

EYE OF ZUL

A detailed illustration of a dragon's head and upper body. The dragon has dark, scaly skin with a lighter, almost white, underbelly. Its eyes are a striking green. The dragon's mouth is wide open, breathing a large plume of bright orange and yellow flames. In its right front paw, it holds a sword that is also engulfed in flames. The background is dark and smoky, with some faint, glowing purple and blue light effects.

KEN BYARS

Eye of Zul – Book 1
The Sword of Zul
By Ken Byars

This book is dedicated in memory to Marion Byars, my mum. She never gave up on me and continued telling me to reach for my dreams. My only regret is she never lived long enough to see this dream become a reality.

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Chapter 1

The GuildMaster stood at the lectern impatiently waiting for this year's group of apprentices to settle down carefully watching one particular candidate. As the noise grew it soon became obvious they were too excited. Coughing loudly he glared with a cold stare when a number of them kept up their discussion.

Raising his voice to get their attention he began. "A story, just what is a story? Is it a statement of fact or fiction? Is it something personalized by the teller, or even the listener?"

"A story is history to the teller. It is his-story, not yours, not mine. If we tell our story then we are bragging about things we've done, and maybe just a few things we wished we hadn't. A story is the reflection of someone's life, their adventures, their passion and their failures. Your job is to prepare that story in such a way that you not only entertain the listener but you hook them, making them want to follow it. They need to feel the pain, understand the anguish, and sense the fear, not only of the unknown but the known as well.

"If you desire to advance beyond the level of troubadour, then this assignment will be required. Is it something that is easy to do? For some of you, yes. Unfortunately most will fail. Only you can decide if it is something you can Master?"

"For the remainder of this week your assignment is to prepare such a story. One that is rich with adventure, character, and appeal. You must present it in a way it has never been told before, if you want to capture and mesmerize your audience."

Groans could be heard coming from his captive audience as the apprentices complained about the task at hand.

"It is impossible to do that in month" groaned one student. "There is not enough time in the day to complete that."

"Looks you will need to do your work this time" said Ragush glaring at the class bully. "It's about time." Before a smart retort could be fired off their instructor continued.

"You have one month starting right now. Your story must be worthy of your position and reflect your own heart for our Guild. The best stories will be chosen by a panel of three Master's. The best entry will be presented at this year's gathering.

"Class dismissed. Remember, this is an individual project. Your future as a Bard will depend on the outcome of your story." Turning on his heel he noted, with some satisfaction, that his cape billowed out behind. He strode quickly across the courtyard and entered the Guild house leaving behind unasked questions and the stunned looks of the bewildered apprentices trying to follow his progress across the floor. Ragush, his questions demanding answers, followed the Master to the doorway. None of the others dared to approach that particular door let alone follow the Master into the inner sanctum of the Guild.

"Ragush don't go in there, you've heard the rumours" cried out a young maid.

Ragush was a handsome lad of fourteen, rugged from working side by side with his father at their forge. His muscles hard from constant use, his hands calloused from the fires he tended. He was of average height with dark brown hair, pulled back and held in place with a leather thong. His face covered in a light down of peach fuzz had never felt a razor. Hidden behind his loose fitting clothing was a body of hard muscles that one girl, in particular, just couldn't get enough of. His temper was even but like most young men could be provoked to the point of explosion with the right words and prodding. His father had warned him time and time again to keep it under control or face a long hard

road of bruises, cuts and possibly even death.

One of the lads poked her in the ribs, "You just don't want to lose your bed warmer" as she turned red with embarrassment. "Go ahead Ragush, show us what you are made of. Show us if the rumours are true or not!" taunted a classmate as he shoved Ragush toward the closed door. "What's wrong, are you a winklezort? Are you afraid that the rumours are true?"

"Winklezort?" he replied

"Yeah, a winklezort. Something that only comes out at night, hiding in the darkness, afraid of its own shadow" the classmate grinned sarcastically.

"Are you afraid that the rumours we hear are more than rumours? Afraid that you might piss yourself in fear? I say you're afraid to open that door? Chicken, chicken" he said strutting like a prized rooster.

