

The goliath warrior watched with nervous anticipation as a small group of fairy-like forgesmiths pounded away at a strip of heated metal. He wiped a few beads of sweat from his brow - the plains of the Goliath Tribes could get hot, but the temperature inside the Gemforge was high unbearable - and glanced past the piece they were working on.

An almost-perfect sphere of murky off-white ore, swaddled in a towel, rested on a table on the opposite side of the smithy. He felt a fresh round of sweat forming on his brow, but wasn't sure if it was attributable to the heat this time. As his eyes focused on the orb - ocrum, if he knew his metals and minerals half as well as he believed - he felt the peripherals of his vision fade to darkness. He licked his dry and cracked lips as the tunnel vision continued to narrow his focus, and the table seemed to shift closer and closer until he felt as though he could reach out and touch it.

A stray ember from the smiths' hammering landed on his foot, abruptly pulling him back to his body. He shook his head. His mind was as clouded as the ocrum orb. He crossed his arms and forced himself to focus on the work the forgesmiths were doing.

Two of the small creatures held the superheated metal with tongs at each end, while three more took alternating swings at it with their hammers. It was beginning to take shape, but they were still in the early stages of the process. If they had noticed his brief lapse of focus, they didn't seem to mind.

"Umos," a sixth one said. The goliath turned his head to the side to acknowledge the newcomer. She bowed in mid-air, small wings beating a thousand times a minute to keep her aloft. The soft hum of their wings was not an unpleasant sound; Umos had quickly grown accustomed to it after arriving here a few days prior.

"What is it?" he asked. The forgesmith was looking pointedly at his scale cuirass. He glanced down at it just as she raised her eyes to meet his.

"I would love to take a sample of one of these scales," she said. "I understand you can't take the armor off, but will you please allow me to pry a scale loose? Just one?"

Umos grimaced. He didn't much care for the idea of damaging this seemingly cursed breastplate, particularly not while he was physically unable to remove it.

"I'd prefer you not," he muttered. "Is it really that important to you?"

"Just the one, Umos," she repeated. She flitted up and down, holding her hands out towards the armor, but not daring to touch it. "I can pull one from a spot it won't be noticeable. And it won't even remotely impact the armor's integrity. Just... one of these, back here."

She had come to a stop just forward of his right side, and was making circular motions with her hands to indicate the part of the breastplate under his arm, near where the join would be if the armor had been made using more standard methods and materials.

As it was, he wasn't sure - not completely, at least - what the breastplate was made of. Certainly it looked like scale, like dragonscale, but it was the same murky off-white color as the orb, and he'd never heard of anything - scrolls, stories, myth, or rumor - mentioning an ocrum dragon. Other metals, perhaps. Gold, silver, brass, even occasional rumors of a nightsilver dragon. But *ocrum*? Unheard of. Especially in modern times, since the last of the ore dragons were slain before Umos had even been born.

"The damn thing's cursed," he said to the smith, "as I've said before. I don't know what will happen if anyone tries to remove it, or even a piece of it. If it's enchanted with any kind of intelligence, it could fight back."

The smith pursed her lips in disappointment. The way the firelight played against her deep tan skin and her membranous fluttering wings created a shock of contrast as she hovered next to Umos's pale blue-white skin. The shadows that flitted across his skin made his tribal tattoos seem alive.

The scales on the breastplate seemed to absorb and refract the light in a way that made little sense. It was as if they were constantly in shadow, and constantly casting a shadow. He suppressed a shiver.

"Apologies," he said. "I just don't feel comfortable risking you - or myself - until we know more."

"I can't know more until you let me take it apart," she muttered, barely loud enough for him to hear. He snorted and shifted his gaze back to the smiths that were working the anvil.

They were re-heating the metal in the flames of the forge, twisting and turning it to get the heat as even as possible. The haft was finally beginning to take shape. On the end of that haft, once they were finished, would be the head of the most valuable greathammer he would ever have the pleasure of wielding.

The smiths of the Gemforge were renowned across all of Userahin. They didn't take commissions often, and what they did create was the stuff of legends. The Shattered Arms, Calomis' Storm, the Bulwark of Adneus. And now here he was, in their legendary place, asking for - and receiving - his own commission.

He'd found the scaleplate and the ocrum sphere during a routine expedition through the Dead Wastes. It was by no means unusual to find equipment, or even artefacts, during such expeditions; the Dead Wastes were older by far than he or any of his tribe could remember. Even the stories passed down from the elders over generations mentioned the Dead Wastes by name and by reputation. They were unchanging, eternal, though in the last century or so the Goliath Tribes had managed to work through an uneasy peace to map the area.

He'd known as soon as he put on the scaleplate that it was cursed. As he'd tightened the strap across his back, he'd heard a distant scream in his mind. The others around him denied hearing anything, even as the sound had continued. It had stopped, eventually, after keeping him from sleep for several frustrating nights.

Then he'd tried to take it off. That was a mistake. The screaming returned, intensified one hundred-fold, until he put the blasted thing back on. His companions, at that point, had acknowledged that he was truly suffering a curse, and not merely losing his mind. The blood slowly streaming from his ears confirmed that for them at least.

The orb was another matter. He'd not had any use for it at the time, but it seemed to speak to him, particularly after discovering the consequences of removing the armor. They were tied to each other, or so he assumed.

The voices coming from the sphere - for there were several, all talking over each other - seemed to be speaking in several different languages. Umos spoke golithi, and only golithi. He knew a handful of useful phrases in dwarvish, mainly to be diplomatic during trade negotiations, but if the orb spoke any dwarvish, it was not the particular words or phrases that he was familiar

with. Along with those, it seemed like the orb spoke another fifty, maybe sixty distinct languages, the majority of which were completely new to him.

Once the hammer was forged, the ocrum sphere would be set into the head, so he could carry it and make use of its unique enchantments.

The sphere and breastplate seemed linked, and Umos felt as though he couldn't separate them. Perhaps it was a trick of the mind, but he was convinced it was a part of the curse.

The further away from the orb he was, while wearing the armor, the sicker he felt. He'd nearly fainted from exhaustion after a companion had taken on the orb's burden for a day. Even now, being just across the room from it, he could feel how badly the orb wanted back in his grasp. He resisted the urge to cross the room and take it back into his possession. It wasn't far from him. He wasn't in danger of losing it. The voices whispered across the room to him.

Please, they said, please don't leave us.

At least, that's what he could hear them saying in golithi. The other voices, in other languages, could be cursing him and his entire line of descendants for all he knew.

The smiths were back at the anvil, hammering down the haft of his hammer. The one that had questioned him about taking a scale from the armor had joined them, hovering down the length of the metal, analyzing it for any potential flaws. She seemed mostly satisfied for now.

Umos strode around the room in the direction of the table where the orb rested in its towel. He pointedly avoided looking directly at it, instead leaning on the windowsill and peering out over the canyon.

"I won't leave you," he whispered, never sure if the voices inside the orb could hear or understand him.

The canyon where the Gemforge had been carved into the rock sat directly beneath another artefact of an age long past. He could barely make out, by moonlight, the shadow of the massive tower jutting from the landscape a few hundred feet above where he currently stood.

The Archive of the Sky. As far as he knew, no one knew where or when the Archives came from, but this one had several theories surrounding it. Being that the Gemforge was effectively in its basement, perhaps the forgesmiths had built it in a time before memory. Lightning was drawn to the peak of the tower, even above the clouds, eliciting rumors that some ancient god or monster slumbered there and somehow controlled the storms.

Umos wasn't sure what he believed the Archive of the Sky to be. He didn't particularly care to find out. The only Archive he took any personal interest in was the Archive of Spirits, on the northern edge of his people's territory.

The Archive of Spirits was a tower, not unlike the Archive of the Sky, though not nearly so tall. The base of the tower was surrounded by gravemarkers, though the graves themselves were mostly empty. It was a popular spot for graverobbers - and archaeologists, though Umos disputed there was any difference.

The Archive of Spirits was also a popular place for the shamans and chieftains of the Goliath Tribes to confer with the ancestors. It was commonly considered a rite of passage for anyone who had serious intentions in moving forward with their faith. The spirits of the ancestors reputedly swarmed around the Archive, and it was assumed to be a place where the barrier between the physical realm and the spiritual was worn thin.

Umos worshiped the ancestral spirits in much the same way his parents had; it was expected, and so it was done. He had no vested interest in the religious beliefs, but the tenets of the faith seemed structured in such a way as to maintain peace, civility, and some amount of socially constructed morality. The Goliath Tribes functioned the way that they did because of the laws set forth by the ancestors - or at least, by the shamans and the chieftains who purported to converse with the ancestors.

