everyone tried to eat slowly and spread the scanty meal, but it was finished nearly as quickly as it began. Hadwin could not ignore the deep set rumbling in his stomach that refused to

be settled. Yet they rose, took the map, and continued on.

Hadwin examined the yellow parchment that illustrated the path they were to take. The dotted snake continued to lead through the jungle for much of the journey. Then it crept through a canyon. More jungle. Then it swam through a river, after which it reached the village quickly. Hadwin sighed. If only they could jump onto its back and ride the path all the way to their destination. He looked back up to the jungle that they had been trudging through. The growl of hunger seemed to scratch at Hadwin's stomach. He reluctantly rubbed his belly and tried to ignore it.

As the hours passed, the hunger and fatigue seemed to weigh on everyone in the group. Soon, some of the members had had enough. "When should we stop for another meal?" Tzofi blurted out.

"I don't know," Hadwin admitted. "Do we have anything to eat?"

Tzofi looked to Basim, Becan, and Dakarai, and they looked back to her, shrugging sadly. "Nope."

Hadwin continued to walk. The others followed him, worried expressions on their faces. Hadwin scanned the ground, looking for anything they could eat.. A clump of wrinkled, brown lumps appeared before them beside the path. Hadwin bent down to inspect them. Becan and Basim peeked over his shoulders, while Dakarai walked around and viewed from in front of Hadwin. Hadwin confidently identified the fungi as morel mushrooms. He loved mushrooms when he was young and had spent hours studying with the foragers. It was a skill he had loved to utilize: finding midday snacks. Now, he used it to feed himself and everyone else.

Hadwin gently pulled the morel mushrooms from the earth and passed them around. Everybody cautiously nibbled the fungi, until the rich, earthy taste filled their palates, and they devoured their morsels. Hadwin took the smallest for himself and slowly savored it. His next find was a large, almost comical, white puffball. This had was light and airy, but unfulfilling. Next, the large disks of parasol mushrooms. Hadwin started to keep extras in his pack as they walked. Soon, once more, it became dark. The ground had all but dried from yesterday's rain. Hadwin found dry leaves and twigs to start a new fire. Without everything being sodden from the rain, the fire started quickly. The light banished the chills in the air that the dark forest left.

The fire leapt like a small child as it hummed and crackled. It glowed and gave warmth to the whole camp. The inquisitive flame seemed to taste the thin logs placed for it. It had a life,

breathing, eating, moving more animatedly than any of the exhausted persons sitting around it. Most of all, it brought hope. Hadwin stared into the fire wondering how many people were staring into a fire just like his and were given hope, life even, just like he was.

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For the second time in the short span of three days, Kegan woke up confused about where he was. He looked around. He was in a low-ceilinged building with a floor area about the size of the Main Hall back home. There were dozens of beds set up, of which only a few had occupants. The majority of others in this building seemed injured or sickly. This must be an infirmary. The whole building was illuminated by soft, white light. Kegan looked in wonder for torches. The walls and ceiling were decorated by what appeared to be glowing crystals. They filled small openings in the mud brick material the building was made of. The crystals appeared to capture daylight and transmit in all directions. This all led to a soft, ambient lighting reminiscent to the gentle streaming of light underwater.

Kegan almost could not believe the tender, silken light that filled every corner of the room. Shadows were nearly nonexistent as every cranny was illuminated by a different crystal. He raised his hand to rub his eyes, but this surreality remained. Kegan began to sat up, but his head was struck with hundreds of pinpricks and his vision became vignetted. He laid back upon the only occupied cot in this curious building.

Footsteps echoed down a wayward hall. Kegan managed to turn his head to see who approached. Einar walked to him with another man behind. This man was of a medium tall height, about same as Kegan. He had a slightly protruding belly, salt and pepper hair, and a vicious beak of a nose. As they came closer, Kegan could see another, smaller, man shuffling behind. As he came out to the front, Kegan could see the second man was about a head shorter than him and balding. There was nothing else distinguishing about him. As they almost reached Kegan, Einar ran up to meet him first.

“Whe-where are we?” Kegan weakly stuttered.

“You were bitten. It had to be a viper, nothing else could knock ya out like that” Einar excitedly said. “I found you as you were passing out and took you to the closest village.”

Kegan gave his best effort of a genuine smile as the small guy stepped forward. He mumbled something that of which Kegan could only catch select words. Something about his name, doctor, and to call him, “Sana”. The second man pushed “Sana” out of the way and looked

directly into Kegan's eyes.

"Hi! My name is Seducculta, but you can just call me Sed. Welcome to Imalam!" He exclaimed. He put on a warm smile and gave Kegan a firm handshake.

"Imalum?" Kegan weakly asked.

"Your friend here brought you here in the middle of yesterday night. You were chock-full of viper spit. We gave you antivenom, and you just woke up today. Now about Imalum." Sed went on to explain the great and beautiful village of which he was chief. Kegan tried his hardest to listen, but remnants of his body's last battle still plagued his blood and he repeatedly found his mind beginning to wander as his tired eyes began to close. For much of the speech he fascinated himself with the fact that Sed's nose hooked far down enough to go over the top of his mouth. How did he shave himself? When he ate, would not foodstuffs adhere to the tip of the incredible protrusion? He seemed to be wrapping up, so Kegan nodded and accepted his second firm handshake with a smile.

This time, Einar stepped forward. "The antivenom takes time to clear from your system, so you'll be drowsy for a bit. But," he looked back to see Sed and Sana walking away, "this village seems pretty nice. An okay place to stay and heal up." Now he wore a genuine, hopeful smile. "Maybe somewhere, at least for me, to stay." He gave Kegan a quick pat on the shoulder and quickly walked out.

Kegan looked back up to the ceiling. As he focused on it, he started to make out a mural that decorated the brick between the light holes. Fantastical, flowing illustrations were permeated with text explaining the scenes they depicted. Kegan let his eyes run down the painting's path until he found its beginning, The mighty village of Imalum was nestled within a grove of trees. Kegan began to yawn. If anything, the story would help put him to sleep. Long, long ago, Imalum was the strongest village in the forest. Having a huge army and larger population, Imalum easily made connections through trade and avoided war. The village was almost universally liked and had virtually no enemies. Then, a budding village called Ifgia formed. Kegan unconsciously smiled at the sight of the familiar name. Ifgia quickly grew to be a rival power to Imalum. Then Ifgia engaged in a lengthy war against Imalum. It was a struggle of resources, but eventually, Ifgia won out. Nearly depleted of food and soldiers, Ifgia was forced to leave the shattered Imalum to reform. Within several years, both Ifgia and Imalum recovered, though Ifgia retook the title of titan, and Imalum fell into the middle stripe due to overpopulation

and scarce resources. Then the Red Plague hit the forest. Kegan gasped at the red haze that seemed to float over the pictures of villages among the trees. While the Red Plague had occurred before his village's inception, he had learned of its devastation to Ifgia. The Red Plague wiped out several villages and hurt many others. Once again, Ifgia strove to survive and returned itself to greatness. After the first war, the citizens of Imalum were discouraged and rioted. The city's wealth and stability continued to plummet for years after the sickness had all but disappeared. Then, a new ruler came into power. A ruler who promised to elevate Imalum back to above Ifgia. Back to where it had been decades ago. He stopped all trade and isolated the village. Imalum soon disappeared off of most maps. Then, the painting and scrawling text came to an end.

Why had the history stopped? What had the new ruler done? Kegan tried to stay awake to think, but his eyelids slowly drooped further, and further, until snakes and wars and plagues danced around his head as everything went black.

Should he have come? Now Kegan doubted it, though it was too late to turn back. He hadn't wanted to miss this opportunity - it would only happen once. But once was more than enough. Kegan stood a little away from all the other boys. He could feel the excitement in them. They had reached their twelfth spring. While the children's birth dates varied by mere days, they had all reached a milestone well known within the village. It was time for the children to make the hallowed passage to adulthood. The celebrants seemed to recognize the shift. Yet, Kegan felt no change, no difference in himself save for the longing to be like the others. Parents stepped forward. Some of the other children looked to Kegan with pity, others jested at his isolation. Kegan's head fell and he began to shuffle away from the proceedings. A voice called out. Kegan glanced back. Theodoric jogged up to him.

"Where are you going?" Kegan shrugged his shoulders. Theodoric bent down to look him in the eyes. "You don't want to be part of the celebration?" Kegan shrugged again. Theodoric gently place his hand upon Kegan's shoulder. "I know you've always felt a bit apart from the other children, but today's not the day to dwell upon it. Today is the day you come of age." Kegan shrugged his shoulders again and looked aside. "How about this, I go up there with you as your parent. I'm sorry I haven't truly been able to play the part, as my position as chief of this village forces upon me responsibilities for the other villagers, but could we call this a fresh start?" Kegan solemnly nodded. "Well then, let us rejoin the group. Ceremonies are a very serious occasion for adults. " Kegan started to grin and he nodded again. They walked back

over to the line and waited. Suddenly, something slammed into Kegan and he almost fell forward. He turned around. Hadwin grabbed his arm and beamed. Kegan looked around. He didn't need to be just like all the other children. Hadwin and Theodoric could be his family.

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Chapter 3

Hadwin hiked through the fine, breezy morning, air fresh with a whisper of mist. Everyone was satisfied by the variety of fungi that Hadwin always happened to point out. Hadwin held a small torch to combat the green with the red glow of his flame. His pack was filled with food and canteens filled with boiled water. Everyone had full stomachs and the sun was just rising in the sky. Hadwin himself was especially in high spirits. All he ate were mushrooms, his favorite food. With a subtle smile, Hadwin kept walking. He felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Well, mushrooms are good and all,” Basim said, staring at his feet, “but can we eat something else now too?”

All the others seemed to second his opinion. Hadwin sighed. He didn't know how to recognize much else that was edible that grew in the wild. Nothing that grew. He had to hunt. Thinking of the protein that meat would provide, Hadwin realized how unsubstantial their fungus diet would end up being in the long run. He went back to scanning the ground. His eyes caught a tiny, pink, wriggling tail. Hadwin lunged and pulled it from the earth. In his hand, he held a fat earthworm.

“Anyone want it?” He joked as he held up the pink, squirming thing. Tzofi, Becan, Basim, and Dakarai all jumped back in disgust.

“To eat?” Tzofi shrieked.

“Yeah, I've done it before, and I'm still here.” He returned, with obvious amusement. He held the worm over his mouth and dropped. However, before Hadwin's snack could reach his throat, he saw Tzofi's hand reach out and grab the worm from the air. With a look of decided defiance, she stuffed it into her mouth, swallowing it with a single gulp. Becan, Basim, and Dakarai looked to Hadwin with disbelief, then to Tzofi with admiration. They scampered off to find their own exotic meals.

Hadwin kicked aside rocks, scanning the dirt for something edible to top Tzofi's exploit. He gasped. Beneath one log was a three inch long sago grub. These were common around the

forest and were, in fact, quite edible. However, the children of the village would never treat them as such. He looked up, wide-eyed. Tzofi glanced down at the writhing, white lump, then up into Hadwin's eyes. She too remembered pelting friend-turned-foes with the giant maggots, gleefully watching as they burst upon impact. She grinned at Hadwin's obvious disgust, then obviously directed her eyes down at the grub. Hadwin tried to quell his uneasiness with confidence as he bent down to pluck the grub from the soil.

"Hawin, that looks pretty tasty," Tzofi said, "are you going to eat it?"

Becan, Basim, and Dakarai instantly turned away from the earth and towards Hadwin. "Of course," he said. And with that, he promptly stuffed the grub into his mouth. Hadwin watched Tzofi quickly, almost unconsciously, cringe. It was for good reason. The grub filled his mouth with a disgustingly slimy texture. His very being was permeated with the overwhelmingly meaty flavor of the sago grub.

And then it was done. But to Hadwin's horror, as he glanced down, he seemed to see the very ground writhe. Beneath his find lay many more of the cursed sago grubs. Hadwin snatched one up and whipped it at the small of Tzofi's back. She squealed at the sharp pain and at the feeling of splattered sago juices.

"What was that for?" she shrieked.

Hadwin grinned, "Just like old times, eh?"

After the better part of an hour, the five travelers were sticky and spotted with pink welts. Hadwin's eyes wandered to one of the many still intact sago grubs wriggling upon the ground. In his hunger, the memory of Hadwin's last sago consumption seemed to grow evermore pleasant. He reached, almost curiously, for the grub and lifted it off the soil. Hadwin bit off the back of the grub and chewed it slowly. Perhaps it was not as bad as he had previously thought. The texture now seemed more creamy than slimy. However, the taste still left much to be desired. At least, these could serve as a full meal until solid food was found.

The deep rumble of a distant river began to bombard Hadwin's ears. Rivers were good. Rivers meant fish and bigger animals drinking from them. Hadwin broke a sturdy branch from a tree and started whittling a point with his rock knife from home. It was a small blade, not very useful for battle. It had one wickedly sharp point that could shave slices off of wood like it was butter. Hadwin formed a barbed point and delightedly pondered the succulent rewards it would reap. He couldn't wait until they reached the river.

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Kegan curled his fingers around the disk. He wound back and launched through the air. The momentum threw him forward, and he stumbled over his stiff legs. He smiled as he watched the thin, wooden disk spin through the air. It wasn't the first time he had smiled since being in Imalam, but in the last several days, he had smiled more than he had in the last few months. A young child leapt up to barely hook the disk with the tips of his fingers. He expertly flicked the disk back to Einar, who tripped as he tried to catch it, but stood back up, laughing. He tossed it back to Kegan. As Kegan looked where to throw the disk, a group congregated wherever his line of vision pointed. Kegan threw it snake-eyed away from them all, then laughed as they scrambled to be the first to it.

In the last few days, Kegan slowly regained his body as he struggle to sit up, then stand, and later walk. As soon as he had taken his first steps out of the village, he had realized what Sed had meant about having such a prosperous and happy village. Nearly every citizen seemed to be out, socializing and spending time together. Ever since Kegan arrived in the village, he had never seen anyone cleaning, or harvesting, or doing any of the normal jobs that needed to be done in the village. He had assumed it was a holiday at first, but later found out from villagers that this was their everyday life.

After about an hour, Kegan's stomach began to growl. He reluctantly threw the disk back to the group of boys and jogged to the village center with Einar. They sat down excitedly upon one of the open air, hardwood tables. Chefs brought platters of mouthwatering entrees to the buffet tables. These chefs were some of the few villagers Kegan saw actually doing productive work. One day shortly after his recovery, Kegan asked the cooks why they did what they did. To his surprise, the chore was not work to them. Rather, they cooked for the enjoyment of it. Additionally, Sed provided them with rare and exotic ingredients to use. He brought the chefs herbs and meats from villages around the forest.

Kegan focused back on the incredible meal in front of him. Everything seemed complicated, but elegantly cooked. Kegan could hardly tell what the dishes were made of. However, this did not stop him from eating until his stomach bulged. Kegan staggered with Einar back to their huts. As soon as he was released from the hospital, Kegan was given a hut to stay in, right next to Einar's. They wished each other a quick good night and stepped into their huts. Kegan dropped into his bed and stared into the ceiling. His system was starting to clear. He

should move on soon. His train of thought quickly crashed and was replaced by a new desire. *Why couldn't he just stay here for a while? It was so much different than what he'd had to go through for so long. Somewhere to stop and calm down. But what about the calm life he had had back at home? His home, where he had friends all around.* Kegan curled up into a ball under his cover.

As he stretched his tired body, Kegan felt a crackle under his side. Surprised, he sat up and lifted his cover. Nothing there. He pushed the bed where he had felt it, and once again, he felt the flattened crinkle. He pulled up the sheet and found a sheet of paper. He turned it over. In scrawled ink, it read,

Look at the plants outside.

It was signed with a cryptic “~S”. It couldn't be said. While the chief was a bit over enthusiastic, he seemed to want nothing more than for Kegan to adjust smoothly to life in the village. Sana? *What does that muttering doctor know?* Kegan got up and opened the door a crack. The simple flowers and grasses had been stomped on and uprooted. Kegan closed the door and crawled back into bed. Probably just some vandalizing kid who thought Kegan knew his name. Kegan could not remember any introducing themselves, though. After some time, he fell into a night of fitful sleep.

As soon as the sun rose, illuminating the crystals in the hut's ceiling, Kegan sprung out of bed. Best to fix his yard now, before he got caught in the day's events. He quietly stepped out, only to see everything back to normal. The flowers sat still, and the grasses slowly swayed in the wind. Someone had fixed them in the middle of the night. Kegan walked back into his bed and lied down, staring at the ceiling. Between the only two people who he knew it *could* have been, Kegan hadn't seen Sed since that first day. He hadn't seen Sana after the first two days when he had been in the hospital. Even then, Sana hadn't spoken much. The heaviness of a night without rest slowly lulled Kegan back to sleep.

A loud knocking abruptly woke Kegan up for the second time. He stumbled drowsily out of bed to the door. Opening it, he found an excited Einar waiting.

“We're going fishing!”

Kegan followed Einar to a group gathering to go. They hiked to a small lake and passed out fishing spears and poles. They were fishing for glass eels that were unique to this time of year. They had an exquisite taste that the cooks considered a delicacy. The group leader

explained how they were much more difficult to catch than normal fish due to their small size. Kegan stared into space as the words passed right by his ears. He needed to see who was fixing things up. He was still weak from healing, so he needed something to help him stay awake. Kegan glanced at the plants around him. Nothing here. He had to move. Kegan waited until everyone began to fish, then sneaked away to find some guarana berries.

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Hadwin stared down a ravine that echoed and amplified the roar of a river traversing its bottom. Not what he expected when he thought of a river. Hadwin looked down both sides of it. The canyon never seemed to lessen in depth. The side below his feet was bare, though the opposing side was coated in a lattice of roots from trees long gone. Just fifteen meters across, the other end was so close, but yet so far away. There was no way to get across.

“We’re going down,” Hadwin declared.

“Couldn’t we try to figure out a way across first?” Tzofi asked.

Hadwin threw his arms up in frustration. “How do you expect us to do that?”

“I don’t know.” Tzofi stared down into the canyon and bit her lip. “Maybe we could walk along the edge until the drop gets less deep.”

Hadwin stood by the edge and peered down both sides. “Doesn’t look like it’s ever going to get any shallower.”

Tzofi began to wander along the edge. “Who knows? We might find something.”

“We can’t waste the time,” Hadwin said. “Plus, we’ll get way off track from the map.”

Tzofi finally gave in. “Fine. We’ll just go down.” A few hundred feet to the right of where they now stood, an old, but sturdy bridge spanned the short distance that would have taken them across.

Tzofi wasted no time in questioning Hadwin on his method. “How are you going to get down safely? Even if you get down, how are you supposed to get back up the other side?”

“I don’t know. Let me think.” Hadwin sat down and zoned out, staring into the distance. It wouldn’t be too tough to get down. They simply had to slow down the natural tendency to do so. However, the journey up would be much more difficult. While the net of roots left behind plenty of spots for Hadwin to use as handholds, none were substantial enough to support an object the size of his foot. He turned to the others.

“I think I have a plan. Tzofi, you chip rocks and try to make a good axe blade. Basim,

Becan, and Dakarai, go find vines to make ropes. I have other stuff to do.”