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The Master watched through an upper window as the scene below unfolded. A slight noise from down the hallway caused him to pause before carefully asking. "Is that you, Lord?"

A grunt of affirmation was barely heard as they continued watching; the taunting, jeering, the name calling, the honour smearing, all unfolding before their eyes. "Is he the one you were telling me about?" asked the Lord.

"Yes M'Lord" replied the Master.

"Does he have what it takes or will he give in to his anger, like so many before him, choosing that path over curiosity? We have such poor apprentices that it may be time to start spreading our seed farther and farther away." Sighing, he continued, "Maybe it is time for this old man to step aside and let younger blood carry on."

"Oh no Lord, don't even think that. You still have many years of service to the Guild left. What you have done for us will be sung about for decades to come. You pulled us all together, gave us hope, brought order where only disharmony existed."

"If this is to be the one, I want him brought to me once he has reached the inner doors. I want to examine him for myself." Turning he quietly followed an erratic pattern moving here and there, stepping over unseen things as he disappeared down the corridor.

Turning his attention back to the in the courtyard below the Master once again watched his students intently. A crowd, of more than students, had began to gather, the noise growing louder and louder. They watched in anticipation at the obvious inner struggle Ragush had to deal with. They did not know what the outcome would be, but they both knew he would be marked by whatever his decision was; either as a coward, a fool, or a brave young man.

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Carefully weighing the odds, Ragush approached the door and intently studied the raised panels, noticing the intricate patterns carved on their surface. The patterns seemed to be random yet somehow familiar. Their identity danced along the edge of his consciousness, eluding his grasp. Stepping back he noticed a small, well worn symbol forming the outline of a lyre. As he studied the door, the taunting, then the cries of concern, then the crowd, simply ceased to exist, until he stood all alone before the door. Slowly, he traced the pattern in his mind, not wanting to defile it with his touch. Each time he repeated the pattern it got brighter and brighter until it had his complete attention.

Ragush slowly touched the pattern on the door. It swung open and he stepped through. It closed,

with a large clang of a lock falling into place. As the cries of anguish roared through the market were cut off with the closing of the door, Ragush pictured the bully strutting like a peacock as he jeered "I told him not to go, now he gets to find out first hand if those rumours were true. Hey sweetie I'll keep your bed warm tonight."

During his stay here, Gerald, had made it his personal goal to get under his skin, to provoke him into a fight, but had failed. When the direct attack had failed he had shifted to assaulting his honor and picking on their classmates. At times Ragush had stepped in to maintain an uneasy truce, but there were still those who buckled under that taunts and pressure. Gerald was big for his age of sixteen, overweight, and spoiled. He was used to having things handed to him, or forcing others to do the work. That was until he came to this school. His parents one step short of forcing him into a life of a soldier had enrolled him here, hoping the Brad's guild would teach him something about life.

Ragush had become oblivious to the noise outside, and the fear that permeated the air. He stood at the edge of nowhere, a place that he could not define let alone explain. As he stared at the ornate symbols carved in the floor it felt like an unseen hand was inscribing story after story onto his heart. Stories that overwhelmed and consumed his deepest thoughts possessed him. Slowly he moved forward, from one empty square to the next. Moving in a pattern that his feet knew but his mind didn't register. One that if asked he couldn't recite.

His feet, moving on their own, propelled him across the hall. He moved like a drunkard, one step forward two to the right, one backward, four to the left, three forward while his attention stayed riveted to the walls as they came alive. Words carved in them began playing themselves out creating lifelike pictures of moving characters that drew Ragush in, inserting him into the actual story. It kept pulling at his attention, threatening to engulf him, to overwhelm him. It was the story that he was living as the main character.

It was the story of a father and son discussing the young lads future, something he was very familiar with. The scene was a Master Craftsman's' shop. An old man hunched over a workbench, tools lined up, each in their place and within easy reach. Along the upper shelf is a row of containers, each containing a special blend of oils and metal fragments that would bring out the very soul of the metal he worked. Next to the old man sat a young apprentice. His bench is littered with tools, half finished pieces that are roughly crafted, the intricate work of the gentle Master definitely missing.