Umos blinked away the thoughts clouding his mind and turned back to the smiths, who were back to reheating the metal once more, in between the rounds of hammering it out.

"I believe I'll retire for the night," he said. A couple of the smiths acknowledged his statement with terse nods of their heads, but they were focused primarily on the forging. He glanced down at the sphere on the table beside him and sighed. "Will the hammer be ready for the orb tonight?"

The smith that had asked about taking a scale from his armor earlier waved him off.

"Unlikely," she said. "You can take it for tonight. We'll wake you if plans change."

Umos nodded, despite the fairy-like creature not turning to look at him. He took the orb out of its resting spot in the towel, and immediately, the voices seemed to calm. The panic of abandonment left their tone, though they continued speaking in their various tongues.

The orb was small enough that he could easily tuck it under his elbow as he headed out of the heat of the forge and into one of the nearby storage rooms. He'd thrown together a makeshift cot in here for sleeping. It was not especially comfortable, but it would do.

He unlaced his boots and tugged them off, placed them side-by-side on the floor at the end of the cot. He sat on the edge of it, feeling exhaustion set in. The exhaustion was especially frustrating to him, considering he had been relatively sedentary since making it to the Gemforge. Perhaps it was the lack of activity that was wearing on him. His toned and trained muscles weren't accustomed to this much stillness. He made a silent decision to find a way to exercise in the morning, keep himself moving, distracted. He lay back on the cot, his head resting on a makeshift pillow made of folded clothes, and closed his eyes. It didn't take him long to fall asleep.

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The screaming startled Umos awake and he leapt to his feet, reaching for a weapon he didn't have. His vision slowly focused into wakefulness and he allowed himself to relax only slightly at the sight of two forgesmiths fluttering in the air a few feet away. At last, his mind caught up to his eyes, and he was able to process what he was seeing and hearing.

His armor - his cursed scaleplate - was screaming again, a different tone than the time he'd tried to take it off. This was the kind of scream that was born of deep, primal fear.

The two forgesmiths in front of him swayed in the air, holding their hands over their ears. Odd. His previous companions had insisted they couldn't hear the screaming of his armor, even when it had howled in protest at his removing it. The voices from the orb came into focus under the screams, but he couldn't grasp what they were saying, even in goliath. They were talking too fast and interrupting each other too much.

"What's happening?" Umos asked. The two forgesmiths glared at him, but didn't reply. No, that wasn't quite it. They were glaring at the breastplate, not at the goliath himself.

Umos glanced down and saw a set of tongs on the floor at his feet, holding a scale torn from the armor. In an instant, he understood.

The armor seemed to feel the anger that he suppressed. The scream died down to a dull roar. The orb continued speaking its excited gibberish, but lowered its volume slightly. Umos glanced over his shoulder at the cot.

The forgesmith that had asked him the day before about taking a sample of the armor lay on the edge of the cot, her body shriveled, the life drained from her. Her hands looked like they'd take the brunt of the curse, shriveled down near to the bone, a cloying mist trailing into the air from the wound. She wasn't breathing. Her eyes were sunken, but locked open in an expression of permanent shock.

"I did tell her I didn't want to risk such a thing," Umos whispered. The other two smiths cautiously removed their hands from their ears, satisfied that the piercing scream had stopped.

"You killed her," one of them said, jabbing an accusing finger in his direction. He huffed and gestured with his hands to the scaleplate.

"*This* killed her," he retorted. "And I'd warned her more than once that it was cursed." He bent down and picked up the tongs, eliciting a whine from the armor. "You've got your sample now, at least. I hope it was worth it."

He held out the tongs, still clamping the torn bit of armor, and the smiths yanked them out of his hand, careful not to touch the scale. They sneered at him - at the armor - before flitting out of the room and back towards the forge.

He turned back to the bed, and to the body of the smith. The odd mist that had been rising from her wounds had stopped. He sighed, offering a prayer of sorrow and forgiveness to any spirits that might be listening.

A different pair of forgesmiths fluttered in through the still open doorway and alighted next to their dead companion. One of them lifted her body by the ankles, the other by her shoulders, and they carried her back into the forge room. Umos followed a respectful distance behind, curious.

The two smiths carried their dead friend once around the outer perimeter of the room, giving each other smith an opportunity to salute and say a quick prayer. The circuit complete, they opened the door to the furnace and heaved her into the flames. There was, strangely, no scent of burning meat, or hair, or clothes. Nothing seemed to change. In fact, the ceremony barely interrupted their work. Legend said that the ashes of the burning smith would enhance anything they were crafting. Nobody had dared test that theory, at least not from what Umos understood.

The two who'd been in his room before had brought the tongs and scale around to another part of the forge and were taking turns inspecting it through an enchanted jeweler's lens. They spoke hurriedly and excitedly in their mysterious language.

Umos glanced out the window. Still dark, but it looked like sunrise might be just an hour or so away. He felt a wave of nausea strike and had to fight to keep from vomiting. He trotted back into the storage room and tucked the orb under his elbow. The sickness passed.

At this point, he might as well stay up. After waking up like that, it would be hard to return to sleep. He strode back into the forge and watched for a while as the smiths went about their business. Once the first rays of sun breached the window, he climbed the stairs that led to the entry of the Archive of the Sky and exited into the cool morning air.

A few deep breaths, a few careful stretches, and he began a slow, methodical training routine. It resembled the training he'd gone through in his youth when he'd thought he wanted to be a warrior, though that warrior training was usually done in pairs or triplets, to keep each trainee accountable to their peers.

This was not the training he usually did to stay active, but the life of an expeditioneer usually kept him from sitting still longer than a night's rest, and he didn't think it wise to travel too far from the Gemforge.

He felt the tautness in his muscles as they strained against what would once have been familiar motion, but now felt strenuous, painful even. He wasn't as young as he remembered, though he dared anyone to call him "old" to his face. Scars crossed the old tattoo ink along the lengths of his arms and legs. There were similar scars on his chest and back, but he suspected those may never be seen again, so long as this cursed breastplate continued to haunt him.

They were starting to fade - scars and tattoos alike - so he made a mental note to have the tattoos refreshed when he returned home. He would most likely need some new ones as well.

The ink that marked much of Umos's skin told stories, each new line and pattern representing some conflict he'd been involved in or some noteworthy expedition he'd headed. A visit to the Gemforge, and the forging of this new hammer, would surely warrant a few new pokes and prods from his tribe's inkspeaker.

He couldn't read the ink himself, necessarily. It wasn't written in golithi - it wasn't really "written" at all. The sharp lines and winding curves were representative of the stories they told, without being pictures. It was like another language, though only ever expressed in written form, and only the inkspeakers truly knew it.

Sweat had trickled down his head and neck, and he started to feel an itch around the center of his back. He finished the part of the exercise routine he had been working on and stretched. A single sharp crack came from his spine and he exhaled, satisfied.

As his attention broadened to his greater surroundings - his focus had been exclusively on the exercise for the past two hours - he noticed that the orb had fallen strangely silent. It had never been silent in the months that he'd had it in his possession. Quieter or louder, certainly, but silent? Never.

The sweat he'd felt trickling down his back turned cold and he suppressed the shiver that ran up his spine. He glanced around, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. He walked the path that led from the surface entrance of the Archive of the Sky down to the edge of the canyon and scanned the horizon. Nothing.

The chattering from the orb started back up, startling him. He tried to hone his hearing to just the golithi voice.

....terror such as we...who can defend...this one? Pah! The words were hard to make out, the voices constantly interrupting and overlapping each other, but it sounded like they thought little of him personally.

Well, that was just fine. He wasn't in the business of fighting anyone else's battles, much less a vaguely cursed sphere of possibly sentient ore.

His ears perked up as he noticed a new voice intermingled among the usual banter. It was a language he recognized, but could neither speak nor understand, and he'd never heard that language from the sphere until now. Smithtongue.

Could the sphere learn new languages? Was it learning, or was it just repeating common phrases, mimicking the sounds?

Umos used a rag from his pocket to wipe the sweat from his brow as best he could before returning to the Archive, then to its basement. He set the orb on the towel, where it had rested the day before, and gestured for one of the smiths to approach. She didn't look busy, but she also didn't look too pleased to be called away from her break.

"Yes, Umos?" she asked, the tiredness in her eyes leaking into her tone.

"The orb has...changed," he said, nodding to it. She shifted her gaze to the orb, stared for a moment, then looked back at the goliath questioningly. "It speaks smithtongue now. Can you translate?"

The smith glanced back at the orb before rubbing her eyes.