Tzofi began to voice an argument, but decided against it and hurried off to do her job. Basim, Becan, and Dakarai sped off into the forest. Hadwin had to make the fire-hardened pegs. He walked back into the trees to find the right branch. One caught in the branches of a tree, hanging down, took his attention. Hadwin quickly pulled it down. About an inch thick and four meters long, it seemed perfect to make enough pegs. He took it back past the forest line, before the gorge. He then promptly went to find Tzofi.

“Made anything yet?” he inquired hopefully .

“Just these.” She held up two serrated wedges, each about the size of Hadwin’s fist.

“Great.” Hadwin took them and started to walk away when an idea struck his mind.

“Make a few more, but make them bigger. At least a foot across.”

Tzofi sighed as Hadwin walked back to where he kept the branch. If his plan worked, they might just have a chance at crossing this canyon. He pulled out his pyrite rocks and slowly nursed a new fire to life. Hadwin used the crude rock axes to split the straight branch into eight inch segments. He pulled out his rock knife and painstakingly carved a wickedly sharp point into each one. His life was going to depend on these, he had to make them good. After making the fifteen his branch allowed, he began, one-by-one, to fire-harden them. Hadwin slowly ran each tip through the flame until it alighted. Before the fire destroyed its strength, Hadwin plunged it into loose dirt he had gathered. He pulled out his rock knife and shaved away the singed portions. Underneath, a point was left, harder than stone. Fourteen left.

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Chapter 4

Kegan jogged back to his hut after the lightest dinner he had had since his arrival. He could not afford the drowsiness accompanied with an overfull stomach. The sun had already fallen and night quickly approached. Kegan messed up his own garden this time. He had to see who secretly took care of all the little jobs people in this village just didn’t do. Kegan flopped onto his bed. He knew it was there before he felt it. Kegan pulled out the newest note.

Try to stay awake.

It was signed the same as the last. Obviously he would try to stay awake. Why else would he have collected handfuls of guarana berries? Of course he was going to stay awake.

Half an hour had passed. Kegan failed to suppress another yawn. Maybe it would be fine

just to sleep for a couple hours. Kegan began to lie back and close his leaden eyelids. No. He had to stay awake. Kegan reached down to grab the bag of herbs. His vision began to blur. No, he couldn't fall asleep. His eyes closed again, but this time he couldn't fight them.

Kegan bolted up. It was still night. He had fallen asleep. What had made him so tired? He had always been able to stay up reasonably late, reasonably easily before. It had to be something in the food. If something going on at night was supposed to be hidden, it would make sense to drug the citizens. Kegan devoured the herbs he had brought, though he was pretty sure whatever was in his meal had worn off by now. He walked to the door and peeked out. The first rays of the morning sun were just starting to crawl over the horizon. There! A few huts down, an unshaven man in ragged clothes swept the streets. His ankles were shackled and his face had a listless expression. He turned around to check over his work. His eyes locked with Kegan's. His eyes widened, and he quickly looked to his side. A guard with a spear stood just a few meters away from him. Kegan gave a nearly imperceptible nod, then softly closed the door.

What were they, prisoners? Slaves? Kegan curled back under his blanket. He wished more than ever that he could go back home. After everything he had been through, he finally found a calm, peaceful place to rest and regain his strength. Yet, with every day that passed, a new secret of this strange village was revealed and Kegan's questions grew ever more numerous. Caffeine coursing through his veins, Kegan tossed and turned for a restless few hours until morning.

Kegan stormed from his hut, first thing in the morning. He had to figure out what was going on. The only person who seemed likely to tell him was Sed. Kegan suddenly stopped. Where was he supposed to find Sed? He hadn't seen him since the first day at the hospital.

The hospital doors flew open as Kegan marched in. A startled Sana look up from the cart he was pushing. He now had a tiny pair of spectacles hanging onto the tip of his nose.

"Where's Sed?" Kegan barked.

"What, Sed?" Sana murmured.

Kegan planted himself directly in front of Sana, glaring at the other man's averted eyes. "Yes. Where is he?"

"Why do you need to talk to him?" Sana continued to meekly place items from his cart onto a stand next to an empty bed.

"Just something I need to ask him about," Kegan muttered. "Tell me where he is."

Sana straightened out the hunched slouch in his back. “I’ll tell you where he is if you promise me something, Kegan. Don’t tell him your name or anything about where you’re from.”

“Wait.” Kegan paused. “Why can’t he know? And why do you know?” Kegan was sure nobody here knew anything about him except for Einar. Unless Einar told someone.

Sana smiled cryptically. “I have my sources.” He walked around Kegan and out of the hospital. “Sed’s in the big building down there. Across the village.”

Kegan stomped out the door and to the administration building. Sana quickly ran around to the side of the building where a runner was waiting. “Tell Sed that the kid’s coming. Say that he doesn’t know anything yet, but he suspects.”

The runner shot off to the building. Sana took a deep breath and sighed. Hopefully he had played his cards right. He could only wait and see.

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Whack! Hadwin ran the stone axe blade into the tree’s base. Slowly, the split grew as he continued to hammer away. The tree began to tilt. A little more. Hadwin dropped the solid wedge he was using and picked up a thinner more serrated blade. He sawed at the tree’s trunk until there was just an inch left. He stepped back, then charged into the tree. The final pieces of its trunk split, and it plummeted into the gorge. Hadwin grinned as he saw it line up with the second tree he had dropped. The first one had fallen parallel to the canyon and floated away with the river. The second and third were interrupted from the descent by the decreasing distance between the canyon walls. The trees provided somewhat of a platform to lessen the distance they had to descend. Hadwin moved on to the next tree.

Tzofi weaved together the vines, bark fibers, and strands of palm leaves that Basim, Becan, and Dakarai continued to gather before her. They needed a rope at least twice the depth of the canyon. It needed to be strong enough to hold the weight of any of them. She had finished nearly fifteen meters of the cord. However, the stack of usable material dwindled evermore. She held a segment of the rope between her hands and tugged it with all her strength. It held strong without a sign of stress.

Hadwin cut the fifth tree into the gorge. The fourth had fallen into the river, but this one caught. The rock axes were losing their edge. One more tree.

Tzofi connected the last segments of rope together. She called back the little kids. It had to be enough. Her tired fingers could knot no more. She looped it around her hand to bring back

to Hadwin.

Hadwin gave the tree a final *thunk*. The last rock wedge shattered. He grabbed the last saw. The tree had almost fallen.

Tzofi emerged through the tree line just in time to see the last great tree topple. The tip spearheaded towards a two foot gap between two trees halfway across the gap. It penetrated the hole and began to slide through and past the platform. Hadwin's heart began to drop. Would the tree stay? Then it stopped. The tree's branches caught against the rest of the platform and its descent halted. The thick lower trunk tottered one way and another, before finally deciding to fall onto the opposing rock cliff. Hadwin turned around to see Tzofi with her eyes wide in amazement. All at once, they jumped and cheered. They looked into the canyon. It looked like Hadwin's platform had halved the distance they had to descend, and afterwards, ascend.

Tzofi stepped forward to give him the rope. "So that's what you used the rock axes for."

"I know. I just have flashes of genius sometimes." Hadwin gazed down at his masterpiece.

"More like luck." Tzofi glanced down at the trees, then scowled. "You were so lucky any of those trees stuck."

Hadwin chuckled and snatched the rope from her hands. "Whatever. They did work anyways."

Tzofi sighed. Hadwin smirked. They both looked down into the canyon. Now that the time had come to traverse the ravine, the distance seemed to grow to two, three times its size. Hadwin looped the rope around a large tree within a couple meters of the precipice edge. He let both ends fall. They drooped a meter beyond the platform. Hadwin pulled the rope back up. He cleared the bark from the base of the tree and placed a smooth rock on the edge of the cliff where the rope would run over. This venture was already a gamble, they didn't need friction working against them. Hadwin tied a waist-sized loop in the rope and tied the ends of the rope together. He slipped into the waist loop and grabbed onto the other half of the rope that went down.

"Are you ready for this?" Tzofi asked with concern.

Hadwin just nodded.

"How are we going to get up on the other side?" Tzofi questioned.

Hadwin simply dismissed it. "Don't worry. I have it figured out."

"Whatever," Tzofi sighed, then held up her end of the rope. "Ok. Tell me again. What

exactly do I have to do?”

Hadwin rolled his eyes and began. “The rope will be like a pulley. I’ll hold on to the other side of the loop to keep myself from falling. Soon as I’m ready, I’ll slowly let the other side go up in steps to lower myself down. When I reach the bottom, I’ll pull the loop around to get the waist loop to the top. All you have to do is if I lose my grip on the other side, you have to grab the rope and stop me.”

Tzofi gravely nodded. Before she could say a word, he jumped. The rope slid over the rock and around the tree as Hadwin slowly lowered himself down. How much was left? Two meters? Three meters? Tzofi couldn’t bring herself to look. She could only wait for Hadwin’s call.

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“What’s going on? Why are there slaves cleaning the village?” Kegan yelled at Sed.

“What do you mean? The whole village is calm and happy.” Sed replied calmly.

Kegan glared at Sed in frustration. After arriving at the administration building, Kegan had waited in the lobby area for nearly an hour as a runner fetched Sed from some meeting within the bowels of the building. Kegan expected immediate answers.

“No, I woke up in the middle of the night, one night, and I heard something outside. I looked and there was someone in shackles cleaning the streets.” Kegan stared into Sed’s eyes for an answer.

“Are you sure this wasn’t just a dream?” Sed’s voice was suave, never faltering.

Kegan took a deep breath and tried to speak in a calm tone. “Then explain how things are cleaned. No one seems to do anything around here!”

Sed sighed. “Okay, I won’t lie. After wars, sometimes we capture more enemy prisoners than the other village is willing to pay to get back. Rather than let them rot in jail cells, we give them the duties of cleaning the village. Making them clean at night makes the rest of the villagers happier because they never have to worry about tedious chores.”

Kegan thought for a second. It did make sense, except... “What about when you don’t have any prisoners? Does everyone in the village just flip a switch and start doing the prisoners’ work?”

Sed smiled furtively. “You could say we are involved in many wars.”

“There’s still no guarantee you’ll get workers.” Kegan furled his eyebrows. “Plus, if you

get in that many wars, how come I've never seen anything military here except for a few guards?"

Sed stepped forward, a slightly annoyed expression on his face. "Being the chief of a village is difficult. I'm sure you wouldn't know. Keep in mind I'm allocating resources to house and feed you, completely from my own kindness. You're just a kid from the forest. Stop asking questions or you might not be welcome here any longer." With that, he disappeared down a hallway and slammed a door somewhere deep within the building. Kegan thought of making a move to follow him, but something about the manner of the guards warned him to leave.

Who could he talk to? He had only one friend in this place, Einar. Kegan ran to the village center. A drowsy Einar was midway through his breakfast. Kegan grabbed his arm and started to pull him away from his plate.

"Kegan, what are you doing?" he said, with something between a mutter and a shout.

"I need to talk to you," Kegan whispered.

Einar drowsily returned to his meal. "Okay. What?"

Kegan noticed a guard starting to look at them. "I need to show you something interesting at my hut."

"Lemme eat."

"No. It's an awesome lizard that's like, ten different colors." Kegan winked as furiously and obviously as he could.

"Huh?"

"Just come with me." Kegan dragged the half heartedly protesting Einar back to his hut. He looked around to make sure no one was near, then pulled Einar into the hut.

"What were you saying about a lizard?" Einar said, blinking as he began to fully wake up.

"Nothing. Forget the lizard." Kegan lowered his voice from a shout to a whisper. "There's something wrong with this village."

"What do you mean? It's great. They're taking care of us, and we don't have to do anything." Einar smiled, but his eyes showed a worried confusion.

"Exactly. Have you seen anyone do anything?" Einar realized what Kegan said. "I figured it out."

"How?" Einar paused. "Wait, what did you figure out?"

Kegan began his story with the first dream that pushed him to go on this journey. He choked up as he got to the part where he and Acarya fought side by side. The part where there were just far too many soldiers surrounding them. Kegan's heart sank as pictures from the fight flashed through his mind. There were too many men. They couldn't win this. His cheeks grew wet and, at last, he could speak no more.

"Acarya gave you a second chance?" Einar gently asked.

Kegan nodded. As he finished his story, ending with his conversation with Sed, Einar was clearly deep in thought. After several moments, he spoke, "It's obvious isn't it? We're in Acarya's village."

* * *

Chapter 5

"Tzofi!"

Tzofi grabbed the rope and held it. She peeked over the edge. Hadwin was floating in mid air, held up by thin loop around his waist.

"What happened?" she screamed.

"Nothing. I was just testing you."

Tzofi scowled. Hadwin lowered himself the last couple meters down to the trees. The branches spread out between the trunks to form a mat-like area. Hadwin sent the waist loop back to the top. "Send down one of the kids."

"Okay." Tzofi yelled back. Shen tightened the rope around Basim's waist. She and Hadwin couldn't count on the young kids to be able to lower their own weight. Hadwin pulled the side of the loop with Basim down from below, while Tzofi pulled the other side up from the top of the cliff. After a few short minutes, Basim had joined Hadwin on the tree platform. Becan and Dakarai followed quickly after. The last person was Tzofi. With nobody left at the top of the precipice, she would have to count on Hadwin stopping the other side of the loop from rising, holding her still, if she lost her grip. She apprehensively stepped off the edge of the cliff. Not too far. Two meters quickly passed. Eight left to go. Tzofi reached for a spot another half meter down on the rope. As she was about to gain a hold on it, her other hand slipped. "Hadwin!"

Hadwin gripped the ascending side of the loop. It was going too fast. He couldn't stop it. It slowed down slightly. A little more. Right as Tzofi was about to land on the platform, she hopped up and off the rope, landing with a gentle tumble upon the tree terrace.

Evening began to approach. Light still filled the air, but its radiance was beginning to fade. Now that he had come closer, Hadwin could see the river was much more calm than they had thought. It was about five meters wide and looked to be just a meter or two deep. On the side, some water had flowed off into a calm pool, just a couple meters wide and less than half a meter deep. Hadwin walked to the point on their bridge directly over the pool. He let the rope fall until it was just above the surface of the river. He marked the spot where the platform was, relative to the water, on the rope. He pulled a branch off a tree and carved a point in the end.

“Hadwin, what are you doing?” Tzofi asked exasperatedly.

“You’ll see.” Hadwin replied with a smile.

He tied the end of the rope around his waist and tied the marked point around a tree. Before Tzofi could argue, he grabbed the spear and jumped. Hadwin hovered just two meters above the surface of the side pool. He could see tiny fish darting through the water.

“Hadwin! What are you doing?” Tzofi shouted.

“I’m fishing,” he called back.

“You could have killed yourself!”

“That’s why I didn’t tell you before I did it.” Hadwin scanned the pool. The fish weren’t too big, but they would be something. He waited until one was very still, right below him. He lunged with the spear. Before it even hit the water, the fish had zipped away from the shadow of the spear point. Hadwin looked at the tip of his spear. It was too big to catch any of the tiny fish in the pool. He had to get closer.

“Tzofi, lower me another couple meters,” Hadwin bellowed.

“Seriously?” Tzofi laughed, “If anything, I’ll pull you all the way back up here.”

“You know,” Hadwin coaxed, “that sounds like a lot of unnecessary effort to me. Why would you put yourself through that?”

“You know, that is a good point,” Tzofi reasoned, “to save myself some work, I might just pull you up halfway and let you dangle for a while!”

Hadwin gasped as he felt a sharp upwards tug on his rope. “Fine!” he exclaimed, “I’m sorry I made this decision without you. Can you please lower the rope just a bit?”

Hadwin heard the sound of his knot being undone amidst four distinct laughs before, suddenly, he dropped. He now hung just a few inches above the water. He flailed until his feet caught the narrow piece of land just to the side of the pool.

“Any farther?” Tzofi amusedly inquired.

Hadwin grunted as he struggled to stand up straight. “Just one more meter.”

As more rope was released, Hadwin had enough extra rope to stand comfortably beside the pool. He glanced up to the darkening sky. All he could see was a thin strip of blue, surrounded by the two walls of the gorge. Hadwin felt like he was sitting on the pages of a huge book that was about to close. About to close and crush everything inside.

Hadwin turned back to the pool. Time to fish.

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Einar opened the top of his bag. He reached in and pulled from it a clump of berries. In the dimly lit hut, they seemed to shimmer with light captured from the stars. Each berry was just smaller than a grape and shone with an iridescent, indigo hue. Kegan was drawn to them. Almost without warning, he developed an urge to create his flames. Not to burn Einar, the berries, or anything else, but rather to join and caress the shining spheres.

“What are they?” Kegan asked reverently.

“They are propero berries,” Einar said, “they will help us.”

“Where did you find them?”

“They were given to my by an old shaman passing through my parts of the forest long ago. He said his people did not appreciate the power the berries held, so he wished to pass them on. He told me, he foresaw them going to use in my hands.”

“Did you ever find this power yourself?”

“I did not have to. The shaman told me of a tale. He said, ‘Once, long ago, a village was fighting in a war. In one battle, the chief was injured quite badly, and he looked about to die. The shaman there, my grandfather, pulled propero berries out from a secret garden. As the chief lay, near death, upon the shaman’s table, that shaman pushed the berries into the king’s mouth. Then for two days, that chief’s mind raced. His eyes rolled beneath their covers, and his legs twitched. The villagers believed he was running away from death, and the propero berries were giving him speed. However, the shaman wasn’t sure the chief would win this race. Then, on the morning of the third day, the chief leaped from his cot, ready to return to battle.’”

Kegan picked up one of the berries and let it roll around his palm. “And what happened to the chief?”

Einar looked to the clump of berries and sighed. “His tale wasn’t quite done yet. He

continued, ‘After the chief led his village to victory in the war, his village calmed down and he grew old and weary. One morning, he went to the hut of the shaman, my father now, limping on his old and creaky bones. He commanded my father to give him a propero berry. My father refused, saying they could only be used for emergencies, but that chief demanded a berry, and a berry he got. After eating that propero berry, the chief was filled with a youthful energy for days. However, after that energy began to run out, the chief grew haggard, more so than before the second berry, and his eyes were struck with red strings of blood. He begged for another berry, but my father refused, as more would simply exacerbate the chief's illness. In a fit of propero-fueled rage, the chief tried to attack my father, but my father sent him sprawling to the ground with a strike to the chin. After that, my father gathered all of the berries, burned the propero plants, and left the village with me. We survived the forest for several years, keeping the propero berries safe until they could be used properly.’”

Kegan placed one of the propero berries into his mouth and bit into its firm flesh. An intensely tart flavor coated Kegan's palate. It burned into his tongue and his jaw began to tingle. Then just as Kegan was reaching for his water canteen, the acid disappeared and was replaced with a fresh and rejuvenating sweetness. The only sensation Kegan could compare it to was the taste of water after working for hours under the heat of the sun in the fields. An amazing clarity spread through his mind, his limbs pulsed with new energy, and his heart pumped blood with renewed strength and speed. At first, Kegan compared it with caffeine, but then he realized, caffeine gave him jittery hops. This gave him power.