As the Master works he lovingly caressed the wood, pausing only to carefully listen to the wood's heart as it slowly begins to take shape. His hands work tirelessly as intricate designs are cut into the wood with fine detail and care. All of this spoke volumes to Ragush, reminding him of unfinished stories, about adventure, and the turmoil between father and son over his desire to become a Bard, forgoing his family's heritage as Master Swordsmiths. Try as his father did, he could not persuade him to change his mind. Accepting the desire that burned deep in his son's heart, rather than his own wishes, he gave him his blessing. Ragush could still hear the defeat in his words when his father reminded him that he would always be welcome beside him at this forge.

Ragush's attention was drawn back to reality; he found himself standing before a door. Etched on it was the symbol of the lyre as well as a warning in an ancient language that strangely he understood.

"Choose wisely young apprentice!
Once your choice has been made,
It cannot be undone!"

Cimion himself, awaits, and will bear witness,
To etch your choice upon his heart forever!”

Ragush paused, and pushed the door open, with no thought about what lay on the other side. He was answering a call that had burned deep within his heart for as long as he could remember. The call to become a Bard, to sing the songs of love, adventure, and pain. To see the world in a different light than most, and to craft it into something all could understand. Maybe, just maybe, he was also being called to greatness, like the Lord’s of the Guild from ages past.

Ragush stood inside the closed door, not sure how he got there, or how he would ever return. A cough broke through his thoughts. As he realized he was not alone, he recognized the man that stood before him, but not the two that flanked him.

“Master, forgive me” he said falling to his knees. “If I could figure out how to leave this place I would! I know apprentices are not allowed in the Guild hall.”

Trembling with fear, he waited the harsh judgment that all the apprentices knew would befall them. Their dorms had been rampant with the rumours of apprentices that disappeared never to return, never heard from or about again.

“Bring him,” barked the Master, “the Guild Lord wishes to interview him before passing judgment.”

Hiding their smiles they hoisted Ragush to his feet and dragged him down the hall. Their glaring looks just daring him to further insult these hallowed halls with his voice, his mere presence was a sufficient insult.

They passed a number of entrance ways, leading to only the gods knew where. Half dragging, half pushing they moved up stairs, down stairs, through dungeons, as he was given the grand tour, or so it seemed. His mind in turmoil, nothing registered; he was hopelessly lost. Forever condemned to a Keep he knew absolutely nothing about. A place of rituals, and traditions that people died to keep secret, a place that had literally scared him speechless.

Why did you have to approach that door, you fool” he thought. “Your questions were not that important, they could have waited until tomorrow. Here I go again, got myself in a real pickle this time. One that I am not going to be able to talk my way out of. One that I am not even going to try.

They had stopped moving, unceremoniously dropping him on his knees before a massive door. The Guild Master grasped his cloak and forced him to stand on his own two feet, his knees screaming in pain, as his two escorts and the Guild Master, slipped away unseen, abandoning him before a great door. It was formidable, large enough to allow a giant to enter, yet ornate with intricately carved stories about people he didn’t know, or recognize.

In the center, over a simple sign, hung a huge knocker:

“Ask the right question and you just might find it.
Seek diligently and it will be revealed.
Knock and it will open.”

He wondered what it meant. He dared not move. Minutes crawled at a snail’s pace and became hours. His legs ached, refusing to move for fear of... He didn’t know what he was more afraid of. Finding the answer, or not knowing.

His curiosity finally got the better of him, and he re-read the sign.

Hmmm ask the right question and you just might find it, seek diligently and it will be revealed, knock and it will open. I asked the questions of the Master and it lead to the door, I went

looking for the answers and ended up here. I wonder.

Reaching up and grasping the great knocker attached to the door he was surprised at how light it was. When he released it a great boom he heard, and felt, reverberating through the door and down the passageway behind him. He thought he heard cheering from somewhere behind him, quickly deciding that it was just his mind playing tricks on him.