"We can't hear it, expeditioneer," she said. "Are you capable of repeating what it's saying? Tone, speed, and timbre are important for smithtongue - keep that in mind."

Umos's lips narrowed into a thin line as he concentrated on the myriad voices. He'd noticed previously that they seemed to loop, or at least the golithi voice did. Maybe if he could focus hard enough to find the pattern in the smithtongue, he could listen for the loop until he could mimic it well enough.

The smith he'd called over hovered lower until she sat softly on the back of a goliath-sized chair a few feet away. She crossed her legs and rested her cheek in her hand, leaning slightly to the side, her eyes fluttering every so often as she fought to stay awake.

Umos concentrated hard, but the pattern of a foreign language was difficult to grasp. He sighed.

"You may rest, little one," he said to the smith. "It may be hours before I am confident in my ability to repeat the voice. Perhaps, by then, the message will change anyway, and my efforts will have been in vain."

The smith's wings kicked back into action and she flew a bit forward to pat him on the arm.

"I know this is important to you, Umos," she said, "and I will help you translate when you are ready. I will check back with you when I awaken." She zipped away through the air without waiting for a response.

Umos stayed near the table, trying to focus on the voice, but every time he thought he was close to understanding the pattern, something distracted him, and he lost it. His eyes scanned over everything in the room, a habit he'd formed as an expeditioneer, seeking an understanding of the details of what he was seeing, and the voice faded out of his attention.

The smiths were nearly finished forging the head of the greathammer. A quick glance around and he found the haft already complete, hanging from a set of hooks, slowly cooling to a manageable temperature.

He shook the distractions from his thoughts and sat in the chair, turning it to face the orb on the table, his back to the rest of the room. Focus. Hear the pattern. Learn the pattern. Repeat the pattern.

A forgesmith wandered into view carrying a bowl. She set it in front of him without a word, trying to disturb him as little as possible. He nodded his thanks and grabbed the bowl.

The food inside looked much like gruel, or oatmeal, or similar foods he'd frequently packed in his travel kit, but it tasted fruity. Every meal he'd had prepared by the forgesmiths had

surprised him. The beige paste never tasted the same, and never tasted the way it looked. This morning, it was blueberries. Even the texture of the berries came through in each bite, even though the texture of the food itself looked like nothing more than slop. He appreciated whatever magic or special technique the smiths had that allowed them to create such interesting - and confusing - foods.

He used the long thin utensil provided with the bowl to scoop the paste into his mouth, narrowing his focus back to the orb's voices, trying to shut out everything else around him.

He couldn't find the pattern. There was too much other noise, too many other voices. It might be different if it was a language he knew, but very few people outside the Gemforge itself even knew of the existence of smithtongue. He took another bite of the fruity paste before refocusing his attention.

This time, he focused on the golithi voice. Maybe if he could figure out the pattern of the one he actually understood, he could figure out how to isolate the other ones.

He listened intently, blocking out the other voices as best he could, but their disparate volumes caught in his ears. It took him the rest of the morning to piece together what he believed the golithi voice was saying.

The old one is here. She has come - she has come! Terror such as we have neither seen nor heard, that is what can be given and what shall be received. The people - the innocents - who can defend them from the encroaching terror? Ghosts of the past, ghosts of the dead and doomed, and this one? Pah! He wears the beacon that calls her to their gates!

There was some chanting, guttural but not forming words, that followed, then a few moments of silence, then it restarted. Umos listened to it loop several times, the furrow on his brow deepening each time, sweat breaking out on his forehead.

He glanced down at the armor he'd been unable to remove. Was that what the voice meant by "the beacon that calls her to their gates"? Who was this "old one" anyway? Terror, if the voice was to be taken at its word.

He suddenly straightened his back, feeling an ache starting to creep its way into the base of his spine, and looked around at the forge. Many of the smiths had taken their breaks in the time he'd been concentrating, and there were only three remaining at work. The usual noise had quieted, and there was only the soft *tink tink* of tiny chisels carving intricate runes into the head of the hammer. That, and the voices from the orb.

The scale that had been removed from the armor was suspended above a steel plate a few tables away, held a few inches above the surface by a delicate clamp. The smiths that had been examining it had evidently retired as well.

He glanced out the window. The shadows cast into the canyon implied it was just before midday. He shook his head as if to wake up from a deep sleep and noticed the bowl he'd been served earlier still sat on the corner of the table, its contents dried well past the point of the pleasant paste he'd enjoyed earlier. He'd barely eaten half the bowl, if even that. His stomach suddenly churned with the realization that he should be hungry, and he got to his feet, stretching to pop his back once more.

"Is there meat still in the stores?" he asked, seeking eye contact with one of the remaining workers. Two of them glanced his way in between taps of their chisels.

"Should be, aye," one of them replied. "May be running low though, so do try to ration yourself."

Umos nodded his head in understanding and, scooping up the orb, strode to the back rooms to seek sustenance.

He found a few salted and preserved steaks - just enough to sate him, if he hadn't had to ration it - and took two from the top of the stack. He gave them a quick sniff and, smelling nothing unusual, moved to the next room. The kitchen, such as it was.

Even by goliath standards, the kitchen here was lacking. Perhaps he felt that way because it was built with the smaller folk in mind. He had to stoop to stand in the room - was that why his back had been troubling him so much lately? - and there was a single firepit, with a cast iron cage that could be placed over it to act as a grill. Beyond that, there were no utensils, no pots or pans aside from the single clay one that the smiths used to prepare their preferred paste each morning.

Water was stored in a bucket near the single window, and could frequently run out if the sky denied them their rain for too long. This did not seem to be of significant concern to the smiths.

Of spices, there were little to none. Salt, mostly, and that was primarily used for preserving the meat, not for seasoning to taste. Umos did find, on his first night using the kitchen, a small bottle of something akin to mustard seed, and the smiths had shrugged at his request to use it for his meals. It was nearly gone now, so he dumped the remainder onto the cabinet and used the heel of his hand to grind it as fine as he could before sprinkling it over the steaks. One side of each was barely covered. Better than nothing.

He wasn't sure what kind of animal these steaks had been cut from. It seemed unlikely they were from the six-legged pagecta that the dwarves far to the northwest used as beasts of burden. The smiths seldom strayed too far from their forge. Here in the Razor Mountains, there weren't many beasts that Umos could imagine cutting steaks this size from. Maybe they imported them, without having to leave the comfort of the Gemforge.

Regardless, they tasted fine to him, plenty of fat to keep his energy up. He listened as they sizzled on the cast iron cage over the flame, the deciphered message still fresh in his mind.

Riddles and puzzles were not his strong suit. He knew some history, enough to aid in his expeditions, but he had no idea who this mystery "old one" might be. Was it poetry? A song that he had only lyrics for, and might make more sense with instrumental accompaniment? He frowned and flipped the steaks to sear the other side.

And what did the other voices say? The ones that spoke languages he couldn't understand? Did they share the same message, or was there more? Would translating the other messages help decode the deeper meaning? Would the forgesmiths be able to shed any light on it?

His attention split between the steaks and the orb's voices, he didn't hear the rapid buzzing of wings as the smith from earlier entered the kitchen. She watched him for a moment, his contemplative gaze seeming to stare through the meat, and then she fluttered past him, into his field of vision, towards the water barrel.

The sudden sight of her shook him from his thoughts and he nodded to acknowledge her.

"It astonishes me how little your people sleep," he said, looking a bit closer at one of the steaks before deciding to flip it over once more.

"We're small," she replied, "so our energy is small." She took a long gulp from a cup attached to the barrel by a string. This explanation made sense to Umos, and he didn't feel any need to question it. The smith looked his way, eyeing the orb that rested on the counter beside him. "Still need me to translate?"

Umos nodded enthusiastically.

"I think I've finally got the golithi message figured out," he said, taking the orb and moving it to a shelf near the water barrel. The smith hovered a bit closer, still not hearing anything coming from it. "It took a lot of focus, but I managed to mostly deafen myself to the other voices so I could get it down. It said - "

The smith held up a hand, palm facing Umos, telling him to stop.

"I am curious to know what it is saying in smithtongue," she said, "but I would not wish to have the golithi translation interfere with my translation. Can you tell me what the smithtongue voice says?"

Umos was a tad insulted at the dismissal of his morning's work, but he shook it off. He sat down cross-legged on the floor - there were no chairs in the kitchen - and leaned in to focus on the orb once more.

Like stripping the layers of an onion, he peeled the overlapping voices apart, slowly but with more confidence after his experience with the golithi one, until he could hear the smithtongue voice almost exclusively. He listened for what he felt were several loops of the message, frequently catching a syllable or two from the other languages and becoming frustrated with himself for it.