The very thought of sleep had all but been abolished from Kegan's mind. He was ready to think. The sun had fallen outside Kegan's hut, and they were planning their next move.

Einar sat next to Kegan and put his hand on Kegan's shoulder. “Okay, we know there's something fishy about this village. All the work is done by slaves at night. The chief says these are prisoners of war, yet there doesn't seem to be a military. Someone's slipping you notes and tipping you off. Are you sure these are the people responsible for your parents' and Acarya's deaths? If they are, what do you want to do?”

Kegan looked to the side and thought. What did he really want to do? “I hate these people” he said. “They stole my parents before I could even know them. They killed Acarya.” He swallowed the guilt in his throat. “I want to hunt them down, shove a spear through their hearts. I want to make them suffer, and I want them to die.” The guilt pushed its way back up.

“But I can’t. I can’t just find a man and kill him when he’s unarmed and not trying to hurt me. I know I can’t.”

“Kegan, you don’t need to kill them. You don’t need to hurt them,” Einar reassured.

“Once we find out what they are doing and reveal them, they’ll suffer enough.”

Kegan turned around, a haunted look on his face. “Einar, I’m scared.”

“Why? Scared of what?”

“I’m scared that if someone gives me the opportunity to hurt them, these people, I’m afraid I’ll do it. Afraid I’ll lose control and hurt them more than I could ever let myself do to anyone. The other Kegan won’t care while they writhe in pain. Then this Kegan will come back, and he’ll never forgive himself.”

Einar laid his arm around Kegan’s shoulders. Kegan wanted to push away, to be alone and independent, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t give up the little human contact that he hadn’t known he had craved so much. They sat like this, in silence, for ten, then fifteen, then finally twenty minutes. The heavy weight that hung in Kegan’s chest slowly dissolved.

“You ready to talk again?” Einar queried softly.

Kegan nodded quickly. Einar continued, “I think the first thing we need to do is have a little chat with Sana. He knows more than he’s telling us. You ready?”

Kegan nodded again, this time stronger and more confidently. Einar cracked the door open. No guards in sight. He gestured for Kegan to stay put. A few seconds later, he returned, holding two spears. They were expertly carved with a needle point, a strong handle, and the exact same length and width as Kegan’s usual spear. He grinned as he accepted his.

“Where’d you get these?” Kegan inquired bemusedly.

“Took the liberty of making ‘em myself on a “hunting” excursion,” Einar chuckled hoarsely. “I did have a few hours between when you talked to me this morning and now. Had a feeling we might need them.”

Without another word, they disappeared into the night.

* * *

Hadwin pulled himself up the rope. He tossed his pack onto the platform. Six crabs spilled out.

“What happened to fishing?” Tzofi smiled.

“The fish were too small to have much meat on them. Plus, we can’t make a fire here, so

we'd have to eat raw fish." Hadwin paused, then resumed with a lowered voice and quickened speech. "And I couldn't catch any, but these will be fine without cooking."

Tzofi smirked, "Well, you better stop them before they crawl back into the river."

Hadwin turned around to see his prizes clambering across the platform. He leaped to stop them, ushering the crustaceans into his pack and narrowly avoiding several pinched fingers.

The blue strip of sky had long turned to white-speckled black. Hadwin carved a twig into a thin skewer under nothing but the moonlight. He impaled the crabs. The legs stopped wiggling. He pulled them from the bodies and passed them around. Crunches echoed across the rock walls. Tzofi tied everyone's wrists to the trees that made up the platform.

Hadwin thought he would miss the fire more. It was something that had calmed him, comforted him, throughout their journey. It had been a protective force that had given peace of mind to everyone around him. On their isolated bridge, Hadwin felt just that; alone. It had an almost peaceful, safe feeling. Nothing could reach them, nothing could hurt them. Hadwin looked out to the stretch of stars left visible to him. What were the villagers back home going through? Were they still in the cave? Whether for good or bad, Hadwin hoped they were out from under the rock. No one should be denied the beautiful, starry sky he admired.

Chapter 6

The calm night seemed to pull Hadwin from his sleep. The moon, high in the sky, seemed to taunt them, stuck on a platform in a canyon. He looked to the opposite wall. If only the moon could pull him up, like water at high tide, at least to the top of the wall, if not all the way into the sky. He couldn't wait any longer. He grabbed his pack. The pegs were still safe within it. Now was as good as any a time to test them.

Hadwin plunged the first peg into the mesh of roots, a meter from his feet. So far, so good. It penetrated a couple inches and held strong. Hadwin reached up and placed the second peg another meter above the first. He grabbed the second peg and jumped up onto the first. The pegs held firm. He stuck the third one in, another meter up. He held the third peg and jumped onto the second. The second peg underneath his feet started to wobble. He had to work fast. The fourth peg went in. Hadwin jumped to the third. The downward force of his jump knocked the second peg from the wall. It tipped off the edge of one of the trees and plummeted into the river with a distant splash. He was too far up to stop now. Hadwin continued to inch his way up the wall. The quiet night was filled with the dull thuds as he stuck the pegs into the wall and the

splashes as pebbles and pegs fell into the river.

Hadwin's blistered fingers reached over the edge of the cliff. His sore shoulders pulled the weight of his aching body up after. With a final heave, he pulled himself completely on top. Sleep had no trouble taking him now.

"Hadwin! Hadwin!"

Hadwin cracked his eyes at the sound of his own name. He suddenly recalled the events of the night before. Maybe it was a good thing he had had the impulse to climb up here last night. He wasn't sure he could do it again if he tried now.

"Hadwin!"

He stuck his head over the canyon edge. "I'm up here."

* * *

"Looks like they're heading toward the hospital. With spears. Better get moving." Sed dismissed the scout and began to walk back towards the administration building.

Sana turned to Sed. "Alone? They're armed!"

Sed continued walking away. "They won't hurt you, you're just a doctor. They probably just want to ask a few questions."

Sana took several steps towards Sed, but remained a few behind him. "Are you sure you can't leave just a few guards?"

"Just hurry up. They'll be suspicious if you walk in after they do." Sed sighed impatiently and turned back. "Run. You should make it in time. Remember, just tell them you don't know anything."

Sana bolted out of the chief's building. As he left, Sed dismissed the scouts who had brought him the news. Sana was proving quite useful. Getting close to the newcomers to help figure out who they were. There was something about the young one that seemed familiar. Something about his face, his voice. Something about how he came and argued. It reminded Sed of something he couldn't remember. It must've been long ago. His old memory was failing him.

Sana burst in through the back door of the hospital. He caught his breath and grabbed a mortar and pestle. A few seconds after he began grinding nonexistent berries, the front doors of the hospital flew open. An animated Kegan entered, followed by a calmer, but still lively Einar. They were still carrying spears. Sana tried to force a smile.

"What are you both doing up so late?" he croaked.

“You know very well what we’re doing,” Kegan asserted. “Or I think you do. That’s what we’re about to find out.”

“Listen, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just a doctor.” Sana shrugged his shoulders in helplessness. “I don’t know anything about anything unless it has something to do with something I have to do.”

Kegan quirked an eyebrow at Sana’s nervous stream of gibberish before demanding loudly, “Tell me truthfully,” Kegan demanded. “Was it you who wrote those notes?”

Sana’s eyes grew wide. “Shhhh. Not so loud!”

“Why? You don’t want all the villagers to hear about what you all up there are doing?” Kegan jeered, “Don’t pretend you don’t know. I could run outside first thing tomorrow morning and yell out everything I know. Answer my questions.”

“Yes, I wrote those notes,” Sana hissed, “Don’t you get it? Those notes were what called your attention to what was wrong. Those were trying to help you. There’s still some information I *cannot* share, but I’m on your side, just trust me.”

Kegan frowned. It was true, the notes were one of the few good pointers given to him in this whole place. He couldn’t risk losing the only person who had a clue what was going on and could be his ally.

“Fine. I still don’t trust you, but I’ll leave,” Kegan remarked coolly.

“Your choice. Go back to sleep. I was just straightening up before I leave for my own hut.” Sana walked aside to reclaim the still empty mortar and pestle.

Sana watched as Kegan walked out, once again, followed by Einar. As soon as they left, he snuck off to Sed’s building. He made sure the two weren’t watching as he stepped in. He took a deep breath as he walked down the left hallway, down to the last room, and in front of Sed.

“Well done Sana! They seemed quite content.” Sed languidly lingered upon the last syllable. “I still can’t figure out how you gain their trust so easily.”

“Thanks sir, only my duty,” Sana croaked.

“Of course, though I did hear a scout report with something about notes.” Sed commented. “What’s this about?”

Sana nervously smiled. “Oh, nothing. I guess you’re just hearing one of the ways I managed to capture their confidence.”

“Sana, sometimes I feel like you’re not telling me the entire truth. Is this something I

should be concerned about?" Sed peered deep in Sana's eyes.

Sana internally shivered at his suave voice. "No, of course not, sir. I don't always tell you all of my methods to avoid boring you. This might be the cause of your subliminal distress. I can assure you that everything being done is for the good of the colony."

"That's always good to hear. You know, you've always been my most useful right hand. I'd hate to lose you."

Sana simply nodded.

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Hadwin slowly dragged the rope up the cliff. Basim watched, curious and admiring as Hadwin's shoulders and arms flexed. At the bottom, Tzofi and Dakarai pulled the side of the loop opposite of that holding Becan. Hadwin bore the brunt of the work, pulling him up, foot by foot. His hands were developing calluses from the work he did. A few minutes later, Becan emerged over the top of the wall. Hadwin collapsed in fatigue. Pulling them up was a lot harder than slowly letting them down. He saw the rope rush as Tzofi pulled the empty loop back down.

"Are you doing okay?" she called up.

"Yeah," he winced, "send the next one up."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

Hadwin felt the rope shudder as another weight was added. He started pulling the next kid. His muscles screamed as they were pushed beyond a barrier they had never passed. His sole comfort was the few inches the rope traveled by Tzofi between his tugs. Several minutes passed, but Dakarai made it up to stable land safely. Knots grew between Hadwin's shoulders. This would be the hardest of all the lifts. No one would be at the bottom helping him. Tzofi was heavier than any of the kids. Plus, he was done. Too tired to do anything. He doubted he could have done the last lift again, forget about this one.

"Ready?" she yelled up.

Hadwin wanted to shout back "No!", but he couldn't leave her alone down in the gorge. He braced his protesting arms. "Get ready, I'll pull you up."

He turned to the kids. "I might have to take a break in the middle of this one. Be ready to hold the rope. When I tell you to, all three of you have to grab the rope and pull it back as hard as you can."

They nodded in fright and excitement. Hadwin turned back to the rope. He shook out his arms. Last one. He pulled the green cord. His body immediately cried for him to stop. He wanted to let go, let the snake slither back to the depths. He wanted to lie back and let his tired muscles rest. He couldn't. Hadwin shook his head back to the present. He had one more pull to do. His shoulders couldn't do it anymore. Hadwin bent over and used his back. A new, though small, reservoir of strength filled him. The rope advanced another couple quick meters. Then the energy was gone. Hadwin's back seized up. "Grab the rope!"

All three kids gripped the rope with all the strength they held in their hands. If anything, the sheer force of their combined weight would hold the rope still. He fell to the ground. His back spasmed. It was not supposed to take that type of beating. Hadwin focused his mind on the pain and surrounded it. He pinpointed it into a tiny speck. He fought it and compressed it. Slowly it faded and disappeared. Hadwin knew the force of the pain was still there, just waiting to burst out. As long as he could keep his concentration, he could hide it away for now. Now is where it mattered. Right until he could bring the last person up.

Hadwin took the rope again. His back held, and his shoulders were slightly refreshed. He pulled the pulley with as much speed as he could humanely manage. He had to sprint to the finish line. He wasn't sure if he could last long enough to jog. Yards flew through as the rope climbed up the wall. Hardly thirty seconds passed before the tips of Tzofi fingers curled around the rock. Hadwin looked back to the kids. They grabbed the rope. By the time Tzofi pulled herself over the cliff, Hadwin had collapsed into a heap. Everyone knew better than to disturb him after the ordeal he had helped them through.

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As the morning sun rose, Einar joined Kegan in his hut. They had both awoken before daybreak. It was time, once again, to plan. Einar seemed alert and ready to think. Kegan yawned profusely as he opened the door.

"What should we do know?" Kegan mumbled.

"I don't know, but we have to act fast," Einar stated. "I think they're onto us."

"Obviously. I went in there and told Sed I was suspicious."

"That was probably a really stupid thing to do, but we can't change that now."

"What should we do?"

"We need to get inside the administration building. We need to find out what they're

doing. Then we can spread the information and try to win some support from the villagers."

"We need to plan this out. When should we try to go? Now? Should we wait for night?"

Einar thought for a second. "We should go now. At least we can see who's watching us in the light. I don't trust my senses in the dark."

"Sounds good, let's go. We'll figure it out as we walk."

"Okay. Let's go."

Chapter 7

Kegan and Einar calmly stepped through the doors of the building. The ever-present secretary seemed as bored as the guard and waiting runner.

"What do you need?" The secretary drawled.

"We need to talk to Sed." Einar said, "He had told us to visit. Just send the runner to ask."

"Fine, whatever." The secretary slowly walked over to the runner. He whispered something in his ear. The runner slowly walked toward a hallway. The secretary looked back for something behind his post. Kegan pulled his arm back, cocked his elbow, and swung forward, whipping a round, fist-sized rock at the absent minded guard's temple. He dropped with a thud. The secretary turned to the side, his eyes growing wide as he noticed the guard's prone form. Before the secretary could voice the alarm growing in his expression, Einar was behind him with a raised spear butt. The runner tried to escape, but Kegan pulled out another, similarly sized rock and slung the stone at the man's head. The projectile whizzed forward, an attached, red cord snaking behind. The rock barely flew past the skull of the fleeing runner. Kegan jerked his left wrist to send a tiny wave through the taut rope. The snake-like rope undulated down its length until its end whipped aside and wound around the runner's neck. Kegan jogged forward, reaching the runner just as the man was gaping and falling to one knee. *No need to kill him.* Kegan finished unwrapping the rope just as the runner fell unconscious.

After he dragged the third comatose man behind the desk, Einar quickly changed into the runner's suit and disappeared behind the hall. Kegan adopted the secretary's attire and took the appropriate post next to the desk. Einar followed the hall the runner had began down. The hall slowly began to curve left, and its sides were filled with dark and silent doorways.

The uniform was slightly small on him and rather itchy. When would Einar return? The sleeves were starting to dig into his armpits. Someone walked in. Kegan just told him that a private meeting was in session. The man seemed to understand and left. Right as Kegan was about to

fall asleep, Einar bolted out the door.

“Kegan, let’s go!”

“Anyone after you?”

“Just a bunch of guards.”

“Ooh, let’s go.”

Einar grabbed their villager clothing and they shot out the door. Right as they left, Sed emerged from the hallway. A dozen advisers trailed behind. His face contorted into fury as he saw the unconscious men behind the counter.

“What did you see of the runner?” He snapped at a chubby runner.

“I don’t know. I just heard a scratching sound from down the hall, so I checked if someone was there, and he was, and he ran,” the runner blubbered.

Sed sighed angrily. Who could have taken out three men so easily and quietly? Sed gritted his teeth. This couldn’t continue. This one time was too bad already. He had to find and silence them before they could do any real harm. How much had they learned?

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Hadwin woke up to the sight of stars just beginning their nightly reign over the sky. He looked over his shoulder and saw Tzofi sitting around a small fire with Basim, Becan, and Dakarai, entertaining them with some story or joke, most likely at Hadwin’s expense. Cautiously, Hadwin planted his palms beneath his shoulders and began to push himself up. His back seized up, his shoulders were struck with a piercing pain, and he fell back to the rock-hard dirt. Tzofi ceased her story and rushed over, her audience close behind.

“Hadwin, are you okay?” Tzofi cried.

Hadwin groaned. “Have I been out all day?”

“It’s been about a day and a half.”

Hadwin looked around. The morning dew still sparkled on the dark green leaves around him. He had assumed he would sleep for just a couple hours, then wake up in the afternoon to continue traveling. He needed to get up again. Hadwin experimented with both arms. His right shoulder seemed to have taken the brunt of the force. He pushed himself up with his left elbow. He stumbled, catching himself on a tree with his right hand, involuntarily. Again, he fell back down to the dirt.

“Hadwin, stop,” Tzofi said. “We have things figured out.”

“Where did you get food?” Hadwin gasped.

“After we finished the mushrooms we had gathered from before the canyon, we set up a couple of rock walls and traps to catch fish in a stream. We only got a few crayfish for now, but I think we’ll catch more soon.”

Hadwin began to speak, but upon seeing Tzofi’s expression, he fell silent, relaxed his neck, and settled into his bed of earth. He watched as she began to walk towards the stream to check the traps. Basim, Becan, and Dakarai giggled as they approached Hadwin and began to lay rocks and leaves upon his still form. Hadwin didn’t mind, or at least he minded it a lot less than he minded sitting up to move them.

Tzofi walked back towards Hadwin and shooed away his tormentors. She handed him a stick upon which several frog legs were pierced.

“Eat,” she said.

“Where’d these come from?”

“It’s not that hard to catch frogs,” Tzofi chuckled as she gestured aside, “Or to make the kids do it, and we already have a fire to cook the frogs over.”

Hadwin gently nibbled on one of the morsels, his eyes half closed and his head still back. As food began to reach his stomach, his gut unclenched and Hadwin began to feel the extent of his appetite. He devoured the remaining frog legs and held the stick up for Tzofi to take back.

“I could get used to this, you know?” he murmured, “Getting served my food without having to get up.”

Tzofi snatched the stick back and playfully poked Hadwin in the side. “Don’t get used to it. I might just give you the frog’s *skin* next!”

Hadwin began to fall asleep, or at least pretend to, but through his closed eyes and still mouth, Tzofi could see the slightest hint of a smile.

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Kegan slammed the door behind him. He changed back into his villager clothes. He opened the door and looked outside. No one in sight. He chuckled the secretary’s suit as far away as he could. He contentedly watched as it snagged on a high up tree branch in the forest. He slipped back into his hut and waited for Einar.

“What’d they say?” Kegan demanded.

“Wait, wait, let me tell you everything from the beginning.”

Kegan waited eagerly. “So, you know how I first dressed as the runner, so I went down the hallway the other runner was going. I assumed if he was going to tell someone that something was going on, he would tell the people in charge. I went to the end of the hallway and opened the last door. It opened into another, shorter hallway. I opened the next door and found my self in a rock room. It looked like it was just a cube. I dropped to the ground to try to find a crack of something secret that made some passageway. Suddenly, I heard what sounded like distant, but raucous laughter. It seemed to be coming from below me. I put my ear to the ground and started to hear voices. I recognized one as Sed’s. I listened to what they were saying.

‘What were the reports?’ one of them asked.

‘I don’t know, some village is holding out way too much.’

‘Did you buy someone?’

‘Yeah, we gave some guy a bunch of gold, but he still wasn’t able to completely do it.’

‘Find someone else then!’

‘But, sir - ’

‘I don’t care! Empty the whole damn treasury! We have enough gold. We need more people, damnit!’

‘Yes, sir.’