He waited and waited but nothing happened. He raised the knocker again, and dropped it, no sound came this time nothing.

"Strange." he thought.

He raised the knocker, for the third time and dropped it. Again there was no sound, but the door swung slowly inward.

"Now you've done it, you fool" he thought.

As the gap widened, he glimpsed into a huge room. A large fireplace filled the opposite wall and held a raging fire in check, burning like an angry animal just waiting for release. Two strategically placed high backed chairs and a small table between them sat facing the warmth.

Someone coughed. "Come in and close the door, or stay outside. It is your choice, not mine. But remember the sign on the door; you have asked a question, and the door opened for you. Do you still seek the answer?"

Ragush stood surprised and scared. What should he do? The chance to find his answers overwhelmed him. Now, if he could just remember the question, everything would fall into place, he hoped.

"Lad, decide. These old bones don't like the cold anymore and this place is damp. You are letting the heat escape."

Slowly Ragush entered the room and pushed the door closed, amazed at how easily it swung for its massive size. He heard a soft thunk as it closed, some unseen latch gently dropping in place.

"Come, sit with me by the fire. We have a lot to discuss, you and I. We are not all that different, except your journey is just beginning and mine has almost ended. Would you care for some spiced tea? It is still hot. There is honey there in the pot next to it. Help yourself, but no messes."

Ragush settled in the empty chair and poured himself a cup of tea and topped of his hosts cup. Carefully setting the pot on the hearth, he picked up the honey and added a small amount to each cup.

"I am Kooramish. You may not know who I am but I know all about you. I have been aware of you from an early age and have, from time to time, checked to see how you and your family have been keeping. Your adopted father and I are old friends. We have seen a lot of this world together, in our younger days, traveled to the far reaches of the continent, chewed on some of the same mud and grime. We"

"WHAT? What are you saying?" Ragush almost choked on his disbelief. "I don't believe you. Adopted? That can't be possible can it?"

"Yes lad, you were fostered out, adopted so to speak, by a good family, as is the custom of most Bard's children."

"Did you say ADOPTED?" he roared his shock now turning to disbelief and rage. "That can't be. I even look like him, we share many family traits, we have a bond that goes beyond a simple father and son bond."

"Your father, as you call him, is actually your uncle. Your mother was his sister, who died giving birth to you. Your father was young and foolish and wanted to see the world. He didn't know that you were alive until you were three years old. By that time your uncle had filled the role as dad, and it was thought best that it be left that way. Part of my heart died the day your mother passed. The

birth of her son never mentioned, perhaps it was for the better that way.. Enough. This is not about me, but about you.”

“What do you mean part of your heart died when my mother died? She is still alive, living with my father, tending his home, our home, my home! How dare you insult them!” Ragush cried leaping to his feet.

“Young man, sit down, now!” ordered Kooramish. “I may be getting up in age but I can still teach you a lesson or two in manners and respect. Do not push my patience, you are here by invitation, and that invitation can be withdrawn as easy as it was extended.”

Haughtily Ragush replied, “Only the Lord of the Bards can retract that invitation. And you are....”

“Yes, continue.”

“Lord forgive me, I didn’t realize” he stammered. *“Oh you fool, you have really messed up this time. Not only have you shoved your boot in your mouth but it's all the way up past your knee this time.”*

“For now all you need to know is that you have fulfilled three of the four requirements to become a Master Bard. We have anticipated your eventual arrival, but no one expected you to be so young, so untrained, and so full of such raw talent. It takes Bard’s years, some decades to breach the outer corridor, you have gone beyond that, to my very own door, in less time than it takes to teach you a new skill.

“Is it your desire to become a Bard?”

“Y-Y-Yesssss.”

"Good tell me what a Bard is. Tell me what it is you seek?"

Ragush paused as he gathered his thoughts. No one had ever demanded he articulate his desire to become a Bard, something he had always struggled to explain, to understand but couldn't.

"Well I am waiting, we don't have all night."