After several minutes, he started to relay the message he was hearing, syllable by syllable, as best he could. It was hard, untrained as he was in the nuance of the language, to get the tone and speed correct, particularly since he was trying to listen and repeat at the same time.

The smith seemed confused at first, but as Umos repeated more words and phrases over again, the message began to make a bit more sense. She had to ask him clarifying questions a couple times about the tone of what he was saying - "the way you're saying it, this word could mean 'a skinny woman' but from the context I'm assuming it should be pronounced at a higher pitch, perhaps?" - but she slowly seemed to be ascertaining a translation that should make sense.

He finally stopped repeating the words and turned to face her, his senses all broadening to a more general focus. The smell of burning meat immediately filled his nostrils, and his eyes widened with shock.

"I forgot the meat!" he gasped, flailing to the side and picking up the now-quite-well-done steaks. He dropped them on the floor in front of his legs and frowned deeply. Well-done was not his preference. Burnt certainly wouldn't be any better. He sighed and looked back at the smith. She was mouthing to herself, finding the appropriate words for the translation.

"The witch has arrived. She is here, she is here," she said slowly, hesitating on some of the words. *"We will be given fear the likes of which we have never known, and will likewise give that same fear. The people, the innocent people, who will be their guardian against the fear? Spirits of the past, spirits of the dead and the dying, and him? Pah! His flag summons her to him, and he will be her doorway."*

Umos felt a shiver run down his spine. He knew the shamans of his tribe, but a *witch*? Witchcraft was strictly forbidden among his people, a type of magic that used the spirits of both the living and the dead. The living should not be expected to give up their spirits, even the merest shred of them.

He realized that he'd had his eyes tightly shut as he had listened to the smith's translation, and opened them to find her staring expectantly at him.

"Well?" she asked. He blinked a few times.

"Well...what?"

"How does that compare with what your golithi voice says?"

He thought back - remembering what the golithi voice had said was difficult after he'd spent so much mental energy trying to replicate the smithtongue voice. After a moment, he exhaled slowly and stared into the orb.

"I think it's the same message," he said. "Different phrasing - translational differences, probably - but the same core. What does it mean?"

The smith shrugged and fluttered back over to the water barrel.

"Could be nothing," she said. She took a sip from the cup. "Could be of utmost importance. I'm not familiar with any witches around these parts. Mention of spirits seems more up your people's alley, does it not?"

He nodded.

"I can consult the elders of my tribe when I return home. I am sure our shamans will want to know about this so-called witch." The smith shrugged again and took another small sip of water.

Umos continued to stare into the murky refractions in the orb, the voices seeming to fade away as he focused on the message and what it could mean. He was fairly certain that the "him" it referred to was probably himself, but what flag did he have? Was this summoning something that he could control, or was it bound to happen?

The golithi translation had referred to him "wearing her beacon" - was it the scaleplate? He glanced down at it. If it was ocrum, it was at least made of the same material. Then again, ocrum wasn't the rarest mineral in Userahin. It seemed unreasonable to assume the orb and armor were related just because they might be the same material - that was akin to the humans' assumption that every goliath was somehow directly related to every other goliath.

He shook his head. He'd found the breastplate and the orb together; that was reason enough to assume they were related. The material was another possible connection. And there were the voices. Granted, the orb whispered, or sometimes chanted, whereas the armor screamed - and then only when he tried to remove it, or a piece of it. The orb never seemed to shut up.

He spent a time seated in the kitchen, staring at the orb, the scent of burnt meat slowly fading from the air as he pointedly ignored his failed cooking. Finally, his stomach growled loudly enough to drag him out of his intense thoughts. He sighed and tossed the burnt meat onto the fire for a few seconds, just long enough to heat it. He took a bite and grimaced. Considering his steak preference was usually medium-rare, the texture and dryness of that bite nearly made him throw the entire thing - and the second one - away.

It wasn't the worst thing he'd ever eaten, though, and he hated to waste the meat, supplies being as low as they were, so he forced it down, washing the taste from his mouth with

a generous helping of water after each bite. He'd make a point to go down the canyon later today, or perhaps tomorrow, to hunt and re-stock for the smiths. They were undoubtedly not accustomed to going through five or more full steaks per day.

A smith fluttered into the room from the forge, wiping her arm across her forehead in a futile attempt to clear the sweat that beaded on her brow. She nodded to Umos and opened her mouth as if to say something, but coughed. She held up a finger to ask him to wait while she got through a several-seconds-long coughing fit, during which she drifted over towards the water barrel. Her coughing ceased, and she took a few deep gulps of the water. She lowered the cup and exhaled in relief.

"That scale," she said, pointing a thumb in the general direction of the forge, "is definitely made out of ocrum."

Umos nodded, but waited for more.

"It seems to be inert - or, I guess that's the word I'm looking for. It let me touch it without sucking the spirit out of me at least. I guess that was a defense mechanism of the armor as a whole, rather than the individual scale." She paused for another, briefer, coughing fit, followed by a few slower sips of water.

"However - however! - it's also, definitely, without a doubt in my mind, dragonscale," she said. Umos could practically feel her excitement. She'd been looking forward to revealing that bit of information. He tried his best to look surprised, maybe a little impressed. That seemed to satisfy her. "We haven't seen anything like this before, Umos. *Ocrum dragonscales!* This could change everything we know about the dragons, maybe even everything we know about the ore itself."

She droned on for a while about the possible implications of ocrum dragons. Umos had tuned her out by this point.

Ocrum dragons? And he was the first to find evidence of them? And that evidence was *cursed*? Ocrum had ties to the spirit realm - strong ties, in many cases - so what would that mean about taking this armor and orb back home, where the shamans and some of their elders communed with spirits? Would they hear and see the voices? Could they only hear or see the ancestral spirits? Would they be able to cleanse the curse from the armor? Would they recognize whatever it was the voices were talking about?

He rubbed his temple with two fingers and sighed. The smith paused.

"Too much?" she asked. Umos glanced up at her.

"Sort of," he replied. "I wish I'd had more training in my people's shamanic practices. Maybe I could understand these things better if I had that foundational knowledge."

"I doubt it," she said. "This is uncharted territory, Umos. None of us really understand it." Umos merely nodded.

The smith took another few sips from the water barrel and then, with a slight bow, flitted back around the corner into the Gemforge's main room.

Umos begrudgingly finished the remaining steak, cursing himself for his earlier lapse of attention. He stood and staggered into the other room, where he could stand up straight once more, and stretched.

The smiths were still at work on the head of the hammer, and he noticed a pair of smiths taking measurements and making marks on the haft that he'd thought was finished the night

before. He shouldn't be surprised; the forgesmiths were known for their attention to detail and perfect artistry. Form and function were equally important to them.

He pulled his cloak off the back of the chair and swirled it around his shoulders, fastening the bone-and-twine clasp at the front.

"I am going to see what manner of creature I can hunt in these canyons," he said to no one in particular. A couple of the smiths absently waved their acknowledgement, but didn't look up from their work.

He tucked the orb into a makeshift sewn pouch on the inside of the back of his cloak, then picked up his bow and quiver, hoisting the strap of the quiver over his shoulder to sling across his chest.

He exited the Gemforge into the basement of the Archive of the Sky, briefly considered climbing the maze of staircases to the roof, then began the long trek down into the canyon.

* * * * *

The sun had long-since set by the time Umos allowed himself a moment of rest in the Archive before going back into the Gemforge. The path down into the canyon hadn't been so bad, but carrying an equine back up the trail had proven much more difficult than he'd anticipated.

His age was beginning to affect him. That, and his lack of maintaining a strict physical regimen while he'd been visiting the Gemforge. Was the armor also draining him, as part of the curse? He assumed it was, but couldn't prove it.

He wiped an arm across his brow to keep the sweat from trickling into his eyes. A few deep breaths, a quick stretch, and he slung his kill back over his shoulders to trudge into the Gemforge.

He didn't know what the animal was called. It wasn't a species they had in the Tribal Lands on the north side of the Dead Wastes. It resembled a donkey, but its neck was disproportionately longer, and its legs disproportionately shorter. Most of the donkeys he'd known on the plains were gray or light brown, but this one was a deep reddish color. It had made it much harder for him to spot among the clay of the canyon, but its head movements had betrayed it, earning it a swift arrow through the neck.

As he ducked under the entryway into the Gemforge, one of the smiths glanced in his direction and made a face.

"We don't normally hunt the ambrone for food," she said. "Far too muscley, most of them."

Umos flopped the carcass on the floor near the entry and shrugged.