Then I heard a door close, and I think the scout guy left. Then the rest of the people there started talking about something about harvests. I was trying to see if I could hear anything more about what they were talking about, but then I heard a shuffling kind of sound. I turned around and saw someone standing in the doorway. I looked at my uniform. Same as his. I guess he figured out something was wrong. Something about my face, or maybe the alarm on it when I saw him, so he yelled for guards. I knocked him out and ran past. The hall was full of guards. I pretended to be a normal runner and calmly walked through them. Then, I guess one of the sentries at the end was a friend of that first rat who found me. He asked where his bud was. Someone found the guy knocked out. That’s when I ran. That’s where you saw me.”

“They must be in a war.” Kegan surmised. “But why is everything so secret?”

“Can’t be a war. Who’s even fighting for them?” Einar retorted.

“Exactly.” The part that bothered Kegan the most was the bribe. What type of person would be willing to betray their entire village for gold? “We need to talk to someone who knows what’s going on.” Einar just nodded and looked straight forward, gears slowly turning in his

head.

Kegan whipped the cloth bag off the head of their captive. His eyes screamed fear, and he desperately tried to yell through his gag. He squirmed and tried to break free, but Einar's knots held strong.

"I'm going to take the gag off, and you are not going to scream," Kegan said calmly. "If you do scream, we will kill you. We want to ask a few questions."

The man quickly nodded. Kegan sliced the cloth, and it tumbled away, falling slowly, swaying to the ground. Words poured from his mouth like a river.

"Please, no. Please, I didn't do anything wrong. Don't hurt them. Just please don't hurt them. I'll do anything. I didn't do anything. Please."

"No, shh shh," Kegan whispered, "now, who are you talking about?"

The man seemed only slightly relieved. "It's my wife and son. My wife, she does street cleaning like me. My son, he's young, just five. He plants and fixes flowers. I told him it's like a game to put them in whatever way he likes. He still believes me."

"Why are you doing this? I don't see anyone here doing any work during the day."

"I'm not from here. I remember, I think, I lived in a nice, exciting village. It was how long, three, four years ago? Well, there we were, when someone attacked. We hardly knew - just a few minutes before they arrived. We didn't have a chance. It seemed like the army knew those guys were coming, but it was still no match for the huge force that showed up at our borders. We hung on one, maybe two days until we fell. They collected a bunch of us as slaves, and we were herded through the forest. Somewhere, I think we changed hands, but it was so long ago, I don't know. I ended up here, working. It's just become my life. If I don't try to remember, it doesn't seem too bad."

A tear started to bud at the inner corner of his eye. Kegan gave him a little smile. The man blinked away the moisture and listlessly stared at the wall. Kegan tried to sympathize with him. He couldn't. This man's pain was a whole different kind of hurt than what Kegan had experienced.

"We're going to free you," Kegan murmured. "You and your wife. And your son. We'll free you and take you back home, back to your village."

The man gave him a worried smile. "I hope you can. For everyone's sake. All of us working here."

Kegan gently undid the bonds they had tied. The man slowly stood up and turned around. “Duciam.”

“What?”

“Duciam is my name. As long as you work to free us, you have yourself an ally. If ever you need help from us, ask a night worker for me. I’ll do everything I can.”

Kegan put his hand on his shoulder and nodded. Duciam disappeared into the dark, shadow-like, slipping between the buildings. Kegan watched until he was completely gone.

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Chapter 8

After another day and a half had passed, Hadwin’s back and shoulders had recovered enough for the group to continue. Following breakfast, Hadwin and Tzofi lead the rest back on their way. Hadwin looked up into the canopy. How many days had passed since they began? It felt like a year. Hadwin hadn’t done that much, simply, stuff in such a short time ever. A tired ache resided in the back of his neck. No, it was more at base of his head. A dull throb that refused to let up. His arms and shoulders were worn out. They were stronger, more wiry than they had before. He could still feel every single, tiny tear in the fibers that refused to heal. More than anything, a quiet pang squeezed his chest with every beat of his heart. Where was the quiet village life that he had been blessed with for so long? Hadwin wanted to run back home, back the clearing he had grown up in. But if he ran back, nothing would be there. The village, his house, the Main Hall, his home. He had to do this. Do this to bring back his home.

The rumbling of the river Hadwin had heard earlier had returned. They had to be approaching soon. Hadwin tried to interpret the noise that passed by them. It seemed different than the sound from the river in the canyon. That had a kind of hollow, echoed sound that started quiet, but magnified through the rock microphone it ran through. This felt like a deeper, more primordial bellow. Hadwin could feel the river in his chest, muscles, and every bone in his body. The trees grew thicker and more overcrowded as they feasted on the rich, moistened soil that precluded the river. Several squirrels and birds populated the trees above Hadwin. Both the flora and fauna flourished with the appearance of a river. The roar grew. Doubts crept into Hadwin’s mind. What was this river? It was by far the largest he had ever heard. How were they supposed to cross it if it was as powerful as it sounded? Just moments later, Hadwin found the answer to his first and second questions.

Water thundered down a seventy foot drop into a deep pool that continued as a river. The stream of water that fell only measured about five feet across, but the speed at which the river charged down the cliff astounded Hadwin. The sheer volume of water worked up a mist that obscured and rose from the pool at the bottom. Within ten feet from where the water struck, the pool regained its calm surface.

Hadwin stood on the bank of the source river, just a few feet before the start of the waterfall. He reached for a leaf from a tree behind him. Hadwin dropped the crisp oval into the water. It floated down the initially calm water. Hadwin walked down the bank, towards the falls, just in time to the tiny boat float over the edge. The green circle quickly turned to a speck, which disappeared in the thunder and mist. Hadwin thought he could see it floating on the still surface of the pool, but it was too far away to tell.

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Dim twilight light crept through the windows and slightly opened door. Kegan slammed it shut and turned to face Einar.

“Okay, now we know they fight in wars to get gold and capture extra slaves. Not particularly a popular method with most other villages, but definitely not deserving of all this secrecy.” Kegan said.

“Yes, but how are they still going so strong? Villages that do this are usually attacked by webs of allies. They’re always hit harder because no one wants their fellow villagers to be taken for slavery,” Einar paused in thought, “These villages never survive.”

“And once again, where’s their military?”

“I think we need to look around a bit more.”

Kegan snuck out of the hut with his spear. The still paths were illuminated with nothing but pale moonlight. He spotted the first worker. Kegan’s eyes worked a thirty foot radius sweep around the lone worker. He found two guards hiding in the shadows of buildings. Kegan slowly made his way to the first. He snuck up behind the drowsy sentry. Kegan pushed the guy’s temples and jabbed his adam’s apple. He dropped silently. Kegan slowly placed him leaning against the building. In the dark, he almost looked asleep. One more to go. Kegan repeated to the second guard what he did to the first. The worker had noticed him. Kegan could see his puzzled expression. No! He was about to yell. Kegan ran forward, signaling the sweeper to stay quiet.

“Duciam, where is he?” Kegan panted.

The man pointed. “Off there, far side of the village. I think he’s making arrows, but I’m not sure.”

“Thanks.”

Kegan could see Duciam wrapping twine around arrowheads and straight shafts. A pile of completed arrows sat beside two piles of arrow heads and sticks. Kegan stared at Duciam, waiting in vain for the servant to turn around..

“Duciam. Hey, Duciam,” Kegan whispered.

“Who is it?”

“Kegan. We need your help.”

Duciam looked around cautiously. No guards in sight. He crept through a moonbeam lit clearing and met Kegan under a shadow. “What’s up?”

“Listen, where are you taking those arrows to?”

“The armory. Why?”

“Where is it? Why haven’t I been told about it?”

“It’s kept secret from everyone except the workers, the guards, and the administration.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. All I do is place arrows in it.”

“Okay, fine. Where is it?”

“It’s back over there,” he pointed to the looming, black building Sed resided in,”but about fifty feet further into the woods. I’ll just take you there.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll find it.”

“The building, yes. The entrance, probably not.”

Kegan followed Duciam’s quiet tread, now with Einar in tow. They passed by the commandant building. Kegan felt somewhat unsurprised when a shiver went down his spine. The tree line began just a few feet after the great, black building ended. Each twig seemed to cut a line in the dark air. The menacing nest of branches hung above Kegan, ready to fall, like a cage, and trap them. Trap them for the guards to find. After a couple minutes, the ground below Kegan’s feet grew stiff, and the give of the soft dirt had disappeared.

“Is this it? Under us?” Kegan whispered.

“Yeah, follow me. I’ll get you in.”

Duciam paused and looked around. *Not here.* They continued a few more feet into the

forest. It was close, he remembered. The three trees in a triangle. *Right there*. Duciam walked onto the small patch of ground between the three trunks. Kegan and Einar followed him onto the five foot wide triangle. Duciam held an innocuous looking vine. He untied a hardly visible knot from a branch beside them. Suddenly, the platform plummeted into a tunnel that appeared beneath their feet. Before Kegan could even react, the fall was ended by a stiff jerk. Kegan noticed several taut vines holding onto a branch frame built onto the platform above them. One wall of the triangular tunnel ended early, leaving an opening to another passage. Duciam led them through here for just a few quick feet. It opened into an enormous rotunda built into jagged rock. Every inch of wall was filled with piles of armor, swords, shields, and occasionally, fire bombs.

“Welcome to the armory,” Duciam remarked.

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Hadwin leaned over the edge. A tiny stream of pebbles tumbled over the edge. The rocks ricocheted off boulders below. The ground zoomed away as tiny splashes appeared in the rapidly shrinking blue smudge of a pool. Hadwin backed away quickly. The fall went forever. He backed up further, catching his breath. Time to go back to the camp. A branch caught Hadwin's toe. The ground seemed to grow in slow motion as he fell. Hadwin flailed and barely caught a branch. He leaned to the side and pulled his foot around the root. Just as he was about to steady himself, the thin branch snapped. Hadwin spun a half circle as he fell, back first, into the icy river.

The cold shock paralyzed Hadwin for a second, and he looked around, trying to find his bearings. There, the edge! Just a couple feet away. Hadwin reached for the dry dirt to pull himself from the watery fist that held him. His arm was pulled under by a current. Hadwin reached again. He gripped the bank, but the force around him continued to take him. Hadwin put his other hand on the sand. The pull was slowing. He tightened his grip. He almost came to a stop. Hadwin looked down the river. The waterfall was hardly more than five feet away. Hadwin grabbed a tree on the bank. It held against the immense pull threatening to yank him away. Hadwin started to pull himself out of the water. Then, barely above the clamor, he heard a muted crack. Hadwin scrambled, desperate to pull himself to the safety of dry land. The dead tree broke in his arms and forced him back. Hadwin looked up and saw the sky one last time. The waves engulfed him as he tipped over the edge.

Water seemed to crash all around Hadwin. It filled his eyes, ears, and mouth. He couldn't

breathe. He couldn't save his village. The name would be erased, just wiped off the map. The weight of the water crushed something inside Hadwin. Even if he somehow didn't drown, he would be squashed like a fly by hundreds of thousands of pounds of water flowing over the edge. There was nothing he could do anyways. All he was doing was falling, falling, falling...

Hadwin jerked up, his eyes half-closed and his heart racing. The ever present rumble of the falls pierced his ears. Hadwin stared in the direction of the falls. The river was far, ten, fifteen meters away. He was safe.

How were they supposed to go down the falls? Every stone was coated with the fine mist that floated up from the pool. Nothing was steady, nothing could be a reliable foothold. Any move could throw them under the torrential flame of the roaring dragon. It was going to be a long night.

Hadwin pried open his eyelids. His itchy, red eyes begged for sleep, but his mind wouldn't comply. He blinked slowly and tried to rub his eyes open. It was day. Another day they had to keep going. Only this one, they faced the bane of the waterfall in front of them. Hadwin slowly stood up.

Hadwin glanced at the waterfall. The edge was still ten feet away, but that felt plenty close enough. Hadwin checked around his feet. Nothing to trip on. His dream burned bright in his mind. Falling, being crushed under the current. He looked over the edge. The pool seemed to taunt him from just as far away as before. They were to go down the same way as before: by rope loop. This time, though, no one could be at the bottom to help whoever was descending. Hadwin looked over again and felt blood pumping in his head. He stepped back. They would have to go eventually.

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Chapter 9

A wall of the cave swung open, and an army poured in. Their tired faces reflected their worn demeanors and spent armor. Even their weapons were chipped and scratched. One procured a jug of ale. They passed it around, slowly loosening up as the alcohol entered their systems. Rough jokes crossed the uneven circle and the armory was filled with gruff laughter. One more man walked in. He threw a huge canvas bag into the middle of the group. It was quickly split open and bread, vegetables, and meats spilled out. Someone made a small fire and threw the rest of the ale in. It blazed into a huge bonfire. The soldiers skewered the meats on their swords and

roasted them in the flame. There was lively conversation around the fire as the army feasted.

“Who are they? Prisoners like you?” Kegan whispered.

“No, they’re the army, but I don’t know where they’re from,” Duciam hissed back.

“Why do they look so poor?” Einar asked, his voice low.

“I don’t think they even started out as villagers. Listen, we need to go. They’ll find us. They’re drunk. They won’t think twice about killing us,” Duciam insisted.

“Wait, wait, wait. We took the effort to get here, let’s get something before we go,” Kegan reasoned.

The soldiers continued to drink away their hardships and senses. They began to discuss their latest battle.

“Haha, what cowards.”

“Yeah, they didn’t stand a chance.”

“Took ‘em right out.”

“They handed over their treasury without even fighting, then we took them too.”

“Yeah, and now we get ale!”

“Yeah!”

“Did you hear where we have to go next?”

“Don’t even remind me.”

“No, it’s some place that the first army couldn’t take out. Some little place I ain’t never heard of.”

“What was it? I-I-Ig-”

“Igaezg? Yeah.”

Kegan’s face turned as white as a sheet. It was the first time he had heard his home’s name mentioned since he had first left it. It had been so long since he left. What had happened? It was being attacked by the army. The raiders.

“Kegan, what’s the matter?” Einar inquired.

“It’s my village. My village is being attacked. They’re going to attack my village,” Kegan choked.

“No, stop. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. Anything. They’re going to destroy my home. The only home I have left when this is all over.”

“You can’t stop them by doing anything now. We have to stop Sed, remember?”

“No! They’re going to go. Then Igaezg will be destroyed. It’ll be too late.”

“Kegan! Stop. You can’t hold them yourself. Your village will do fine. You heard what they said. They army couldn’t take it out.”

“The first army couldn’t take them out. Now there’s going to be two. I need to stop them. I need to help my village.”

“Kegan!” It was too late. Kegan leapt from the shelf they hid behind. He held his anger into a silent rage. The first soldier was dead before Kegan was even noticed. Kegan twirled through the ranks, a tornado decimating a forest. The alcohol had dulled their senses. None of them could stop him. Kegan’s spear broke in his hands from his vicious attack, so he grabbed two swords and fought with renewed vigor. The two blades flashed into a sphere of destruction. Einar couldn’t tell whether the bonfire flame was reflecting off the steel or whether the swords themselves were ablaze. A soldier galloped towards the exit, but Kegan flung a sword straight through his stomach. Kegan then grabbed another blade and continued his assault. Within minutes, every soldier had fallen. As Kegan roared, a ring of fire emanated from his chest, and the shelves crumbled into ash. All of the weapons were drowned in a sea of rubble and the bodies of the soldiers. With embers still burning around him, Kegan’s last rush of adrenaline came to an end, and he tottered and fell to the ground. Einar ran forward to catch him. Only he could feel the thick and heavy sobs that racked Kegan’s thin, almost fragile frame.

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This time, Tzofi was to go first. She looped the rope around her waist and looked over the edge of the cliff. Didn’t seem too far. They had spent the last day lengthening the rope. The drop down the falls was more than twice as far as they had had to go to reach the intermediary bridge they had made in the canyon. Tzofi kept looking over the rough, green cord that held her from the fall. With the speed with which she had to add 30 meters to it, she wasn’t sure how good her handiwork was. Tzofi looked back down the waterfall. The rope loop dropped into the pool a few feet from where the inundation hit the surface. She started to lower herself down. She looked up and saw Hadwin peering over the edge. He had a nauseous, almost green expression on his face. With a private smirk she looked back to the rope. The pool grew in her view as she quickly approached the ground level. Several minutes later, she dropped into the pool, unlooped, and swam to the bank.

“C’mon down! It’s not too bad!” she called up. “Water’s warm.”

Hadwin gave a weak smile and a nod, but he was pretty sure Tzofi couldn’t see it from down there. He could hardly see her from up above on the rocks. He sent all three of the kids down the rope. Tzofi just waded into the pool and helped pull them out. Now it was his turn. No one would be at the top to hold the rope if it slipped. Hadwin jumped over the edge. The descent seemed comfortably similar to the one down the canyon. Hadwin closed his eyes and tried to ignore the torrent of water flowing just besides him. Some time ago, maybe a couple years, Hadwin was playing with a couple sheets of paper. He held them vertical and parallel, a couple inches apart and a couple inches from his face. Hadwin blew a thin, directed stream of air between them. By some miracle, they were pushed together, towards the air stream. Hadwin found that with anything light, leaves, grass, seemed to have some kind of an attraction towards a stream of air.

Hadwin opened his eyes. The roar of the falls filled his ears again. He imagined himself just hanging there, frail like a piece of paper. The water rushed, like a stream of air, wind, right by him. He could feel some invisible hand grasping him and pulling him into the stream. Hadwin tried to hold himself away, but he knew it was hopeless. The rope above him was first pulled in. Hadwin let himself slowly be drawn under the stream. The water thundered through Hadwin’s ears. It filled his mouth and covered his eyes. Hadwin clung to the thin rope that held him up. Slowly, it frayed and started to split in Hadwin’s hands. Suddenly, the green strip snapped and Hadwin plummeted with the current. Within a fraction of a second, he was driven into the pool. The water pressed on him and started to crush him. An iron grip clamped onto Hadwin’s wrist. He wasn’t sure if it was real, or just the lack of oxygen that seized up his muscles. He felt a pulling force dragging him somewhere, somewhere away from the weight on top of him.

With a gasp, Hadwin’s head broke the surface. Air rushed into his crushed lungs. Hadwin’s vision cleared and he saw Tzofi holding his arm. The falls were behind.

With everything gathered up, they continued on. The new land they walked upon was clear, more open than the heavy forest they left. The sun glowed gently on the underbrush covered, brown, loamy dirt. Hadwin noticed a patch of green bushes proliferating across a portion of the ground. Each seemed populated with a host of red jewels. Hadwin walked closer. The ripe raspberries glistened. Becan, Basim, and Dakarai sprinted forward to pick off the berries. The turned around to offer juice-stained handfuls to Hadwin and Tzofi.

“Perfect,” Tzofi laughed, “we can snack on them as we go along.”

Hadwin whipped his head around. He inspected the bushes behind them. Something had just been there. Something was there. He ran back and searched around them. Nothing there.

“What is it?” Tzofi questioned.

“Nothing,” Hadwin sighed. “I thought I heard something, but it was nothing.”

Hadwin continued to sneak glances back, though nothing ever appeared. Slowly, his checking became less frequent, and he focused on the walk forward. Whatever had shown up would probably show up again.