"I'll remember that when I go back down tomorrow," he answered. "I'll strip and clean this body in the meantime, so that I can leave your stock of meat."

The smith shrugged in response and returned her gaze to her work.

The smith was right. As Umos skinned the beast - the ambrone, the smith had called it - and dug into the meat of its flesh with his knife, he was met with mostly muscle. He poked and prodded at it for a moment, then cut a small strip from the base of its neck and tossed it into his mouth. Tough, but edible. He wagered he could make some field rations from it, at the very least. Cut it into thin strips, dry bake it over the fire, salt it to preserve its longevity.

He separated the meat in joints as best he could for his first time working with such a thing. There was some fattier meat around its stomach and rear, and he cut that separately to salt for the smiths' storeroom. From a rough estimate, it barely made up for the steaks he had eaten earlier in the day, much less what he'd consumed since arriving almost a week before.

He froze for a moment as he was preparing the meat. The voices from the orb had stopped. How long had it been silent? He'd been so focused on carving the ambrone that he hadn't immediately noticed.

He wiped his hands on a rag and then carefully removed the orb from the pocket in his cloak. It seemed...dimmer. Had it had a light to it before, so subtle that he'd never noticed until it changed?

He stared into the orb for a few seconds, slowly turning it over to inspect its entire circumference. No noticeable changes, no damage that he could see. It just *felt* dimmer somehow.

One of the forgesmiths zipped into the room and Umos jumped at the sudden interruption. The voices immediately started back up, apparently in the middle of their looped messages. The smith drew up short and hesitated at Umos's reaction.

"My apologies, Umos," she said. "I did not mean to surprise you."

She fluttered over to the water barrel.

"No apology necessary my friend," Umos replied. He hadn't realized - until her sudden appearance snapped him out of it - that he had been in something like a trance. He glanced at the window. The sky was just starting to show signs of the morning light. Had he been up all night?

He used the nearby rag to wipe the cold sweat from his face and neck. Now that his focus was returned to his surroundings, he felt the sudden weight of exhaustion tugging his shoulders down into a slouch. He rubbed his forehead with his fingers.

The smith was eyeing him as she took a few sips of water.

"You haven't slept, have you?" she asked. He inhaled deeply and looked up at her with his head still bowed.

"Evidently."

"You should."

"I do not disagree."

"...are you going to?"

Umos's shoulders heaved as he sighed.

"I will try."

He turned his head, and his gaze landed on the meat he'd been preparing earlier in the night (or had it been morning?). The smith followed his gaze.

"I'll finish preparing what I can of it," she said. "You rest."

Umos nodded and lumbered back to his makeshift cot, orb once again tucked under his arm. He sat heavily on the edge of the cot, leaned to the side, and fell asleep without removing his boots.

The voices from the orb slowed and quieted, until even his dreams were silent.

* * * * *

Umos slowly blinked awake. Immediately, he felt a headache pounding inside his skull, and as he twisted onto his back, he felt pinpricks as circulation returned to his arm. He lay on his back for a few minutes, taking deep breaths and blinking the sleep from his eyes.

The voices from the orb faded into his consciousness. He couldn't tell whether they'd been silent before or if he simply hadn't noticed them at first. As his mind finally started processing the sounds of his surroundings, he realized there was something missing. He couldn't hear the near-constant pounding of hammers on steel.

He sat up, his headache worsening at the reorientation. There were no windows in his small inner room, making it impossible to tell the time of day, or how long he had been asleep. He groaned as he stood, his knee making a cracking noise in protest. He stretched and felt a series of pops along his back. He picked up the orb and held it tucked under his arm.

He pulled open the wooden door of the storage room that served as his bedroom, and shielded his eyes from the sun as it shone directly in through the window across the way. Low in the sky, and to the west, so he'd slept through almost the entire day.

He turned and headed down the hall toward the forge proper. He could still feel heat emanating all the way down the hall, so the fires were still lit. Lilted voices drifted toward him, speaking in the sing-song tongue of the forgesmiths. He thought they sounded excited, but sometimes it was hard to tell with the way their language depended so heavily on pitch and inflection.

He ducked under the frame of the entryway and greeted the smiths.

"I can't help but notice the lack of clamor in here," he said with a tired smile. The smiths all acknowledged him and nodded.

"The hammer is done," one of them said, flitting up to face height. His eyes widened and he cocked an eyebrow.

"That quickly?"

The smith returned his smirk.

"How long do you think you slept, giant?"

Umos suppressed a cringe. Most of his kind had intentionally distanced themselves from the legacy of their farthest removed ancestors, and to be called "giant" was an insult. The smiths likely didn't know that, and he was here for more important things.

"I saw the sun preparing to set in the west," he replied, "and it was not quite dawn when I went to bed, so I've slept away the entire day."

The smirk on the smith's face turned to a full smile and she chuckled.

"It was not quite dawn *yesterday* when you went to bed, Umos."

Umos furrowed his brow and glanced toward one of the windows in the forge room. He couldn't tell one day from the next, only the approximate time of day based on the position of the sun.

"So I... I've slept away two entire days?" he asked. His throat was suddenly painfully dry, almost as if he hadn't had a sip of water in well over a day.

The smith nodded. Umos trudged over to a bowl on a counter near a window. The flavorful mush the smith's prepared everyday. It was completely dry now, presumably having been left out for him this morning.

"Give me a moment," he croaked through parched lips.

He headed back down the hallway and into the kitchen area, straight to the water barrel. He ignored the ladle that the smiths used, instead using his hands as a bowl to get as much of the lukewarm liquid as possible. He took several massive gulps of the water before slowing down. It sat heavy in his mostly empty stomach.

He looked in the store room and spotted the dried meat he'd started the night before - no, two nights ago now - tied together with thin string and hanging from a hook in the ceiling. The smith had indeed finished what he'd started.

He pulled two strips of meat from the bundle, cinching the string tighter to keep the rest in place, and started chewing one on his way back to the forge room. It was tougher than the rations he was used to, but he'd been expecting that. What he wasn't expecting was the slightly sweet flavor. It was pleasant.

"Better?" the same smith from before asked him. He took a deep breath and nodded.

"You say the hammer is complete?" he asked through a mouthful of jerky.

"Finished," the smith replied, "but not complete." Her eyes drifted to the orb tucked under Umos's arm.

"Ah, of course," Umos said. He quickly swallowed the last bit of jerky, wishing he had brought a cup of water to wash it down, and gestured for the smith to lead him where he was needed.

She led him around a table that he was sure hadn't been there last he was in here. Near the forge, the rest of the smiths reclined in small hammocks, chatting about whatever it was forgesmiths liked to chat about.

They reached the counter along the far edge of the room. A sheet covered what he assumed was the finished weapon. The smith leading him tugged on the sheet and let it fall to the floor.

It was the head of a hammer, certainly, but it was like no hammer Umos had ever seen. Rectangular, roughly two and half feet long from blunt to blunt. In the center of it, though, was a mechanism unfamiliar to Umos.

The center of the hammer's head had been carved out in a circle, a couple inches bigger than the orb. Curved and polished metal disks rested at the end of spring-like protrusions inside the opening, creating what he assumed was the space the orb would occupy.

Notably, the haft of the hammer was not attached to the head.

"I do not understand," Umos said as he leaned in to inspect the mechanism.

"The disks and springs help protect the orb from any kinetic force that might travel through the head of the hammer if you strike something with it." Umos stared blankly back at her. "Ever hit something hard enough that it hurt your arm? This will make it so that doesn't happen to the orb."

"What of the haft?"

"The haft is a screwdriver - if you twist it into the head it pushes this plate farther in to lock the orb in place." She gestured to the plate at the bottom of the head. Umos noted that it seemed slightly out-of-line with the rest of the disks, if they were meant to form a circle.

"And this will help channel the orb's power as well?" he asked. The smith pointed at a row of intricate runes that had been engraved into the head, then to a matching set engraved into the haft.

"These runes attune to spiritual magic," she said. "They will require your own power to manipulate the spiritual energy appropriately, but they will help channel your power through the orb, as well the other way around."

Umos nodded and flipped the head of the hammer so it was resting with the bottom-side up. He pushed the orb into the circular gap between the plates. It was a tight fit, but the springs allowed him to push the plates in with some effort.

Once the orb was resting on the curved plates, he picked up the haft and, after inspecting the end of it, set it into the threaded hole in the bottom of the head and started to twist. It took a few turns, but eventually he saw the bottom plate start to move inward toward the orb. He twisted a few more times - cautiously - until it pressed securely against the orb, forming a circle with the other disks.