The scout sprinted back to his village. This was the first time he had found children approaching. Even so, this was the first proximity alert for this close in at least a few years. This report would be interesting.

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“Meet me behind the hunting gear shack. ~S”

Kegan looked down from the note he held in his hands. It was the first note he had received from Sana since the original two. This was the first time he knew what the mysterious initial stood for. The “S” looped around the bottom half of the scrap of paper. A thin tail worked off the end of the letter and stretched to the other edge of the page. It seemed to have been written meticulously or with much thought. Either that, or it was just much practiced. Practiced to the point of being almost autonomous.

“What do you want to do? Go?” Einar blurted.

Kegan glanced back at the note. “Sana obviously wants to tell us something.”

“I don’t know if we should trust him, though.”

“He helped us before.”

Einar peeked around the shack. No guards. He motioned to Kegan, and they continued. Sana emerged from below a tree branch. He constantly peered over Kegan’s and Einar’s shoulders. He had a nervous, almost crazed look in his eyes. Thorns and branches stuck in his clothes. Fear and desperation filled his face.

“Good, you’re here. I almost thought you wouldn’t come,” Sana confessed.

“We almost weren’t going to,” Kegan retorted. “Now, what do you want?”

“I have to tell you. I was going to keep my mouth shut, but I can’t. I have to tell you.”

“What? Tell me what? Just say it!”

“Shh, they haven’t found us yet. They will, but they haven’t yet.”

“Who’ll find us? Just tell me what you want to say.”

“This village, they don’t do any work. They don’t do anything because there are slaves, prisoners, doing the work.”

“I know. We found them. We figured that out.”

“They’re here because they were captured. Prisoners of war.”

“We talked to one and already got that.”

“The village, they don’t fight with an army of their own.”

“Yes, yes, I know. We found this all out. What do you want to actually tell us?”

“Do you know why they do all this?”

Kegan took a sharp breath, about to return another annoyed reply. He slowly breathed back out. This was the question that had plagued him since he first realized something was wrong. Kegan set his face into a stony glare. “Why?” he asked cautiously.

“It’s - it’s because it’s so damn easy!” Sana was nearly yelling now. “Go topple a few villages, you got enough gold to last more than a while, and if you’re really good, enough slaves to last much longer.”

“Who’s the army? What’s that all about?”

“Ah, you see, there’s the trick. You’d expect these guys to be gone. Squashed by dozens of villages teaming up against the bully. That’s what always happens to people like this, isn’t it? It’s their army. It’s raiders.”

“Why would they even think about dealing with raiders?”

“I don’t know if you know or not, but the raiders have been here for a long while. They used to be little bands that would go around, looting and pilfering tiny villages. They fought amongst themselves so much, nearly any army could take ‘em out. Hardly anyone knew them, they were so insignificant. Then Imalum, here, saw some potential in them. We banded those bands together and made ourselves a little army. Deal was, we gave them food and shelter between raids, they gave us slaves and half the gold. We organized that bunch into a coordinated fighting group much more powerful than any of the scraggly bands had been. The raiders gained a name, we got an army. No one would blame us for attacking them. It was always the raiders’ fault. We kept our alliances, but could always knock an ally village or two out when we needed. All our citizens were happy and we never had riots. We were perfect.”

“Raiders? That’s what the raiders are?” Kegan peered deeply into Sana’s expression, trying to decipher his intentions. “Why do you keep saying we?”

“I was nothing but a poor doctor. I had no family, no friends, just acquaintances. I wanted position. Attention too, but more the power and authority of position. I worked my hardest and made it clear to Sed, and eventually he started letting me in to minor meetings. These grew to more and more secret congregations. One day, he just told me. I was hardly listening to the words from his mouth. All I cared about was that I was finally being allowed into that top circle. That circle that knew everything. Even there, I rose. Within weeks, I became Sed’s right hand man. He consulted me about everything. I always knew what was going on. Then I met Acarya.”

Chapter 10

Kegan gasped. A sharp pain bit into the back of his mind and an empty chasm started to open in his chest. He pushed it away. Sana continued.

“He really made me look at what our village was doing. Only when he talked to me did I realize the countless lives we were ruining, the villages we were destroying, the cultures of each, just wiped away. I wanted to stop it, but I couldn’t. I knew I couldn’t do it alone. Acarya told me to wait. To wait for a young man named Kegan who would fix everything.”

“Acarya. How did you meet him? Did he live in the village?”

“No. At least not when he came to talk to me. He told me not to just tell you everything, but to let you discover it on your own. I tried to let you, but I swear you were gonna kill yourself. I had to tell you before you were captured.” Sana looked over Kegan’s shoulders again and cried out.

“What? What happened?”

“A scout just left. They’ve found us. This place will be swarming soon. You gotta go.”

“Where? Where are we even supposed to hide?”

“I don’t know. Your hut?”

Kegan heard voices approaching in the distance. They got closer. Kegan heard footsteps. Guards. They got closer. Kegan heard a smooth voice speak up. Sed’s smooth tone could not be mistaken in the quiet night. They got closer. Kegan could hear their words now.

“So, who did you say came this way?” Sed boomed.

“One of ‘em was called Kegan. Other one, I dunno. Nar or something.”

Kegan immediately recognized the voice. His face grew hot and red with embarrassment

and anger. How could Duciam have betrayed them? Kegan promised him he would save the slaves! Sana seemed to sense Kegan stiffen besides him.

“The slaves will do anything for a guarantee of freedom,” Sana murmured. “What they have now can’t even be called a life.”

Sed turned to the other scout and whispered something. The scout whispered back. “So Sana was talking to someone here, Kegan was snooping around the treasury, and now Kegan came this way.” Sed affirmed. “I think something’s up, don’t you?”

“Kegan, run! Into the woods!” Sana shrieked.

“What? What about you?”

“Just go! They’ll find me anyways. I’ll just slow you down. You can escape.”

“I won’t leave you here.”

Einar grabbed Kegan’s shoulder and wrenched it back. “Listen, we don’t have time. Sana has done everything he can. We have to go!”

Kegan tried to resist, but Einar pulled him away. Einar pulled him back, back into the trees. Kegan reached out. He had to save Sana. Sana was his only link back to Acarya. Einar dragged Kegan ten, fifteen feet into the forest. Kegan kicked and punched wildly. He had to get out and go save Sana. Another person who had sacrificed everything for him. Kegan glanced back. Einar’s fist ran a wide arch and was inches from Kegan’s temple. Kegan closed his eyes and welcomed the blow that sent his mind away.

* * *

A dry, brown leaf blew in Hadwin’s face. He absentmindedly brushed it away, but the disbelief stayed stagnant on his face. The trees stopped to form a giant clearing. A few old, abandoned huts lay collapsed and overgrown. Hadwin looked down to their map. They stood in Ifgia.

“Whe-where is everything?” Hadwin stammered.

“It’s not here. Ifgia never came back,” Tzofi answered.

“It had to. How could nothing be here?”

“Hadwin, you knew this was a long shot from the start. Why are you so surprised now that it failed?”

Hadwin sighed and zoned out into the distance. This whole thing was a stupid idea from the beginning. How could he expect Ifgia to come back and be a strong, amazing village without

his village even knowing. “You’re right. I should have listened to you when we were back home.” Becan, Basim, and Dakarai threw themselves on Hadwin in a group hug, but Hadwin hardly stirred.

“Yeah,” Tzofi started. She looked and saw the dismal disappointment on Hadwin’s face. “You know, it wasn’t a bad idea.”

“Yes it was. We risked our lives, wasted so much time, and have nothing to show for it.”

“We had to try whatever we could to help.”

“Now we have to just go back. Who knows if they’ll even be there when we return.”

“They’ll be there, don’t worry. Then we’ll save everyone somehow.” Tzofi tried to force a smile. “Besides, we did the journey once, so we can do it again.”

Hadwin whipped his head around. “We almost killed ourselves once. This is just one more chance we have. We starved ourselves, went without much water, dragged through a canyon, climbed down a waterfall, and now we have to do it all again. And all for nothing.”

“Let’s just go. We’re not going to get anything by just sitting here.”

“I don’t know if I can do it.” Hadwin admitted. “On the way here, I kept going by telling myself that we’d make it here, find help, and save Igaezg. Now, we have to go through everything just to get back home, all the while knowing there’s probably nothing we can do once we get there.”

“We can look around here a bit. Maybe we’ll find another map or something.”

Hadwin glanced cheerlessly around where he stood. Nothing stuck out. He nudged rocks and branches over with his foot. Still nothing. Tzofi’s searches met with a similar result. Their moods fell with the light as the day darkened. Soon, Hadwin found himself, just sitting, leaning against a log and throwing rocks at a tree. It was hopeless. They weren’t going to find anything. Even finding the map to here back in Igaezg was a huge stroke of luck. Even if there was something to find, they probably wouldn’t find it.

“Let’s just go.” Hadwin conceded. “We’re not going to find anything.”

“Yeah, if we head out now, we can go a bit before we make camp.”

“Yeah.”

Tzofi and Hadwin turned and started walking away. The setting sun behind them cast long shadows on the ground. Both looked to the ground and trudged with a sense of dejection. Their venture was ending with a failure and both of them knew it. Suddenly, a muffled shout

shocked them from their thoughts. Hadwin turned around to see Becan, Basim, and Dakarai all sitting on top a young man who seemed about the same age as Hadwin. They held his arms behind his back and had stuffed a branch across his mouth.

“Wait, what are you guys doing?” Hadwin asked incredulously.

“Well he was watching us from a hole in the ground by a bush,” Basim started.

“So we pretended to not notice him, and we slowly surrounded him and slowly got closer,” Becan continued.

“Then when he wasn’t looking at us, BAM, we got him!” Dakarai finished with a laugh.

Hadwin peered into the eyes of their captive. Hope started to spring within him. Maybe everything wasn’t wrong after all. He didn’t want to get too excited, since that didn’t work out too well last time, but maybe, just maybe, they found what they needed.

* * *

For the first time in a long time, Kegan woke, once again, in the forest. His hut, filled with velvet light, was gone. Einar sat above him, motionless and expressionless.

“Where are we? What happened?” Kegan quaked.

“We escaped. The guards yesterday, remember? They came after us and Sana?” Einar winced as Kegan’s eyebrows tightened.

“Why did you let them take him?”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“Yes you did. We could have fought them off. Or at least taken Sana away with us.”

“There was nothing we could have done. Sana had made up his mind to stay. Guards were everywhere. We would have all been killed or at least captured.”

“You just didn’t like him. You didn’t trust him.”

“Kegan - ”

“He was my only link left to Acarya.”

“Kegan! Listen to me. I know you wanted to save him, but there was nothing I could have done. I know what we can and cannot do. Just trust my judgement. Remember, I’m the one who saved you when you got that snakebite.”

Kegan sprung up. He turned away and walked a few steps. “So what are we supposed to do now? How are we going to take them out? What’s the plan?”

Einar held his forehead in his hands. “I don’t know. We just traded our surprise for

answers. I don't know if that was a trade we should have done."

"Well, there's nothing else we can do about that now. We know what they do. They destroy villages, destroy lives, we need to stop that."

"We can start trying to tell people in the village. If they rebel, Sed might be overwhelmed."

"With all the raider armies he has, he'll use force to stop them. Plus, who knows if everyone's even going to agree with us."

"What do you mean?"

"Their lives are great. Easy, fun, no work, why would they want to lose that?"

"These are people too, Kegan. They'll care if entire other villages are ruined just for their comfort."

"I don't know. They've grown up with everything just given to them for so long. I don't know how easy it'll be to convince them that this is wrong."

"So what do you say we do?"

"Let's go for Sed."

Kegan shoved a branch away from his face. He and Einar were perched within a large oak, watching the village center. He scratched at his leg. A line of ants fell away. A vine drooped in front of his eyes. Kegan tore it off the tree and threw it to the ground. He turned to Einar. "Do we really have to watch from up in a tree?"

"Yeah, obviously. We can see so much more from up here, and they'll never find us. Look! Something's happening."

Sed strode into the village center. Advisers filed in behind him. A crowd gathered around them. Sed seemed so tiny from their vantage point. Just a few inches tall. Kegan wanted to just step forward and smush the chieftain. Flatten all their problems. Even from here, the wickedly curved protrusion above his lip could be recognized. Kegan shivered. It was so sinister, even in the morning light.

"I'm sorry to inform you that a member of our community was killed." Sed mournfully sighed. "Sana was out collecting herbs for medicine and some wandering raiders found him."

Kegan smiled wryly. How close to the truth. Only the raiders in question weren't wandering, and Sana wasn't collecting herbs.

"Raiders? Shouldn't we be worried? What if they attack the village?" A young mother

trembled.

“Don’t worry. We took care of them.” Sed smiled.

Einar climbed the last few feet to the ground. Kegan leaped down behind him. They kept low and sprinted to the makeshift camp Einar had made. The early light streaked through the trees to the green ground. Bees and flies buzzed in the fresh air. A slight breeze blew. A flock of crows cast a dark shadow on the leaves above. A lone blue jay squawked from a stout log. Dropped leaves lay rotting, forming a brown layer of mush beneath the new growing plants. Fallen trees were cleaned of their bark by the numerous scavenging insects that populated them.

“What do you expect us to do?” Einar questioned.

“We need to get to Sed when he’s not with guards. If nobody’s looking, we’ll just take a spear and - ”

“We can’t kill him.”

“Why not?”

“He probably has a dozen lackeys ready to step up and continue for him. You think you’re going to kill them all?”

Kegan let out a heavy breath. “So how else are we going to stop him?”

“Kidnap him, force him to do what we say, something along those lines.”

“Now how should we do that?”

* * *

Chapter 11

Hadwin walked up to their detainee. He bent down and looked the boy in the face. There was blatant fear in his eyes. Hadwin had the odd feeling it wasn’t towards him or anyone with him. Hadwin nudged the boy with his foot.

“Who are you? Why are you here?”

“Please, don’t hurt me. Just let me go and keep walking.”

“Tell us who you are first.”

“Um, I was out gathering berries. Just me and Mother live together.” He gave a stiff smile and looked to the side.

Hadwin nodded calmly. “Ok, do you know where the closest river is? We need to fish for our lunch.”

He shrugged his shoulders at Tzofi. She gave him a dirty look. The boy gave a huge,

relieved smile and said, "Yeah, just a couple hundred feet down that way."

"You seemed awfully eager to change the subject," Hadwin dared, "Tell me what you know about Ifgia!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Igaezg has fallen and we need help. Are you a part of Ifgia? Why were you watching us?"

The boy gasped at Hadwin's mention of his village.

Hadwin leapt back as bushes rose and trees fell to the side. The quiet huts were thrown aside, and the ground erupted, and soldiers poured from the earth, each holding a double-sided spear with finely honed tips. The men spread to surround Hadwin and his party. Hadwin had the sense to drop his pack and fishing spear. What seemed to be the leader of the group went to the boy Hadwin was questioning.

"Ctare! How could you let them find you? Idiot! I'll deal with you later." He walked over to Hadwin. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"Funny, I was just about to ask you the same question."

"Look around. Do you think you're in any position to ask?"

"Fine, I'm here because I was looking for Ifgia because my village is in trouble. We're being taken over by raiders, but I escaped and I wanted to find help."

"Regardless, you found us, so you must be imprisoned."

Ctare ran up. "Father! They came all the way from Igaezg. I heard them. After so great a journey, you are just confining them? They should be waited on, given refreshments, helped in anyway possible."

Hadwin looked incredulously to their new proponent. His companions seemed to be of a similar opinion.

The leader wrinkled his nose and rolled his eyes. "Times have changed. We cannot afford hospitality to strangers anymore. They now know we are here, and they cannot be allowed to escape."

"Do we really need to keep hiding?"

"You know what happened before."

"Yes, but it won't happen again. He's from Igaezg! We must help him."

"No. I will send them to to be imprisoned."

Ctare turned to Hadwin. “Yes, we are Ifgia. We have hidden to keep ourselves safe. The time of hiding is over. We will help you.”

Hadwin gasped. Ctare’s father turned to berate him, but Ctare continued. “My father, Ducere, believes we should continue to keep ourselves secret.”

Ducere grew livid. He turned to Ctare. “How could you do this? Stupid child! We’ve worked so hard to keep this secret and you give it out so openly. You should be exiled for this. But then you’d go tell everyone you see.”

Ctare slyly smiled. “I’ll convince you to help them eventually. You might as well give up now.”

Ducere wrinkled his nose again. “My men have been itching for a real battle.”

“And these are raiders. Defeating them will help you in the long run too.”

“We also do need to establish allies.”

“We’ve been hidden for so long.”

Ducere acknowledged Hadwin. “My men will accompany you to help your village.”

* * *

Kegan leaped to the ground and somersaulted across the gap. He sprung to his legs behind the second building. He waved. Einar sprinted the few feet. Einar looked to Kegan with hardly discernible vexation.

“Was the twirly thing really necessary?” he groaned.

“Hey, style points,” Kegan laughed.

“Someone seems happy today,” Einar commented. “May I be informed of the reason for this joy?”

“I’m just glad I know it’s all going to be over soon. Either we’ll win today, or we’ll die today. Whichever it is, I won’t have to fight again.”

“I rather hope we don’t die.”

“I would prefer that to being enslaved. To know the rest of my life would be one of servitude.”

They came upon the capitol building. The huge black dome loomed above them in the dark night. A tiny set of doors marked its front. Kegan scanned the area. Clear. They proceeded to the doors. The building grew as they approached. The doors began to swing open after the slightest nudge. Kegan and Einar slipped in. The drowsy counter guard fumbled for a spear.

Einar swooped up behind him and pressed a forearm down upon the guard's throat. With a strike to the temple, the guard collapsed into Einar's arms and Einar gently laid him onto the ground. The silence was hardly broken.

Three tunnels split from the main room. Each identical, empty, and silent. Kegan looked down each. They all seemed to offer equal prospects. He debated which to chose. A cold wind blew through the barely open front door.

"Kegan, just pick one. We don't have time!" Einar hissed.

Kegan tried to analyze each. He couldn't find a difference. Einar sighed in impatience and stepped towards the left hall. He grabbed Kegan's arm and pulled him along. Being too deep in to have the light holes, the walls were decorated with torches. The stone that the walls consisted of seemed to be slick and slimy. The fire light reflected off their surface. Kegan brushed his fingers against the rock. The walls were bone-dry.

The first door came and passed. A new hallway opened up. Einar and Kegan looked to each other. They continued. The second hallway passed just as quickly as the first. Still no evidence presented itself to point to where Sed was located. Kegan and Einar came to the second door, identical to the first. They traversed through the door into the third hallway. Prison cells filled the walls around them. Every one was empty. Kegan peeked into each, hoping to catch a glance of Sana, just waiting to be rescued. They turned back and walked to the main room. Without second thought, Einar pulled Kegan into the center hallway.

The first two passageways passed as they had in the left hallway. Kegan and Einar came to the second doorway. Without a pause they passed through. This time, the third tunnel contained no jail cells. It was identical to the previous one, but a small door stood at the end. Kegan dropped his ear to it. He could hear a soft, slight snore. He stood back up. Silence returned.

"I think he's in there," Kegan mouthed to Einar. "You want to go in?"

"If you're ready."