He glanced at the smith, who nodded her approval, before he dared to lift the weapon from the table.

It was slightly lighter than he expected, but he supposed the hollowing out of the hammer's head would reduce the overall weight. There wasn't room inside the forge to give it any test swings, but he tossed it from hand to hand a few times, and held it on his finger to measure its center of mass - farther down the haft than he was used to, again most likely because of the hollowed out head.

"This is... odd, but clever," he said. "I hadn't thought about accidentally shattering the thing. I suppose that's why you are the experts on such things."

The smith grinned at the compliment.

"I know there was some, ah, *trouble* with it before, but would you mind giving us a few more scales to study?" she asked. He looked over at her in shock.

"'Trouble'? One of your sisters died trying to take a scale from the armor," he said. He was vaguely aware that the rest of the smiths had quieted down and were listening to their exchange.

"We prefer the term 'cousins' Umos," she replied.

She sighed and flitted over to the scale they'd gotten previously, resting on one side of a balancing scale. Three coins rested on the other side, almost balancing the weight. She picked up the scale - it was almost half as long as she was tall - and the balance fell to the coin side.

"This is something no one living has ever seen," she said. "It's potentially one of the most important discoveries of our age. We *need* to study it. Maybe you can remove some of the scales yourself? Surely it wouldn't try to defend against its, er, host body."

Umos hesitated. She was probably right. The armor didn't want him to take it off, but it seemed unlikely that it would drain his life as it had that unfortunate smith. Besides, even though they had told him that the opportunity to work with such rare materials was payment enough, he had nothing else to reward their work. What money he had was useless to them as far as he knew.

"I will try. Hand me those tongs."

The smith excitedly set the scale back down on the table and carried the pair of tongs to him. They were small. Almost too small for him to manipulate with his goliath hands. He settled on using his pinky and his thumbnail to clamp the tongs down. He paused, took a deep breath, and pulled.

The scale resisted initially, but came loose without too much prying. And the smith had been right, Umos didn't feel any ill effects. He thought he could hear a distant cry of pain, but he ignored it.

He placed the scale on the table.

"How many do you need for your research?"

The smith was flitting between the new scale and the old scale, comparing the color, size, striations, and other details and differences.

"As many as you can spare," she replied, focusing more on the scales than on the conversation.

Umos frowned. That wasn't a satisfying answer. He thought about it for a moment, then tore loose another three scales, one after the other.

"I don't want to risk the integrity of the armor," he said. "I don't feel comfortable taking out more than five for now."

The other smiths by now had zipped over to the table to take their own measurements and lay claim to individual scales for research.

"Yes, of course," the smith said. Was she their elder? Was that why she was leading this conversation? "Five will probably be enough for our research."

Umos waited a few minutes for more, or for instruction, but the smiths were too preoccupied with examining the scales. They chatted excitedly - he was sure this time that they were excited - in smithtongue as he excused himself and carried the hammer out into the Archive, then into the open area between the entrance and the canyon's edge.

He spun the hammer in his hands a few times, then rested it on his finger again to verify the center of balance. He adjusted his grip and spun it a few more times. Satisfied, he started in on a few training exercises he'd learned in his youth.

The exercises took some adjusting because of the odd weight and balance, but he spent about an hour making sure he was at least somewhat accustomed to it. Once the sun had truly dipped below the horizon, he wiped sweat from his face and headed back into the forge.

The smiths were still busy with the scales. He didn't understand what all they were doing, but a pair of the smiths had submerged one scale in water in a glass container, and they were watching it from mere inches away. Another pair were taking turns carefully tapping a scale with their hammers, stopping every few taps to talk and write something down. One had tied a scale to a string and was dangling it from a hook in the ceiling, watching it sway back and forth.

Research was not Umos's field of expertise. He was a traveler, a wilderness expert, a hunter.

He unscrewed the haft of the hammer, took the orb out of the head, and placed it in the pouch inside his cloak. He left the pieces of the hammer near the exit to the Archive as he went to his storage room in the back and quickly packed up what he needed.

His two days of sleep weighed on him. He'd missed an entire day that he could have spent doing *something*. He planned to set out on the path back home tonight, waste no more time. Besides, he certainly wasn't tired now.

He slung his pack over his shoulder, untied and retied the laces on his boots, and returned to the forge room. The smiths mostly ignored him as he set the orb back in head of the hammer and screwed the haft back in place.

The smith that had shown him the hammer slowly extricated herself from the experiments and hovered across the room to where he stood.

"It's late Umos," she said, gesturing toward the window. "Are you sure you want to leave now?"

"I slept for two days," he replied. "I doubt I could sleep tonight even if I tried. Besides, I need to get back to the shamans and elders of my tribe as soon as possible. They'll want to know about this orb and this armor, and that your people have verified that the scales are from an ocrum dragon. Given ocrum's spiritual properties, that could be world-altering information."

The smith nodded. She didn't seem especially eager to put up a fight. There was research to be done, after all. She bowed in the air and Umos returned the gesture.

"Thank you for this opportunity, Umos," she said. "Truly. We will not forget your name or your people." She floated away, back to the bustling forge area.

Umos glanced around the forge, bowed to no one in particular, adjusted the weight of his pack from one shoulder to the other, and set out through the Archive's basement.

* * * * *

Even taking the most direct route, it was twenty-eight days of travel to return to Dragon's Mouth. Umos briefly considered detouring to Glirr-nur-Vuarlir, the only major population center in the Dead Wastes, but that would have nearly doubled his travel time. Besides, he'd heard they didn't necessarily take kindly to strangers or outsiders.

He managed to catch a merchant caravan a couple days north of the Dead Wastes, and they agreed to let him ride along until they turned eastward. He thanked them for their hospitality and continued on to the north.

He spotted the gates of Dragon's Mouth in the mid-afternoon. It was the only permanent settlement in the Goliath Tribal Lands, at least as far as he knew. His people were mostly a nomadic bunch, settling in for shelter during the cold season and wandering the plains during the warmer months.

Dragon's Mouth needed to be permanent, stagnant, because it was the effective seat of power for the Goliath Tribes. Some human down near the coast had started talking about "universal peace" and some all-important treaty. Called himself a "king," whatever that meant.

What it meant for the Goliath Tribes was that, in order to have a voice in this supposed unified kingdom, they'd needed to establish some kind of official government that the humans would recognize. Rather than dealing with each tribal elder individually, the humans wanted a single representative - or a single small group at least - to speak for all the Tribes.

Nonsense, but they had acquiesced. It was difficult for humans to understand things that didn't fit their rigid definitions and categorizations. Thus, Dragon's Mouth was established.

Initially, it was just a small village with food stores and a handful of houses, just enough for the Shamanic Council to reside in during periods of negotiation. They'd founded it on the edge of the largest lake in the plains; the lake was also called Dragon's Mouth, because it was shaped vaguely like the snout of a dragon. After a few years, though, more and more people had decided to settle - usually the elderly or physically impaired, those who had the most struggles with the nomadic life.

And, since the growing settlement represented the new central seat of government for the Tribes, eventually more ambitious younger members of the Tribes had settled around the outskirts of the village, hoping to apprentice under the members of the Council, perhaps earn the favor of the humans and, if it worked out the way they expected, power and influence.

Umos thought it was more annoying than anything else. He'd been barely an adult when Dragon's Mouth was founded, and the forced changes to his people's cultural structure - which had worked out fine for them all these past generations - left him with a simmering disdain for the humans.

Be that as it may, he also knew Dragon's Mouth was the best place to find the elders and shamans who would want to examine these items, and so, the gates rising over the horizon in the distance were a welcome sight.

He strode up to the gates and shouted a greeting up to the guard towers on either side.

"State your name and business," came a gruff reply.

"Umos of Kithkoliath Tribe," he said. "I have news for the Shamanic Council."

He heard the call of "open the gates" and a moment later, the wooden gates swung outward. He took a couple steps back and waited until the gates were open. He would recommend a smaller entrance to the Council as well. Opening the main gates for a single visitor seemed inefficient. He strode in, and heard the gates start to swing shut behind him.

"Welcome back, expeditioner," one of the guards said, jumping down from the guard tower and clapping him on the back.

"We'll catch up in a bit, Kriffier," Umos replied with a tired smile. "For now, what I have for the Council is of utmost importance."

Kriffier glanced at the greathammer he carried, with its odd hollow head carrying the ocrum orb.

"Fair enough, old friend," he said. "My shift doesn't end until after sundown anyway. I'll meet you at the bar, eh?" Umos nodded and Kriffier climbed back up to his post.

Umos trudged down the central path (would you call it a road? the humans probably would) toward the largest structure in the village: a two-story wooden hut, right at the edge of the lake, about thirty feet long and forty wide, with seating sufficient for a representative from each tribe to have a place at the Council table. Visitors, plaintiffs, and anyone else who brought business before the Council was required to stand. Sometimes, when the weather was particularly pleasant, they might hold a meeting out on the balcony that jutted over the shallow water.

A guard posted at the entrance to the building nodded acknowledgement to Umos, then pulled the door open for him. He strode inside, through the small entry foyer and into the Council chamber proper.

Most of the Council had recessed for dinner. There were only three members seated at the table, quietly arguing with each other about the terms of the humans' treaty. Nearly ten years since it had been proposed, and only two other regions - human regions, obviously - had agreed to the king's terms.

As soon as Umos entered, the shamans froze in their seats. Two of them began to shake and the third fell from her chair with her eyes rolled back in her head.

Umos shouted for the guard and ran to help the fallen shaman. Before he reached her, one of the other two leapt to his feet and jabbed a finger at him.

"What have you brought upon us, Umos?" he shrieked. He was still shaking, and seemed like he was trying - and failing - to focus his eyes on Umos. Umos hesitated, already kneeling next to the fallen shaman.

"What do you mean, Elder?" he asked. He propped the shaman's head up on his thigh and turned her to the side. She started to vomit onto the floor. The guard had come running when he called, but stood near the entryway, unsure what to do.

"Leave!" the elder shrieked. "Go! You are making her worse! You are hurting her!"

Umos looked up in shock. The expression on the elder's face was a mixture of fear and anger. Fear? That wasn't something he'd ever seen in an elder.

"How - " he started. The elder interrupted him, using magic to amplify his voice.

"GO!" he shouted. The word echoed around the walls, pounding against Umos's chest with almost physical force. He gently lowered the shaman's head to the floor, stood, and hurried out of the building, shooting a glance at the guard and nodding his head back toward the shaman. The guard nodded back and rushed to where she lay on the ground.

A crowd had already started to form outside the Council building. They reeled back as Umos burst through the door.

"What's happening?" "Is someone hurt?" "What's that hammer?"

Questions bounced from the crowd faster than Umos could answer any of them. He held his hands out to signal the gathering crowd that they should back up.

"I don't know," he said. "They may need some space, please give us some space." The crowd obliged.

He took a few steps away from the entrance and then turned to face the door. What had happened? He hadn't gotten so far as speaking before whatever it was. He glanced down at his scaleplate, then to the side at the orb inside the head of the hammer. Could the elders somehow feel the curse? Hear the voices? Nobody else had been able to so far.

A voice rose above the general racket, magically amplified, just as the elder's had been inside the Council building.

"Disperse!" the voice commanded. The crowd parted, but very few of them were willing to go back to their homes. Umos turned to see two of the other shaman elders cautiously making their way through the gap in the crowd. They seemed to be in pain, and the closer they got to Umos, the more they shivered as the pain wracked their bodies.

"Please, elders, what is going on?" Umos asked, his voice strained with emotion.

The elders paused just forward of the almost-circle the crowd had made around the entry to the building. They seemed to be looking *near* Umos, but - pointedly - not directly at him.

"You... can't see it? Can't feel it?" one of the elders asked. It was clearly painful for him to speak. Umos glanced over his shoulder and saw nothing.

"No, elder, I don't understand!"

The other elder, the one who hadn't spoken, stumbled backward and landed on his rear in the dirt. He covered his ears and clenched his eyes tightly shut, mouth open in a silent scream.

"You must leave, Umos," the first one said. He covered his eyes with his arm, as if shielding them from some blinding light. "You... You must go to the Archive of Spirits. You will know there what must be done."

Umos hesitated.

"Is this part of the curse of this armor?" he asked.

The elder fell to his knees, but nodded.

"Then I will go," Umos said. He hefted the hammer up to rest on his shoulder and turned to march westward, gesturing to the crowd to part for him.

Many of the townspeople glanced from him to the elders, clearly afraid. They'd known him for years, and now, because of something he didn't understand and couldn't control, they acted like he was some strange monster to fear.

It filled him with equal parts sorrow and rage. He forced down the rage, allowing only a growl to escape his lips.

"Move," he commanded. The crowd gave him a wide berth this time. He glanced back at the elders, still collapsed on the ground, still shaking. He swallowed a lump in his throat and took off at a jog. The faster he could put distance between this cursed armor and the people it was hurting, the better.

He jogged through the western gate of Dragon's Mouth and started the long trek around the edge of the lake and then north, to the Archive. The gate shut behind him, and he felt a sense of finality from the way it latched into place.

He slowed his pace once the sun was fully set. He slung his pack around to the front and took a quick inventory of what he had left. Rations were scarce. He'd need to refill his waterskins from the lake before he got too far from it. That, or he could follow one of the Dragon's Mouth's tributaries upstream. It would take longer to reach the Archive, but it did pass within a few miles of the tower, and it might be overall safer.

He glanced back in the direction of the village, though he was far enough out that it was only visible as pinpricks of light on the horizon.

Faster was better, in this case.

He marched through the night, despite fatigue threatening to force him to sleep. To stay awake, he chewed on the root of a local plant, the gatzania herb. The herb itself was a pleasant spice when cooked, but toxic raw. The root, however, granted energy, wakefulness, and focus to his people, but caused violent hallucinations in humans.

Part of his mind took a moment to ponder if the elders were suffering hallucinations. The shaking, the fear, the collapsing - they were similar symptoms to what one of the first human delegations had suffered upon partaking in the root of the gatzania herb. That was almost a political mess. The elders had handled it well.

He shook his head and looked east, over the lake. The sun was about to rise. He'd been walking all night. He paused, stretched, splashed cool lake water onto his face, then continued on the path to the north.

* * * * *

Over the next twenty days or so, Umos slept sparingly, generally only three or four hours a night. The rest of the time, he walked. He was desperate to get to the Archive so that he could figure out what was going on and then return to Dragon's Mouth.

He avoided any wandering Tribes that crossed his vision. He didn't want to risk harming their shamans if they were traveling with any.

It seemed like, as he approached the Archive, the voices from the orb grew steadily louder. It could have been his imagination, but he would swear they were louder than he remembered.

Finally, just after sundown, he came upon the iron fence that surrounded the graveyard at the base of the tower. He couldn't see the tower in the darkness - it was a new moon - but he followed the fence by the light of his lantern until he came to the entrance gate.

The Archive wasn't guarded like Dragon's Mouth was, despite the propensity of grave robbers to make the rounds here. The iron gate was rusting (Umos made a note to speak to the groundskeepers when he returned to Dragon's Mouth) but still functioned. He pushed it open, eliciting a grating *squeak* of the hinges that sent a shiver down his spine.

He walked slowly down the path toward the center of the cemetery - toward the tower. He mostly ignored the gravestones scattered around him, except when the flickering of his lantern cast an odd shadow that seemed almost familiar. Those strange shadows caught his eye for a moment before resolving back into the shape of gravestones and small shrubs.

It only took a few minutes to reach the entryway of the tower, and he realized he *could* feel something. A presence, looming over him. He slowly turned in a circle, but saw only the cemetery around him.

He sighed, raised the lantern a little higher, and walked into the Archive.

As soon as he stepped through the threshold, the voices from the orb quieted, and again he felt as though it was dimmer than it had been, like the light from his lantern was getting sucked into it rather than reflected off the polished surface.

Other voices started, mostly speaking in golithi, and he recognized the voices of many of the ancestors his people frequently consulted. They sounded... angry? Afraid?

They were telling him to turn back. To leave them be.

"The elders commanded me to come here," he called out. Wisps of spiritual energy wafted around the corners of the room. "They were afraid of something, something I carry or own, I'm not sure. I came here for clarity."

The voices of the ancestors interrupted each other, overlapping, and becoming unclear. Umos took a few more steps inside. A single spirit materialized before him, hovering about four feet off the ground.

"Turn back, Umos of Kithkolliath Tribe," the spirit commanded. Its voice was like the voice of a hundred spirits, all coalesced into a single sound.

"I need answers, great spirit," Umos replied. The spirit sneered. That was something he'd never seen. The ancestors' voices split again, and it sounded like they might be arguing with each other, though Umos couldn't pick out any single voice, much less any particular phrase. The spirit vaporized and a different one took its place.

"Answers lie below," the new spirit said. It vanished to mist before Umos could respond.

He felt the presence looming over him stronger than before. Still, a quick look around revealed nothing. He headed to the stairs that led down. He held the lantern out a ways into the gap in the floor. These stairs were carved from the same stone that the rest of the tower was made of. They looked like they hadn't been used in decades, maybe centuries.