Kegan thrust the door open and jumped forward with his spear. A ruffled, but empty, bed sat before him. Kegan looked around the room. It was a lavish abode. One wall was adorned with paintings of past chieftains. Another was home to a variety of ornamental weapons.

"Kegan, watch out!"

Einar leaped forward just as Sed slashed at Kegan's back. The serrated blade opened a

red, bleeding gash. Kegan collapsed to the ground as his strength flowed away. Einar struck at Sed with his spear. Sed turned and easily deflected it. Einar leapt into a series of thrusts and swings. Sed blocked each stroke, parrying with ease. A bead of sweat formed on Einar's brow. He had never faced an adversary of this skill level. The only reason he was still uninjured seemed to be because Sed didn't seem like he was putting quite all he had into the fight. Almost like he was saving his strength.

"Kegan, I need you!"

Kegan lay on the ground. His gash pumped blood down his body. It flowed and pooled on the floor. This was it. The end. Sed would come and finish him off. Then, he heard Einar's plead. Kegan forced himself to his knees. He almost fell again as lightheadedness took over. Kegan tore a strip off the front of his shirt. He tied it around his torso, stemming the blood flow from his wound. He squeezed it. The fabric cut into his sides. The blood slowed, but still quickly soaked the cloth. Kegan pulled one leg up. He pushed himself up. Black static filled the edges of his vision. Kegan clamped his eyes shut. His mind cleared. Einar was fighting, losing, falling into a corner. Kegan roared and leapt forward.

It was a flurry of blades. Sed quickly changed his target and adjusted his style. The relaxed fighter was gone, replaced by a ferocious tiger. Kegan instantly forgot his pain as he assimilated into the battle. He slowly let himself ease back into the lessons Acarya had taught him. Still, Sed seemed much more a formidable opponent than any Kegan had faced.

"Einar, stop the guards!"

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Chapter 12

Hadwin marched along the soldiers. The army he walked with had more people than his entire village. They headed upon a hidden path in a much different direction than the one Hadwin had come from. He could only assume it was to avoid what he had gone through to get here. Ctare jogged up besides him.

"You do realize that absolutely none of that little display back there was for you, right?" Ctare remarked.

"Thank you so much for telling me that," Hadwin said with a heavy sigh. "If not for me, why did you stick up for us?"

Ctare smirked. "The girl you're with is pretty cute, and she never did anything to me."

“Shut up.” Hadwin glanced at Tzofi. She was walking several meters away from him and watching Basim, Becan, and Dakarai with well-founded paranoia.

“Whatever, man. This battle better be worth the hike.” Ctare stared back up the hike and impatiently gripped his spear.

Hadwin scoffed at Ctare’s display. “Is that all you care about? The thrill of a fight?”

“What else should I care about? Winning for your village?”

“You seemed to care an awful lot about it back there.”

For several silent moments, Hadwin and Ctare continued to walk forward through the forest. Then, Ctare turned to Hadwin and spoke. “I’m not going to pretend I know what your life has been like, but I’m sure as hell it hasn’t been anything like mine. I’ve got my reasons for doing what I do.”

“Now, you’ve got me curious,” Hadwin said with a subtle grin. “So tell me, what makes your life so interesting and unique?”

Ctare scowled, but began, “We have basically eight hours of physical, combat, and stealth training punctuated with paltry snacks they call meals. Then it’s schooling, gathering food, and a few hours of sleep.”

“Seriously? Do you even have any free time?”

Ctare chuckled cynically. “I almost forgot that, the free time’s the funniest part of it all. After we forage, we get an hour or two to ourselves if we reach the food quota of the day. Otherwise, we gotta go do chores like food prep and weapon making. Obviously, we collect a bit more food than we need some days, so we’ll lend some out to get our friends just over the quota. Usually after we’ve helped who we want, though, we’ll still have a bit to stockpile. During our free time, we gamble with our stores to try to earn a bit of extra food to bargain chore duties with.” Ctare punctuated his speech with a dry laugh. “The worst part of it all is that we never spend that free time for anything else. We spend all of our free time gambling for more of it. But I’ve got enough debt owed to me to be able to gamble every night for the rest of my life, so I’m fine with it.”

The tirade ended with another silent span of several moments. However, again, Ctare’s desire to dictate his life to this curious stranger overcame the apparent lack of any other conversational topic.

“The thing is, we spend all of this time preparing, training, and building an army, but we

never, ever actually fight other villages. It's not like I particularly want to conquer the forest, rather I just wish we'd stop spending our whole lives waiting and waiting for war that might not even come. Even if someone does attack, have been practicing our whole lives how to fight them off. I doubt we'll make the mistakes of our past."

Hadwin turned his head suddenly to face Ctare. "Just for curiosity's sake, what did happen?"

"Back then, the chief was my great great grandfather. I'd like to think he was an amazing chief, but the only thing I've ever heard about him was of his scamming. He made a few deals, not all very honest, with a few different villages. Unfortunately, we hit worst-case scenario and they all attacked at once. The few survivors, including my great grandfather, went into hiding. He became the new chief and slowly regrew the village."

"Does that mean you're next to be chief?"

"Yeah, what's wrong with that?"

"Wow, I'd like to see that."

"What, you think I couldn't lead a village?"

"I never said that, I just said it'd be fun to watch you try."

Ctare wrinkled his nose in annoyance. "Point of the story is, if this battle turns out well and we take out those raiders, maybe my dad will finally bring Ifgia out of hiding. So, I have a reason for saying that this battle better be worth the hike."

Finally, the two boys traveled in verbal silence. Hadwin glanced at Ctare, then turned his head back to the path. This kid wasn't too bad after all. It would be interesting to see how he fought with those eight hours a day of training when they got back to his village. They continued to walk, pushed along by the surge of warriors.

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Einar sprinted down the hall. With the length of time they had been fighting for, every raider in the place probably knew they were there. How could they have failed so badly? The plan was so perfect. It got them into the building unnoticed and to Sed's room. The only thing it assumed incorrectly was Sed being a feeble, old village leader. Oh well. However bad his battle with Sed, Einar was sure he could deal with common soldiers.

The main room came into view. No one populated it but the still unconscious counter guard. Einar leaned on his spear. Suddenly, the doors burst open and soldiers poured in. Einar

resisted the instinct to rush forward, to stop them before they even got through the door. His only advantage was his position. If they could get around him, he'd be surrounded, and he'd be done. He was fighting alone. If he fought in a narrow hall, each soldier would be alone against him. The men quickly spotted him and ran forward.

Einar quickly dispatched his first few opponents. He started to fall into a rhythm. He could hold this until Kegan was ready. Einar ducked swept at a soldier's legs. A sharp pain emanated from his wrist. He looked around. No one had struck him. Then, Einar remembered when Sed had twirled his sword in their battle. Twirled the blade and slapped its flat side on Einar's wrist. It had seemed like a mistake at the time. Who knew what other parts of his body had yet to rebel?

Einar's wrist twinged again. The spear almost fell from his hands. He hardly held on to it. His back spasmed. His calf panged. Einar barely kept from collapsing. Kegan had better take care of Sed fast.

Kegan rolled to the ground, away from Sed's weapon. All of Acarya's training was for this. Even so, he wasn't sure if it was enough. Neither Kegan nor Sed had landed a blow on the other, but both were tiring fast. Kegan ducked beneath the bed and threw it in Sed's face. It was a risky move that would only buy a few seconds. Kegan reached in his pocket and pulled out a shining propero berry. He crushed it beneath his tongue and waited for the acrid juices to change. As the restorative nectars formed, the propero berry sent power coursing through Kegan's weary muscles. Sed crawled from beneath the cot. Kegan jumped forward in attack.

Sed was quickly overwhelmed. When both he and Kegan were both fresh or both fatigued, they were almost equal. Now, it was as if Kegan had just joined the battle. The only advantage Sed had was Kegan's wound. Kegan twirled the blade invisibly fast. Sed tried to counter it, but he could not stop the advance of cuts that gouged into his limbs. Finally, Kegan slammed the spear-end into Sed's chest. Sed flew back and hit the wall. Kegan grabbed a sword off the wall and disappeared out the door. Sed pushed himself up and ran for the entrance to his room. The door would not budge. Kegan must have jammed it. Sed cursed and walked back into the center of the room. He had to escape. He had to ensure they wouldn't escape.

Kegan ran down the hallways. Einar was struggling to barely hold off the onslaught of guards. Kegan rushed to help him. The army had pushed Einar back ten, fifteen feet from the entrance where he had started. Kegan attacked ferociously and started to push the soldiers back.

“What about Sed?” Einar shouted.

“I jammed the door. He’s stuck there for now. We gotta get away before he gets out.”

“Kegan, I can’t fight very well.”

“What?”

“Sed did something to me when we fought. He hit me in places, pressure points or something, and now I’m weak there. I can hardly hold my spear.”

Kegan reached in his pocket. The berries were gone. They must have fallen. “We just gotta do this. We can do this. Let’s go!”

Kegan whirled through the guards like a storm. He pushed them past the entrance to the first hallway. The men formed a circle around him and Einar. They stood back to back and slowly pushed closer to the building exit. As they were used, Einar’s sore muscles loosened up and he eased into the fight once more. There were just a few mere feet between them and the doorway. The soldiers were falling, one by one. They were going to escape. Sed burst through the door of the room.

“Don’t let them escape!” he yelled. “Attack only Kegan!”

The soldiers flowed away from Einar and clumped upon Kegan. Kegan viciously held them at bay, but Einar knew it was only a matter of time. Einar threw himself on the soldiers around Kegan. They completely ignored him, quickly falling to his spear. But with each one that fell, two rose to continue fighting Kegan. Kegan suddenly let out a scream. Einar caught sight of him between soldiers. His makeshift bandage was sliced in half and a second gash crossed the first. Einar lunged to help him, but a soldier’s elbow caught him in the chest and threw him to the ground. Einar tried to rise, but a river of men ran around him.

“Einar, run!” Kegan’s pained voice cried.

Einar wanted to stay. He wanted to fight the soldiers until he fell. To have a chance at saving Kegan. But he knew he had no chance. There were too many soldiers. Kegan was so injured. They would just both be captured. Einar crawled to the door and disappeared into the night.

* * *

Hadwin turned around. He silently held his finger across his mouth. The army all stopped moving and looked to him for their next command. He looked down into the entrance tunnel. Like the first time he came here, Hadwin was apprehensive, but for a different reason.

“Anyone else want to go first?” he nervously pleaded.

One of the soldiers shrugged and slithered into the hole. Immediately after, several others followed. Hadwin had to force himself into the emerging crowd. The stream pushed Hadwin into the tunnel. The end was blocked by the multitude of soldiers in front of him. Hadwin blindly crawled along. Suddenly, the train stopped. The front man must have reached near the opening of the cave. A cry of battle sounded back along the ranks as the army burst into the opening. Hadwin now felt himself being swept along twice the speed of before as the men ran into battle.

Hadwin hardly had a chance to adjust before he was thrust into the cave. The members of his village were tied up and held in a corner of the cave. Four of the Ifgia soldiers were there freeing them. Within minutes, the battle was over. All of the raiders in the cave were dead, unconscious, or restrained with cord. Hadwin looked around. He hadn't even fought one man. It seemed like there were hardly any raiders even there. Hadwin ran up to Theodoric.

“Hadwin, how did... where did you... when did you go?” Theodoric stuttered.

“It's Ifgia!” Hadwin beamed. “We found them. They were in hiding. We convinced them to help us. Now we're free.”

“No, these weren't all the raiders.”

“Huh?”

“These were just a few left behind to make sure we didn't do anything. The rest are out gathering supplies and looking for our gold. A couple of us snuck away and burned and ate all their food, but we made it look like wild animals, so now they need to prepare for the journey back. That's the only reason we're still here and not taken away.”

“Shouldn't be too bad. We'll just wait here and take 'em out one by one as they crawl in.”

Ducere overheard Hadwin's comment and strode over to them. “These guys don't seem stupid. They'll start learning when the lead of the line's getting slaughtered. Besides, we're stuck in a cave, so they can starve us out. They've got the whole forest around them to collect resources.”

“So what should we do?”

“We need to break out of here and get everyone out.”

Ducere called his men over. They congregated in a roughly circular mass as they quietly whispered their proceedings. Just moments later, they dispersed. The soldiers separated and began to gather various materials. Hadwin walked up to Ducere in confusion.

“So what are we doing?”

“We’re going to use the heavy spears to try to break through the dirt right after the tunnel starts. Then we’ll stick a fire bomb in there and make the opening bigger. Then the field will be open and it’ll be a fair fight.”

“You brought bombs?”

“Better safe than sorry.”

Hadwin turned around. He saw Ctare and jogged over to join him. A quick smile and wave passed between them before they looked back to tunnel. The soldiers had tied together a bunch of spears to make a sort of battering ram. They shoved it at the tunnel ceiling. A shower of dirt rained down. They thrust the ram again. Less dirt fell this time. One of the men pointed at the dirt and pulled out a stray root. The packed dirt was held together by the dense network of roots that extended from the trees and plants above. A soldier brought over a torch. The first man who pointed out the roots started to gently burn them away. Tiny pockets of dirt fell to the ground, surrounded by glowing embers. None of the roots burst into flame due to the inflammable soil surrounding them. Several moments later, the torch was thrown to the side, discarded. The battering continued, but now chunks of charred, weakened roots fell with the dirt. After 15, 20 hits, a tiny stream of bright, white daylight shined through. Someone pressed a bomb in the dirt and lit it. The army ran back, and everyone huddled at the back of the cave. A boom rocked the stone as a 10 foot wide hole was opened up. The soldiers rushed forward, oblivious to the glowing, orange dirt around them.

Hadwin and Ctare ran to the opening. They followed the rush into the daylight. The bright sunlight burned Hadwin’s eyes as they adjusted. He heard a yell as the first raider and soldier caught sight of each other. The group surged forward. Hadwin held Ctare’s arm back. Someone had to stay back to protect the only gateway to the vulnerable, non fighting villagers. Half a dozen of the others stayed back as well.

The first raiders peeked through the trees. Hadwin and Ctare leaped forward to take the first two. Hadwin looked over, watching as Ctare seemed to calculate every move as he made it, imagine the exact outcome of the fight before it happened. Hadwin thought about himself. He was much more aggressive, but hardly defensive at all. Much more exposed after every strike. Wow. They were pretty military. Hadwin set his spear as many more raiders swarmed through the trees. The warriors of Ifgia rushed forward around Hadwin and slowly, but surely, the two

forces converged.

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Chapter 13

A group of soldiers marched out the back of the administration building. Einar shook his half-awake eyes open. A couple of them held a tied up, struggling person. Einar grinned. He had been watching the building for the last six nights and days. Watching, waiting for something unusual. Whether he saved Kegan or not, he had to bring this village down. Finally, Einar was sure he could achieve both. He dropped down from the tree.

The path the miniature army followed looked to be moderately well trodden. Not daily use, but not forgotten. Einar followed the fresh footprints. The ground slowly grew to be covered with a thin layer of murky water, and with every step, Einar felt a tug on his foot and heard a soft pop. The tall, living trees were replaced by scrawny, black dead trees and various small plants.

“Arrowheads, marigolds, cotton grass, we’re getting to a swamp.” Einar silently muttered.

The ground melted into muddy peat and even the dead trees disappeared. Einar’s foot caught in a clump of muddy moss and dead plants. He looked around. A branch was resting on the edge of a puddle. He lifted one end of the branch to use as leverage. Suddenly, the entire branch sunk into the muddy water. Einar timidly pulled his foot out. He took out a roll of rope and tied the end to a pebble. He dropped the rock in and slowly lowered the rope down. Must have been one of those sinkholes that were a few feet deep. Einar continued to lower rope into the hole. Without immediately noticing, he lowered stone down over ten feet. Einar pulled the rock back up. He didn’t have time to find out how deep these actually were. Anything beyond ten feet would be the same to him. Something to avoid.

Einar trailed far behind the band of soldiers, just close enough to see the faint glow of the torchlight. He navigated the treacherous terrain by the soft moonlight. Einar glanced up. A bright half circle moon stared back. It would be full in just a few days. Ahead, the orange torch stopped. Einar continued. He could see nothing from the distance he was at. The circle of torchlight grew and Einar could start to make out the people holding it. They were standing at the edge of a wide circle of cattails. Something felt off. Einar suddenly realized it. This swamp pond was missing the orchestra of frog and insect calls that always accompanied bodies of water like it. Einar shivered. There was a humid, damp breeze.

Kegan took a huge gulp of the putrid bog air as the rough mask was ripped off his face. All he could breathe for the last two hours was his own breath and sweat. He scanned his surroundings. A black marsh spread in every direction. A horrible stench filled his nose. It felt like the smell of rotting and decaying matter. Light from a half circle moon beamed down. Tiny details clicked in Kegan's mind. They were in the Fetid Mire. The place his father had died. Sed was calmly shackling Kegan's wrists. The metal links attached the brackets to metal poles that were driven into a gigantic boulder. It was at least the size of Kegan's hut. No less than ten feet high. Sed stood on top of the boulder. When his handiwork was complete, he slid down its back, landing on the unsteady ground just bordering the pond.

Kegan frantically searched the swamp for something, anything he could use as an advantage. There was nothing. Wait! Einar watched, hiding in a clump of the cattails. Their eyes met. Kegan tried to convey his fear and desperation with just a glance. Einar mouthed back a single word. Kegan immediately began to panic. Sed stepped forward to the edge of the pond.

"Spirit, take your offering!"

Kegan squirmed on the flat face of the rock. He had to get out, but he couldn't use the fire. He couldn't let the anger wash over every bit of consciousness left in his mind. A dry heat built up. He had to use it, at least to escape. He couldn't let the loss of control take over. Kegan turned his fingers towards the chains. He felt a chill blow across the surface of the pond. Kegan sent a small, hot flame down at his chains. They grew hotter, hotter, starting to burn his skin. A gusty breeze blew straight through the canvas rags Kegan wore. The metal glowed as orange as the torches. Kegan pulled his right arm down. The metal snapped and crumbled. The broken link tumbled, still red, into the pond. It dimmed with an explosive hiss. Kegan used the left chain to pull himself up onto the rock. A shadow crawled across the surface of the water. He pulled his left arm free. A shadowy arm shot out at him.

A tiny, orange shield launched from Kegan's fingers. The shadow and the fire melted into each other and dissolved into a raw nothingness that seemed to float away into the night. Kegan looked to his arm. It was unchanged. There had been no conscious thought in the defense. It was just reaction. Maybe if he just shot small, controlled flames, he could stay in control and defend himself long enough to escape. Another sinewy shadow snaked closer. Kegan held himself back, restrained himself. Still, a fiery projectile stopped the shadow before it reached its target. Kegan grinned. This wasn't too bad. His face was hot with blood, but it felt refreshing in the cold air.

A spot of dark across the pond began to dilate. It grew larger and larger, that cloud of blackness, larger until it surpassed Kegan in size. He had noticed it earlier, but had dismissed it as a shadow of one of the dead trees or rocks. The shadow sent out three probing fingers. Kegan hardly shot three spurts of flame out in time. The patch of shadow continued to grow, now eclipsing the boulder in its dominance of the dark landscape. It reminded Kegan of a snail - hidden up before, but now oozing out of its shell. How big would it get before it was clear of its shelter? What it was, Kegan still didn't know. The shadow shrouded the reflections of stars upon the water's surface as it grew to over ten meters across. Finally it stopped growing. Then, it began to glide across the shimmery pond surface while sending out a swarm of antennae. Kegan sent a shell of glassy flame emanating from his chest. The dark missiles bombarded the dome, sizzling upon contact and disintegrating back into nothingness. The thin shell disappeared into the air.

Kegan dried the cold sweat that broke on his brow. This defense strategy was just barely cutting it, and he knew there was more to come. The shadow sent wave after wave of black ropes that filled the sky and covered the moon and stars. Kegan continuously formed shells of flame around himself. Nearly all of the oncoming foes were extinguished, but some found holes in the walls, chinks in the seemingly solid armor. They navigated the growing shields like a maze. Each wall took out a few more of the survivors, but dozens more continued to join. The first shadow made it past the last shield, but Kegan quenched it with a fiery bullet. He turned around. More shadowy fingers reached out from all directions. Kegan shot two more away. A shadow just about hit his chest, but Kegan quickly burned it away.

An icy cold touched the base of Kegan's back and quickly began to spread. Kegan's body was clenched in pain as three, four, five more shadows joined the first. They began to draw the warmth from Kegan's frame, and every part of him was frozen in ice. Then the shadow drew away his strength. Kegan could see something, something bright rushing up the tentacles back to their master. He collapsed to his knees, and more joined the feeding frenzy. Kegan tried to send another shield of flame to get them away, away for just a second, but all his heat was sucked away. He collapsed completely, lying curled up on top of the boulder. They covered every part of his body but his face. Soon, his nose and mouth were drowned too. Kegan's vision, all he had left, was rapidly leaving. It grew fuzzy and black. Everything was filled with static. A strange ringing filled his ears, and the last spark in his chest was being squeezed away.

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Hadwin batted a spear thrust away and stabbed at the raider's legs. The raider fell to the ground. Hadwin bashed the enemy's head with the spear-butt and kicked the unconscious body to the side. He and his little team fought off the occasional raiders that appeared through the trees. The body of the fight was happening farther away, deep within the forest. Back where most of both armies stood in.

A face popped out from behind a leaf. Hadwin readied his spear for the raider. Then he recognized the face. Disgust and anger filled him. Disgust at what had been done. Anger at the fact that someone could have done something like that.

"Llywarch," Hadwin snarled.

"So Hadwin," Llywarch smirked, "you figured it out, didn't you?"

"How could you do something like this to your village? How do you live with yourself? How can you stand knowing you betrayed the place you have always called home?"

"Think about it this way: if the raiders won, which is still a realistic option, not taking the bribe would mean I would be killed or enslaved. Helping them out, on the other hand, would give me lots of gold and the village would be destroyed anyways."

"How can you even think like that?" Hadwin said, horrified.

"Wait, wait, wait, I'm not done. If the raiders lose, sticking with you guys would mean I could live out the rest of my life here, as bored as ever. If I took the bribe, I would still have gold, but I could just go live in some other village. Whether the raiders win or lose, with the bribe, I can just move somewhere else and be a whole lot richer. Without it, either I'd be killed, or I'd just be stuck here. Taking the bribe is a win-win situation. What would you do?"

"What matters is that you almost destroyed any chance we had of survival."

"Oh, no. I didn't do that much. The raiders probably could've done this all before. I just benefited from what I explained in the earlier speech."

Hadwin roared and attacked. Llywarch quickly adjusted. The dull thuds of the spear on spear hits resounded in the clearing. Hadwin thrust every jab directly at Llywarch's heart. Each strike was forced with a kind of raw strength. Hadwin swung every blow with everything his arms could give. He slammed Llywarch's spear to the side. Hadwin opened a gash across Llywarch's chest. Llywarch returned and tore open Hadwin's thigh. He pulled his spear back and sliced down Hadwin's left forearm. Hadwin clutched his stinging wounds.

“You’re going to have to be more careful than that,” Llywarch chuckled.

Hadwin’s eyes widened in shock. It was a sound he would never forget. “It was you! You were the assassin in black!”

Llywarch smiled proudly. “I was. See I did keep busy those days!”

“You didn’t just deal with the raiders. No you were much worse.” Hadwin shook his head in disbelief. “You directly attacked us!”

“I honestly don’t see why you find that so hard to believe.” Llywarch twirled his spear. “I mean, look what I’m doing now!”

Hadwin turned and dived towards the hole. He jumped down into the cave and landed with a somersault. He brushed dirt from his hair. Llywarch plunged down. Hadwin resumed his assault. Llywarch almost lazily swatted away Hadwin’s attacks. Hadwin couldn’t even try to fight with the intensity he had had before. Any force would send his spear far away and would be immediately followed by an always accurate attack by Llywarch. Soon, Hadwin was dripping blood from his shoulder, side, and stomach as well. The stomach cut, luckily, was shallow. Any deeper and it could have ended the battle.

Llywarch’s snaking spear pushed Hadwin back. Hadwin’s arms were stiffening into stone. Hadwin blocked the shots he could with his spear. Every other shot, though, Hadwin had to jump back just to avoid. Hadwin jumped back into something. He glanced to the side to see that Llywarch had forced him into the wall. There was nowhere to hide from the spear point. Hadwin dropped and rolled to the right. He tried to stand up, but Llywarch’s resulting attacks forced him back to the ground. The ground pushed Hadwin back up. There was nowhere he could go. Llywarch struck Hadwin’s spear aside. The end hit the wall. What had looked like solid dirt crumbled away into a tiny tunnel, an opening. Hadwin rolled to it. Llywarch’s spear slit Hadwin’s chin. He clenched his eyes shut and gasped. It was worth it. Worth another escape.

Hadwin ducked into the tunnel. He scrambled through the dirt walls that pressed around on all sides. He could see something, something like light, shining through from on the other side. It was soft, bluish, daylight? No, too blue. What was it? Hadwin crawled through the tiny burrow. He came to the end. He emerged on the soft, dirt platform and stood up. He stood, silent, in awe. Giant, bluish-white crystals spiked from every surface of a huge cavern. The cave opened above about ten feet, but continued infinitely down. All that separated him from the drop onto the beautiful, sharp crystals was a tiny patch of dirt from the cave.

Llywarch emerged from the tunnel. Hadwin stabbed at his wrists, causing Llywarch to lose his grip on his spear. Both warriors watched as the weapon tumbled into the gorge, clattering as it bounced off the crystalline walls. Hadwin turned back around, only to see Llywarch clamp his hands onto the middle of Hadwin's spear. Using the spear as a handle, Llywarch swung Hadwin back against the wall of the cavern. As Hadwin's head struck the rock, his vision grew fuzzy, and Llywarch wrested the spear from his grip. Hadwin fell aside to the ground out of the way of Llywarch's next strike. He scrambled to escape to the tunnel, but Llywarch leapt upon Hadwin's back and pinned him down. Hadwin flailed and rolled to try to escape Llywarch's grip, but he only succeeded in moving further from the tunnel entrance. As Llywarch held him down again, Hadwin gasped at the conspicuous feeling of having nothing beneath his head. He turned around and saw the crystal spires pointing straight up.

"I guess the raiders are going to win after all," Llywarch jeered. He stabbed down at Hadwin's chest. Hadwin turned and grabbed the spear. Llywarch tried to pull it away, but Hadwin held it with the few ounces of strength he had left.

"What are you going to do?" Llywarch smiled. "It can only end badly from here."

Hadwin knew it was true. He could see it in his mind. Llywarch would wrestle him over the edge. It would happen. He was too tired. Then Llywarch could just wait for Hadwin's arms to tire out. That, or just drop the spear. Hadwin glanced back over the smoothly carved divots along the spear's shaft. His eyes ran over the sharp, perfectly carved point. And finally, he brushed his thumb over the carved letters along the base of the spear. Throughout this entire journey, this spear hadn't just been a weapon. It was his link back to Kegan when Kegan couldn't be here to help him. It took him all the way from the raider's first attack, through the journey to find Ifgia, to the final battle against the raiders. However, no matter how Hadwin saw the spear, it truly was just that, a spear. It was a weapon. And maybe it was time to stop all the fighting

Llywarch saw the fear in Hadwin's eyes. He started to push Hadwin over the edge. Hadwin pulled the spear towards himself and slammed his heel onto the middle. The spear splintered. Hadwin slashed with the half spear he had, then butted Llywarch directly in the chest with the spear end. Llywarch's smile dissolved as he saw the edge approaching. He tried to grab onto something, bring himself back, but he was falling, falling. He disappeared over the edge. Hadwin turned around and squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't look. He couldn't watch even Llywarch fall to his death. Hadwin crawled back into the tunnel.

Llywarch gripped the crystal edge. His fingers bled freely, staining the bright blue stones around him. The dirt platform was at least twenty feet away. He started pulling himself up, one hand at a time.

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Chapter 14

The ringing grew louder. It grew until it consumed all of Kegan's senses. Then suddenly, it was silent. Kegan waited, waited for all perception of the world to disappear. For the last thoughts left in his mind, all he had left, to be quenched. Then, a feeling of warmth came over Kegan's body. Everything left him and light filled the darkness.

Faint light filled the morning. The world was moving so quickly. A soft blanket was wrapped around Kegan. He pawed at the edge of the basket, the sides rising like walls around him. He looked up. Golden sky surrounded his mother's face. She wasn't looking back to him. She wasn't happy. No, she wasn't happy at all. She wasn't angry either. Was it sad? Scared? Maybe a little of both. He was still learning to tell. They stopped. Kegan continued to look up. His mother smiled and stared down into his eyes. She gently pushed a clump of his hair to the side. Kegan laughed and reached for her arms. What was she doing? She wouldn't hold him. She turned around. She was looking scared again. She bent down. Her lips met Kegan's forehead. He started to laugh, but it died away as tears splashed onto his face. She stood up and looked back. Kegan pushed his pudgy arms out as far as he could, grappling for a warm embrace. She smiled again, more tears falling. Then she was gone. Kegan tried to sit up, to see, but the blankets restrained him. Nothing he could do. Just to sit and wait for her to return.

Through his eyelids, he could see something shining. Kegan opened his eyes. A tiny layer of bright fire was building up over his skin. Kegan closed his eyes once more and took a deep breath. He let it out, sharply, through his nose. The fire exploded in every direction into a giant flaming cloud. Every arm of darkness shriveled and fell away. A strange sort of shine was left behind by each of the shadows. The glow slowly gravitated back to Kegan. He felt his strength return and heat permeated deep into his chest. Kegan looked out. The shadow had recovered and was sending the next swarm. He exhaled and let the energy flow through. A raging torrent of flame burst from Kegan and attacked the shadow. The swamp was lit up. For the first time, Kegan could see the fear on Sed's face.

The river of fire grew to envelop the thing. It tried to work shadows around the flame

front, to create a net to protect itself, but the conflagration blazed away every pocket of darkness around. It formed a bubble around the shadow. The sphere of swirling flame shrunk down to the size of the boulder, down to the size of Kegan, then small enough to hold, then gone forever. Now just a thread, the stream of fire blazed once more and spread up into the air. The sky burned orange.

Kegan fell to a knee. His head buzzed with a lightheaded power. He waited. It slowly dissolved. He stood up and slid down the back of the boulder. Sed sprinted away. Kegan set his eyes on his target and began his chase. He started slowly, jogging. There was no hurry, though. With so much power within him, Kegan knew he would catch that bastard.

Einar could see Kegan running after Sed. Einar broke into a sprint towards Kegan. He had to stop him. A tiny flash zoomed across the swamp. One of the guards fell. Then another. Einar tried to go faster. Kegan would kill Sed. They wouldn't know who the next leader would be. This whole venture in the swamp would go to waste. No, that wasn't it. Even if they killed Sed here, they could go back to the village. Find the administration, find the next leader, and capture him. It would be difficult, but definitely not impossible. No, that definitely wasn't it. He couldn't let Kegan do this because Kegan would be destroyed. Destroyed inside.

The last guard fell away. Only Sed was left. Kegan sped up, quickly having the distance between them. Sed looked back, his face haggard with fear, and tried to run faster. Kegan just drove on, getting closer every second. Sed looked back again and tripped on a tree root. Kegan slowed as he approached Sed. Sed was trapped, prey finally caught. Kegan wryly smiled.

"I've got you. You're mine. Finally." He paused. "You. You killed them. My mother, my father, Acarya, even Sana. Everyone who has tried to help me."

"Exactly. Fighting Imalum is hopeless. You should have learned that earlier. You just keep going, people just keep dying, when are you going to learn?"

Kegan started to lunge forward, but he felt a hand on his shoulder. He jerked his head around. Einar stood there, concern evident on his face. He pulled Kegan back and turned him around.

"You can't do this." Einar whispered.

"Why not? He's killed so many people I cared about. He's destroyed countless villages, ruins lives with slavery. He's a bad man, Einar."

"I know he is, but he's completely unarmed, helpless, you can't kill a man like that."

“This is our only chance to kill him. You know what it was like fighting him fairly.”

“What about our plan? We won’t kill him, just make him do what we say. If we kill him, what will it achieve?”

“We’ll find the next chief. He’s too dangerous. I can’t let him live.”

Einar pleaded. “Remember what we talked about? What you told me about? About that other Kegan that would come over you? What happened to that? This is that other Kegan. I know the you I know is in there. You just need to break out.”

Something flashed in Kegan’s eyes, a bright spark. His expression softened. Kegan squeezed his eyes shut and looked to the side. His face set. He looked back up and opened his eyes. The cold glassy stare returned.

“Move aside.” Kegan grunted.

Einar stood in disbelief. What had happened to Kegan back there? Back on the lone boulder by the swamp. Kegan shoved him aside. Einar tumbled to the ground. He watched as Kegan advanced upon Sed. A tear fell and soaked into the ground. Einar tried to stand, but a huge weight pushed down on his chest.

Kegan set his feet. He squared his shoulders. Sed squirmed in fear. Kegan closed his eyes and breathed deeply. The power he had had at the swamp was returning. He could feel it moving, leaping, attacking inside him, just waiting to get out. Kegan held his hands up. He could feel the power spreading through his body. Sed’s face reflected pure terror as Kegan’s right hand began to glow. He lifted his left hand up. Pulled it back. Wiped a tear away.

Kegan finally lowered his walls. Acarya lay there on the battlefield. He mouthed his last words. The swords fell upon him. Flame flowed from Kegan’s chest, down his arms, through hands, around his fingers. Suddenly, the world spun and Kegan felt something strike his shoulder with a dull thud. Kegan could see nothing but that his flame was misdirected. He tried to stop the rush, but the bottled up anger had to escape. The very air was seared by the red heat. A huge cloud of flame formed over Kegan and Sed. Several seconds passed as every bit of energy the flame had brought him was sent back out. Yet, the bright deluge continued. Kegan felt himself fainting once more. Only this time, the flame was not the savior, but the foe. Finally the cord was severed and Kegan was freed. A fire cloud half the size of Imalum slowly dispersed into the sky.

Kegan’s senses returned. He lay, near unconscious, on the swamp ground. Einar stood

over him. As his mind came back into consciousness, he realized what had happened.

“Einar, why?”

“I couldn’t let you do this. You would never forgive yourself. You yourself told me this.”

“Th-th-thanks. Thank you Einar.”

Sed chuckled. He shook his head. He sat up and peered into the distance. There they were. Everything was according to plan. “I’m sorry to break this up, but I just wanted to point out that I’ve won now.”

Einar eyes burned. “What do you think you’re saying? Just because I stopped him from killing you doesn’t mean I won’t skewer you myself.”

“Well, if you look somewhere in that direction, you’ll see armies approaching. Armies that my scout brought during this escapade.”

Einar stared off where Sed had pointed to. Sure enough, a dark tide swept over the swamp. He glanced back. Kegan still couldn’t stand. Einar ran down to one of the unconscious guards. He took their spear and tossed it over to Kegan.

“If you can still use that fire, now’s the time.” Einar quivered.

“I just don’t know.” Kegan murmured.

Einar advanced upon Sed. He raised his spear. As hard as he could, he whacked Sed’s elbows, knees, and back. Sed cried out and curled up in pain. Einar pulled his rope out and tied the village chief.

“Just because I won’t kill you doesn’t mean I can’t hurt you. Try anything and I will repeat what I just did. Stay out of our way.”

Einar walked up to Kegan. He held Kegan’s arm and pulled him up. Kegan clutched Einar’s shoulder to steady himself. He stepped away, but his feet faltered. Einar rushed to hold him up once more.

“Can you do this?” Einar implored.

“Yeah,” Kegan winced, “just give me a sec.”

Kegan parted from Einar again and used the spear as a support. Einar watched him. This could not end well. He had to fix Kegan. He could not do this alone. He walked back in front of Kegan.

“If you want to get angry again, you can now. Just for this fight.”

“I can’t. I just can’t. Everything’s gone. Already thrown out.”

Einar bit his lip and tried to think. “You don’t need the fire. You were a great fighter before all this. Remember? You beat Sed. Bring that back.”

“But my anger took everything with it. I don’t have any energy left in me. The power I had to fight is gone.”

Einar sighed and held his forehead in his hands. He looked around. The army was spreading a wide circle around them. Another unconscious guard was just a few feet away. Einar took his spear and handed it to Kegan.

“Use it as a crutch to hold yourself up. It’s the best I can do. You’re going to just have to do the best you can do.”

Kegan grimly nodded. Einar whipped his head around again. The circle was shrinking. He braced himself. The circle shrunk further. He could see the faces of the soldiers now. They advanced with blank expressions. This is where it counted. Where he had to fight the best he ever had. The circle contracted more. Einar held his spear tightly. The men charged.

Einar swept the men away. They stood no chance against him. Then he looked over to Kegan. Kegan hardly held up against the soldiers around him. He wouldn’t last long. Einar worked his way towards Kegan. If he couldn’t give Kegan his strength, at least he could make the fight easier. Einar flashed back and forth between barely protecting himself and stopping weapons from burying themselves in Kegan.

The fighting around Kegan suddenly seemed to slow down. He began to discern the glimmer of Einar’s spear fending off the raiders’ strikes. Kegan relaxed his arms and slowly eased back into the movements from Acarya’s training. He eased off the crutch. This time, he didn’t stumble. Kegan grasped the spear tightly with both hands. He could do this. He could fight.

Einar returned to fighting his own battle. Kegan had recovered enough, they might actually have a chance. Einar leaped into the air and bashed a soldier’s skull. He glanced aside before he fell. The army extended around for at least thirty feet in all directions. Except one. Facing the pond, there seemed to be a break in the ranks. It was reasonably close to him. With at least one other enemy fighting them, the soldiers would be distracted enough to allow him ample time to escape. Einar turned his head. He could see the bare ground lining the pond edge. So close. He turned to the other side. Kegan fought the soldiers conglomerating around him. He was strong enough now to hold his own, but not to charge alone out of the battle. Einar couldn’t let

him go. Not again. This time, Kegan truly needed him.

Einar worked his way over to Kegan again. He turned and checked. Their escape still lay open.

“Kegan, start pushing that way. I’ll cover your back.”

“Wait, what? Why?”