He cautiously descended. The voices from the orb still had not spoken since he'd entered.

At the bottom of the stairs, the tower opened up into a room that spanned the entire diameter of the base. It was strangely lit by the mist that made up the ancestral spirits. Aside from a few weight-bearing pillars scattered around, there were no walls down here.

Umos hesitated, then extinguished his lantern. The spirits illuminated the room much better than his lantern had. He cautiously moved forward, slowly spinning to take in the architecture around him. As far as he knew, no one had been down to this level in generations. He tried to make a mental note of as much as he could. Maybe he could have an artist sketch the room from his description if he was detailed enough.

At the opposite side of the room from the stairs, he came across a stone altar. The surface reflected the light from the spirits oddly. He leaned in closer to inspect it, and leapt back in surprise.

It was made entirely of ocrum.

The spirits weren't reflecting off of it, they were *trapped inside of it*.

He glanced back at the stairs and froze. Blocking his way back to the stairs was a full-sized dragon. How had he missed an entire dragon landing and following him in?

Wait, how had a dragon come down those stairs? They were wide enough for him to fit, but two goliaths abreast would have been wider than the staircase.

The dragon was eyeing him as it lumbered forward, and he realized how it had followed him. Its shoulder passed right through one of the supporting pillars without damaging it (thankfully). He looked down at the scale cuirass he'd been unable to remove for months now.

"Welcome, Umos of Kithkolliath Tribe," the dragon hissed. It had a tone of - what was that? Pleasure? Self-assurance? Seduction? "I had wondered if I might truly meet you one day. Lucky me."

Umos clipped his lantern to the side of his pack and hefted the hammer into a battle grip.

"I don't know what you want," he said, "but you brought harm to my people, and I cannot stand for that."

The dragon made an odd coughing sound. Laughter? Umos had never heard a dragon laugh, but he'd only ever met Sjeilo-larii - the Goliath Tribes' guardian dragon - one time, and that had not been an occasion for laughter.

"Umos, you mistake me," the dragon whispered. "I mean no harm, no harm to anyone. I merely want to *live* again."

The dragon blew some kind of smoke from its nostrils to emphasize the "live" part of its sentence. It was close enough now that Umos could see, even though it was comprised of spiritual energy, it absorbed the light from other spirits nearby. Much like ocrum.

The ancestral spirits spoke as one.

"You must not return to the living," they said. "You are a blasphemer and a danger to all living beings."

"Quiet!" the dragon hissed. It tilted its head up and opened its mouth as if it was going to breathe fire, but Umos couldn't see anything come out.

"How can you return to life?" Umos asked. The spirits howled wordlessly. "True necromancy is strictly forbidden in our lands. It is witchcraft. It cannot be done. I cannot help you with this."

The dragon snorted and took a few more steps forward. It was within ten feet of Umos now.

"Necromancy is for the dead," the dragon said. "I am merely... not alive. There would be no violation of the terms of your people. No witchcraft. Merely the completion of a ritual to return me to my true form."

Umos involuntarily stepped backward, away from the dragon, as it inched closer.

"I see no difference between the dead and the not alive. This is forbidden. A creature's truest form is the form it takes, nothing else. You are a spirit - that is your form."

The dragon shook its head, a confusing motion that caused its snout to pass through one of the supporting pillars.

"I was cursed to this form," it replied. "Much as you are cursed by wearing my scales. Would you argue that *that* is your true form?"

Umos looked down at the cuirass and felt his resolve waver.

"What is this ritual?" he asked quietly. The ancestral spirits howled in anger once more.

"The orb you hold in your hammer - it speaks to you, yes?" the dragon asked. Umos nodded. "That is no ordinary ocrum orb. It is the only existing ocrum dragon egg. Over the course of its life, including in your hands, it has absorbed the souls of many mortals." It licked its lips. "The forgesmith was particularly... enriching. I must thank you for that one."

The pieces suddenly clicked in Umos's mind and he recoiled in horror.

"The voices are your victims?" he whispered. The dragon... grinned?

"Our victims, Umos. And once we have collected enough spiritual energy, I can be reborn from the egg." The dragon spread its wings as if to indicate their surroundings. "What better place to harvest than this sacred place?"

The voices of the goliath ancestors shrieked and howled as the spiritual mist swirled around. The spirits inside the ocrum altar seemed to bounce from side to side within their confines. A voice reached Umos, quiet, but distinct from the ancestors.

"You cannot do this," it said. It was the golithi voice he'd singled out from the orb back at the Gemforge. "You have brought her back, you have brought her here, but you cannot allow this to come to pass."

Umos glanced at the orb, but any light it had reflected before was gone. He turned to look at the altar. The spirits inside the altar reached out, and he could suddenly hear their voices - the same ones that he'd listened to for months now. Somehow they'd been transferred from the orb into the altar.

"Is this part of your profane ritual?" he asked, turning back to the dragon.

"*Profane*? 'Profane' is relative, Umos. To me, to my ancestors, this place is holy. Sacred. Why should my life be denied me because your ancestors arbitrarily decided something should be profane?"

"The dead should stay dead."

"And the living? Should they stay alive? Does the momentum of life exist in only one dimension? Who are you, so great and all-knowing, to determine the value of a life, or the value of a death?"

Umos hesitated, and the dragon didn't give him a chance to consider a reply.

"Was it just for the ancestors of your so-called 'guardian dragons' to wage war on me and mine? Was it right for them to completely wipe out every species of ore dragon from Userahin? Do you deny me resurrection, while defending genocide? How sacrimonious of you. Your ancestors would be proud indeed."

The dragon had stopped advancing toward Umos. It was almost within an arm's reach. If he'd wanted to, he could probably swing his greathammer down onto its snout.

But did he want to?

"What happens if you return?" he asked. He was met with the dragon's approximation of a smirk.

"I will, of course, seek revenge for my people's deaths," it replied, smug. "Your guardian dragons will fall. I have had plenty of time to plan for such an occurrence. But your people will be free to do as they please. I give you my word, no further harm will come to your Tribes, once I have collected enough spiritual energy to enact the ritual."

"How much spiritual energy would be required?"

The dragon glanced past Umos at the altar.

"The altar is barely a quarter full. Much more will be needed. The spirits residing in this tower could, perhaps, meet the requirements. They are powerful."

"The spirits of my ancestors? What will happen to the spirits that are needed for this ritual? And what happens if the spirits of the Archive are not sufficient?"

The ancestral voices were crying, angry, lamenting that their great-great-grandson would even consider an offer from this beast.

"They will, unfortunately, cease to be. The spirits are consumed as part of the ritual. They would become a part of me, of my reborn body and spirit.

"As for what happens if they are not sufficient... We will have to seek others. *You* will have to seek others. I cannot physically affect the mortal realm, but if you kill - "

"Out of the question," Umos interjected. A second voice had been speaking, much quieter than the dragon, and Umos had been half-listening to that voice while the dragon explained itself.

The second voice had a solution, but it required much sacrifice.

The dragon huffed in indignation at being interrupted.

"What is stopping me from walking out of here and ignoring you?" Umos asked.

"You can't ignore me forever," the dragon hissed. "Either I'll kill you through my cursed scales or I'll drive you mad enough to eventually do my bidding, even if you aren't fully aware of it. Your mind resides partially in the spiritual realm - I can affect that."

Umos sighed and nodded.

"You're right," he said. The dragon smirked again.

"Excell - "

"Not you." Umos turned his back to the dragon and faced the altar. "*You*."

He raised the hammer in both hands, channeled all of his spiritual energy into the orb, and brought it smashing down on the altar. Neither the hammer nor the altar seemed affected by the hit, but Umos's body collapsed to the floor.

The dragon let loose an angry roar.

"FOOL!" it howled. "What have you done?"

After a few moments of silence, all of the spiritual mist that was trapped inside the altar began to swirl around. It flowed back out of the altar and into the orb, and the dragon snarled.

Umos forced his spirit to materialize, hovering just inches above his body. He could feel his ancestors propping him up, lending him their strength. He reached for the hammer,

half-expecting his hand to pass through it. His fingers wrapped around the haft and, surprisingly, he was able to lift it.

“We will both be trapped here, dragon,” Umos declared, “our souls in eternal conflict until the day one of us absorbs the other.”

“You fool,” the dragon snarled. “You have no true understanding of the meaning of *eternal*.”

“Then I shall learn.”

Umos Ghosthammer raised his legend’s namesake and charged forward as the dragon raised a ghostly claw in response.