“We can do this. We can escape.”

Kegan fought in the direction Einar pointed. He saw the thinness of the army. He looked back. Einar fought off all the soldiers that tried to attack him. He focused back to the front. The soldiers were weak, easy to beat. Freedom grew closer. The men tried to push him back, but their attempts were fruitless. Kegan fought for the freedom he knew he had to get. The number of soldiers in front of him fell quickly to none. Kegan burst into the open swamp ground. The vast land lay open before him. He turned back. Einar was at his side.

“Run, run!” Einar screamed.

Kegan started sprinting away. Einar kept level pace with him. Kegan could hear the footsteps of the soldiers behind them. The men were falling behind. Already, they were ten feet, twelve feet away. They would never catch them. Then, Kegan heard a strange sound. It was the sound of a left-behind battle. The sound of the weapon plunging into flesh. The faint grunt. But that didn’t make sense. They weren’t fighting anymore. He turned aside. Einar had stopped, a curious expression on his face. A thin, wooden spear protruded from his back. Kegan look back. He could see the soldier. The soldier with no spear, his arm still swinging from the momentum of the throw. Einar fell to his knees.

“Kegan, just go,” Einar wheezed.

“Einar, no,” Kegan whispered.

“Just go! You can keep going. Escape. Still bring down Sed.”

“I-I can’t do this alone. I need you!”

“No you don’t. I know you can do this. Run!”

Kegan ran. He wished the fire could take his mind away, send him away, propel him from this entire battle. Instead he sobbed, heavy, wet tears. Water, not fire, marked Kegan’s trail now as he ran.

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Hadwin emerged into the cave. Except the bodies of the fallen raiders, it was deserted. Not even the injured Ifgia soldiers remained. Hadwin slowly walked across the packed dirt, turning his head from side to side. Nothing moved. He crawled out of the blast hole onto the open ground. Still, no one around. Hadwin debated where to go. What had happened? Did the raiders win and leave? Was it a perfect one-to-one match and everyone died? No, that wouldn't make sense. For either case, there ought to be more injured people or bodies everywhere. Hadwin just continued walking, walking away from the dark cave.

Hadwin found himself subliminally following a well-known route in his mind. Step by step, his feet carried him back to where Igaezg had stood. He didn't know what he expected to find there, but last time, it revealed the location of Ifgia, saving his village. Hadwin came onto a well trodden path created by the move from the old clearing to the cave sanctuary. The green underbrush was squished into the brown dirt. Suddenly Hadwin heard something, almost a low murmur. Were the raiders still here? He looked ahead. The village grounds were near. It seemed like the sound was coming from there. Hadwin snuck up to a bunch of tall grasses surrounding a dense tree. He pulled them back and peered through. Ifgia warriors and Igaezg villagers were mixed, rebuilding the village. Hadwin silently stepped through the grasses into the clearing. Tzofi's face lit up as she noticed him. She ran up and embraced him in a bear hug.

"Hadwin! You're okay! We saw you fighting Llywarch, then suddenly, you were gone. We-we thought you were," she paused, "lost."

Hadwin felt his face flush. "Yeah, I didn't think I'd make it either. But now Llywarch," he wryly smiled, "Llywarch won't bother us anymore."

Tzofi's eyes sparkled. "Thank you for everything. For leading us before when we still had the village and bringing back Ifgia to save our captured village."

Hadwin smiled and mumbled his thanks. He started to follow Tzofi as she returned to the hut she was rebuilding, but Ctare grabbed his arm and hoisted Hadwin onto his shoulders. Hadwin glanced back at Tzofi, and she turned to face him. She shyly smiled, then continued walking away as Hadwin felt his cheeks grow red. Ctare finally let Hadwin down and punched him in the shoulder. "Dude, we beat 'em out. We took them down! The guys who were left just ran! And nice job with that Llywarch guy. When you were up here fighting him, he was owning you."

Hadwin laughed. It was all over. Everything was okay. They finally did it. They won.

Now they were free. He jogged over to a stack of gathered reeds, planks, and clay. He immediately began to assemble another hut. After the running, climbing, crawling, and fighting that had taken place in the last couple weeks, he was glad to finally do something ordinary. After leading it through a war, Hadwin could not wait to heal and rebuild his village.

The wreckage of the old Main Hall was cleared and a new frame was fabricated. The job became a village effort as children excitedly rushed to bring new materials for the adults building. Mud bricks fleshed out the walls of the wooden skeleton. Some of the more intrepid youth climbed on top of the walls and began to fill out the ceiling. The edges started to close in to the center. The unfinished, jagged edged circle of glaring sun shrunk and was replaced by the silken light diffusing through the open wall panels. Hadwin finished his wall section and strode into the nearly formed building. The opening above him shrunk the light into a thin beam. Then, it was gone. The Main Hall was completed. The Main Hall had returned. No, it was something new. Still a Main Hall, but it was a completely new building looking over a brand new village.

Hadwin approached a still drying wall. He began to step out of the adjacent open panel, but refrained from doing so. He crouched and pressed his hand firmly into the mud. After a couple seconds, he pulled it away. A perfect print of his hand was left. It was right at the bottom, so people wouldn't see it right away, but Hadwin would always know was there. A little piece of him left in the new Main Hall.

Hadwin stepped out. The building of the huts had resumed. Some pushed the dirt of the half-standing defense wall into the half-filled trenches. Theodoric and Ducere were chatting as they hefted large planks in place to build tables and chairs.

"So how about coming out of hiding?" Theodoric laughed.

"I don't know. I don't want to repeat what happened before. Last time, we were lucky to survive. I don't know if we will be so fortunate next time."

"Well, you can always count on having allies in us."

"Likewise! You might need it next time if you're stuck with raiders again."

Hadwin continued touring the village. He next found himself at the waste pile. The corner of a large slab of wood stuck out from the top. Hadwin winced. He pulled out the remains of the chieftain's door. It had deteriorated even more since Hadwin had last seen it. It had led Hadwin to find the map to Ifgia. It saved Igaezg. It didn't deserve to be treated like this. The beautiful carvings were gone. It was nothing but a burnt, decaying chunk of wood. Then he realized. It

was a new village, a new day. They could make history start anew from that day. Hadwin searched around. His eyes caught on the materials set aside for the table assembly. One of the main planks could work. It wasn't the same as the one before, but that didn't matter anymore. This door wasn't the odd one out, rather, the last one was.

Hadwin carved away the corners with his rock knife. He examined his work. What was to be the door was now five feet by seven feet and two inches thick, all edges rounded slightly. Hadwin grasped a corner and attempted to lift it. All he could do was slowly drag the door to where the chief's hut was being erected. He didn't want it to just be pulled along the ground. It would be scratched, scarred, marred. Ctare saw him and ran over to help. Together, they trudged along, holding the door just inches over the ground.

Hadwin approached Theodoric. "Hey Chief? I found something new we can use as a door. You or someone can start carving it out while the hut's being put up."

"You know what Hadwin? Why don't you start it out?"

"Me? Why me?"

"Why you? Of course it should be you. After what you did, no one else would more deserve the honor of beginning the engravings."

Hadwin gulped. How was he supposed to even attempt to match the intricacies of the beautiful bas relief carvings on the old door? In a way, this was more daunting than the journey he had partook to Ifgia. He pulled out his rock knife and froze. How would he even start?

"First, just carve something that shows the war." Theodoric described. "Then, add the newly formed alliance with Ifgia. After some consideration, I have convinced Ducere to bring Ifgia back into the open and form his first alliance with us."

Members of both villages cheered. Hadwin glanced up. Ctare ran into his father's arms, treating him with an embrace. Hadwin inwardly smiled, then quickly turned back to his task. He placed the tip of his rock knife upon the top corner. Already, it marked the surface. It was now or never. Hadwin pushed the point in and began to drag out the first line. Once he started, Hadwin let his fears go and allowed his arm to trace the scene out itself. His mouth slowly bent into a smile. It was working. He was doing it. The first scene was done. Hadwin then finished the second. He admired his handiwork. It was beautiful. The first panel was graced with an army of crude, stick figure raiders amassed outside of a sprawled village. The next panel showed members of the same raider army lying prone on the ground. Stick figures from both Ifgia and

Igaezg raised their weapons together.

“It’ll do, Hadwin,” Theodoric chuckled. “It’ll do.”

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Trees flew past. Leaves waved in Kegan’s wake. He sprinted, sprinted until his lungs were about to burst. Then he sprinted more. He couldn’t do this. He would never do it. Never beat Sed. Avenge his parents, Acarya, Einar, everyone else they killed. He just couldn’t. There was no one else he could go to. No one else could help him.

Kegan stopped and collapsed against a tree. He let his tears flow into the rough bark, not caring as it scratched his face. Einar was gone. Einar was like his father. He helped so much. Now, he died because of Kegan. Why did Einar have to die? He knew everything. He never messed up. He never, ever grew desperate or lost his temper. Kegan couldn’t do this alone. He wasn’t sure he even could’ve beaten Sed with Einar’s help. Without Einar, or anyone, Kegan couldn’t do anything.

Wait, there was still one more person. One more person in the whole, wide world left who could help. One more person left after everyone who tried to help Kegan had died. Maybe, just maybe, this could still happen. Kegan could still win this. Then he would be done. Done with this all. Kegan turned home. He didn’t know how he knew which way it was. He just knew. Like something inside him, some inherent compass pointing out the way. It was time, finally time to go home.

Kegan completed his circle and passed Imalum. The inhabitants of the now taciturn village were replaced on the streets by the silent slaves. They were going to be freed. Their lives could be saved and their villages restored. He turned into the forest. Kegan could feel each step of his journey rewinding. He passed Einar’s home. Some hours later, Acarya’s destroyed oasis was gone too. Kegan started to stumble and stopped his run. He needed food, energy. The blasts of fire at the spirit and at Sed had taken a lot out of him. Then he ran for hours. His stomach felt shriveled and curled up. He walked a little farther. There was a stream. The piranhas. God, it was so long ago.

Kegan dived in with his spear. It was pitch dark. He couldn’t see anything. He wouldn’t find food like this. He nicked his ankle with the spear tip. Now it was just a matter of time. Kegan surfaced for a breath. He felt the first bite on his heel. Good. They were here. He closed his eyes. They wouldn’t help here anyways. The spear flew. Kegan swung again. He stabbed

forward. More piranhas filled the water. More targets. The spear started to grow heavy. That was enough. Time to go. Kegan burst out of the water and pulled himself onto the stream bank. His spear had fifteen fish skewered upon it. Little chunks of flesh were missing everywhere Kegan had been bitten. They would heal. Kegan ripped the scales off the first victim. He tore it apart and poured the innards back into the stream. The water boiled.

The fish were gutted and cleaned. Kegan dug in. He devoured the white, raw flesh. Protein filled his stomach and some strength returned. As each of the first few fish were eaten, Kegan could feel himself grow hungrier. His stomach could sense the food and was opening up. The fifteen fish were finished quickly.

Kegan resumed his dash. The sun rose over the horizon and the forest was filled with light. Night sprung into dawn. Kegan's feet began to grow blisters. His toenails chipped. Dawn gave way to a bright morning. The trees thinned. The clearing approached. The village was near. Kegan grinned. He was here. Hadwin was here. They would fight together. They would win. The early hours of morning passed.

The grasses split. Kegan burst into the clearing. Where was everything? Half the huts were gone. The others looked just built. The raiders. It had to be the raiders. They destroyed everything. All the better. Hadwin would have to come with him after this happened. There! Hadwin was making a new hut. Kegan ran forward.

"Hadwin! I need you to help me!"

"What? Kegan? Wait, what happened? Where'd you go?" Hadwin seemed annoyed, mad, even disappointed. Kegan couldn't tell why.

"I, you know, found this village. It was this village that takes over other villages. They're evil! They killed my parents!" Kegan's eyes were wide. His voice came through choppy breaths.

"Kegan, what are you talking about?"

"It's this village that controls the raiders. They're the reason you were attacked!" Kegan was nearly hysterical now.

"Kegan, what do you even want me to do? I have to stay here. I've fought enough. My place is here. I just need to fix everything."

"Don't you want to get back at the people who caused all this? Who destroyed this village in the first place? We could destroy them right here and right now!"

"I don't need to destroy them, whoever they are. They tried to fight us, and we won. We

found Ifgia. We made a new alliance. If they ever try to attack us again, we'll beat them. Why do we need to go on a mad hunt to attack some far off village?"

"Don't you see what you're saying? You say you'll fight them again if they return. Not if, *when*. They will return. We can stop them, though. Stop all this fighting. Don't you get it? You won a battle, I'm trying to end the war!"

"Kegan, I can't do this. I still don't even know what I'm supposed to do. I can't keep fighting. I need a rest. I need to help my village. Do you know what I've been through since you've left? What the whole village has gone through since you left? I don't want to say this, but just shut up. Shut up about your stupid village. This is my home. This is where I'm staying."

Kegan lunged at Hadwin with his spear. Hadwin hardly countered the blow. Kegan pressed his spear forward. Hadwin could only just hold it back with his own. Kegan's eyes were wild. "I need you, Hadwin. I'll make you help me. We'll win. I'll make you come with me. I'll fight you if I need to!"

"Please, Kegan, please don't do this. Just try to understand. I need to be here. My place is here. After everything's calmed down, maybe we can send a team to help you. We all need to help here right now."

"I can't wait 'til everything's calm. We have to go now! They killed them! They killed everyone! They killed Acarya, they killed Einar, they killed my parents."

"Kegan, stop!"

"You were my friend. My best friend. We did everything together. Now I need you for one thing and you just say no?"

"Kegan, I just need to be here for a little while. Stop! I don't want to fight you."

"Fight me, or come with me."

Kegan launched into an aggressive, all out offensive series of attacks. Hadwin could see holes, openings, weak points. He tried to manipulate them, but he was just so weary and through with the fighting. He especially couldn't fight Kegan. Kegan forced him to the ground. Hadwin cried out for help. Three Ifgia warriors sprung at Kegan. A cornered beast, Kegan almost formed a solid shield with the speed of his flashing spear. These fighters, however, were stronger and more experienced than Hadwin. They surrounded Kegan and wore him down. One lashed at Kegan's knee. Kegan yelled and collapsed. Another soldier raised his spear for the kill.

"Stop!" Hadwin ran forward. He couldn't let this happen. "Imprison him, tie him up, I

don't know, do anything, just don't kill him. Take him to the old cave. Find some way to keep him."

"As you wish."

Hadwin turned and walked away. He couldn't look. Who was this? This wasn't the Kegan that left that morning. That morning months ago. There was something different inside him. Something that broke inside his head. Hadwin's face scrunched up. His eyes clamped shut. Their corners grew damp. He couldn't break down. Not now. Everything was good. The village was saved. What was wrong with him? Moisture beaded up and rolled down his cheek. What happened to the old Kegan? The one who was always seemed to be stuck between the adults and kids. The one who always chose the kids because they were so much more fun. The one who was always the coolest, the best, almost like a brother to him. Hadwin wanted that old Kegan back. He would know what to do with this one.

Kegan tried to pull away, resist. They were taking him somewhere dark. A cave? He yelled and screamed. "Hadwin, I'm sorry. Please, forgive me. I'm sorry." They wouldn't let him go. He had to get away. Apologize to Hadwin. What had Kegan done? He was a monster. He couldn't let this take him over again. But it would. He knew it would. It would consume him and make him not him. Kegan slumped in defeat as they pushed him into his cell. It was simple, just wood bars over a bomb excavated space in the wall. Kegan didn't even want to escape, though. He didn't want to hurt anyone anymore. He grabbed a bar and tried to shake it. It held strong. Good. He knew he would try to escape. When that happened, at least the prison would hold him.

Days had passed. Kegan had wanted to scratch them out in the wall, but it seemed like too much effort. It was easier to just slump against the wall. Do nothing. Once a day, they sent a cloth bag full of food. The guards threw it in with a strange look of pity and confusion. Pity at Kegan's condition, and confusion at why he was still kept alive. Then one day, it wasn't a guard who brought the food. It was different.

"Hadwin, I'm sorry," Kegan cried, "Please, I'm sorry. Leave me here, just forgive me."

"I'm sorry, Kegan. I-I just don't know who you are anymore." Hadwin stared, stone-faced at the cell.

"Why are you here? Why didn't you just send a guard again?"

"Don't you know?" Hadwin wryly chuckled, "I guess it's pretty tough to keep track of the days in here."

“What, what is it?” Kegan came up to the edge of the cell, clutching the bars.

“It’s your birthday. Your day. Finally, the village is fixed and we have enough time to celebrate. Instead of reveling up there, you’re stuck here. Why? What happened, Kegan?”

“I don’t know. Just go. Please. I can’t take this.”

Hadwin scooted the sack of food into the cell. “Well, I have something for you. For your birthday. I made it a while ago. I thought I’d give it to you now.” He pushed in a rounded, carved piece of wood after the food. Then he turned and strode away.

“Hadwin, come back! Let me out! We can go! Do this together!” Kegan jumped onto the bars and tried to rip them open and shake them apart. They wouldn’t break. He was stuck. He sat to the side and cried for a bit. It wasn’t fair. They were keeping him away. He started taking morsels from the bag. The food strengthened his spirit. They were keeping him here because he was horrible. He was dangerous. He would hurt people. He picked up the carving Hadwin had left him. It was a life-size, elaborately whittled Aetos. An image of the bird flew into Kegan’s mind. All of the great times. His childhood with Aetos. The beginning of the journey with Aetos. Then Acarya died. Aetos was lost. Everything turned bad. Aetos had to return. If Aetos could return, maybe so would all the memories that accompanied the bird. Kegan held the figure close. He could smell it. It was freshly carved. It had that scent to it. It had to have been made within a couple days ago.

On the tip of the right wing, there was a ring. A tiny ring, smaller than Kegan’s smallest fingernail. Kegan immediately knew what it was. Only a tear could leave a mark like that. Kegan weeped. The tiny bird was drenched with his tears. Kegan flung the wretched thing out of his cell, at the wall. The detailed work snapped apart. Kegan’s face dried. Then suddenly, new tears welled up. How could he destroy it? Hadwin put so much work into the little treasure for Kegan. It was the first thing Kegan had that he could have called his own for so many days. A tiny sculpture that connected him back to the village and his freedom. What was wrong with him?

There was more tapping. More footsteps. Someone was coming to his prison. Was it Hadwin? Kegan was ashamed of himself. He could never face Hadwin. Kegan curled into a ball and faced the wall. He just listened. Wait, it wasn’t Hadwin. The steps were different. Not so strong or confident. Kegan peeked around. A tall, thin silhouette was outlined by the sunlight streaming through the opening into the cave. Kegan turned around. The person, whoever it was, got closer. They were injured, badly. They had a prominent limp and had heavily bleeding

wounds. Kegan quickly stood up.

Llywarch stumbled over to the prison where Kegan was being held. It was almost more like a cage. He saw Kegan stand up. Kegan looked healthy, strong, just a little crazy. A perfect ally. He came right up in front of the cell.

“Hey Kegan. You see, I’ve got some people I want to get back at, and you have some people you want to get back at, so why don’t we help each other out and work together?”

Kegan slowly lifted his head and brushed the matted curtain of hair from over his eyes.