"A Bard is" he said hesitantly. "A Bard is competent in several trades but truly only a Master of one. They must be a journeyman fighter who learns the use of several weapons but never reaching the level of a Master. They must learn the art of the thieves Guilds advancing to a journeyman level. But their real weapon is their music, their song whether it be by voice, instrument or both. It is something that is unique to each bard and just as deadly. Their training teaches them how to find it, identify it and more importantly to control it. Not much has been heard of rogue bards that attempt to develop their wishsong on their own, but it is presumed they do not survive long. A few learn a smattering of majik and can manipulate simple spells for healing and the creation of portals. Some, the very rare ones, can tap into their wishsong and use it either as a weapon or a tool drawing their audience deep into their song until they feel they are an integral part of it. I am here because I have felt my wishsong, reveled in its presence and would learn how to control it and use it to weave music that has never been heard before."

“Impressive, you have a better understanding than most, but do you know what that commitment entails? The standard you will be held to?”

“Sort of.”

“Are you aware of the training and final requirement you will need to fulfill?”

“No”.

“Good, at least you are being honest. A Bard must learn and Master, to the best of his or her ability, several musical instruments before settling on a favourite one. You may be called to play in a royal court for a king or queen, or the courtyard of nobility for a gathering, or forced to play in a local

pub for your dinner. You must learn to do this with dignity and respect, and never betray this house. You will learn how to defend yourself with no weapons except your hands and tongue, how to fight like a warrior and manipulate the shadows like a thief. The training will be difficult, dangerous and exhausting. It takes time to learn all of these, while you may excel in some areas, in others you will struggle and fail.

Lord Kooramish groaned as he stood, moving to the fire. He turned his back to it, taking great delight in its warmth before continuing.

“Tonight you have learned something new, something that you can never share with anyone. Information is a weapon, in the right hands a lever than can be used against you in ways you can’t imagine.

“You also need to make a decision. Once reached, you are bound for life, not only by that choice but by your oath. I will give you the remainder of the night to decide.

“You will now be returned to your dorm. If you decide not to continue, then you will be gone by first light. If you decide to stay and begin your journey, then you will return to the door where this all started with nothing but the clothes on your back, and your weapons on your hip. Everything else will be left behind, and I mean everything. It will be collected and disposed of. I strongly suggest you spend the night alone, without the distraction of a warm body next to you. It will only make things more difficult come morning.”

Nodding his head an unseen figure approached from a darkened corner. “Go with the Guild Master. He will escort you back to your dorm.”

Without saying a word the Guild Master motioned Ragush to follow. Moving off to a smaller door, they quickly made their way through the Keep to a smaller servant’s entrance. The old man deftly locating the hidden latch, the door opened and he followed.

Ragush found himself standing in the hallway, just outside of his dorm. Quietly he stepped along the wall, staying to the shadows until he reached his room. He could hear the passionate groaning, from across the hall, of a couple in heat of their lovemaking. The door partially open allowed a quick peek. He was not surprised to see his young maid, his bed warmer as Kooramish had called her, in bed with the bully. “*Didn’t take her long to change her loyalties*” he thought with disgust.

Shaking his head he moved into his room and quietly closed the door, but not before checking to see if anything had been tampered with. Sitting on the edge of his pallet he slowly mulled over all that had happened to him in an attempt to sort out the events of that day and to decide what to do, where to go.

Systematically he worked through all the information he had learned, the shock of what he had learned slowly wearing off, no longer impeding the process. He was amazed to find out he was actually the son of a Lord, and not just any Lord but the Guild Lord, the son of a Bard. But he couldn’t tell anyone. He was confused, shaken and at a loss to try and explain what happened. His thoughts muddled and confused, kept coming back to that one question; would he accept the invitation or decline it?

Ragush had stretched out on his bed, hoping to get a few hours sleep before having to face his decision. He tossed and turned and could not settle down enough to fall asleep. His mind alive with questions, self doubt, and fear. He drifted back to the first day he had discussed the idea of becoming a bard with his father. A memory still filled with hurt, and anger, at its outcome. It had not gone as he had planned or thought it would. At first his father wouldn't discuss it, then he got angry demanding to know if being a Swordsmith was beneath him. Nothing he said could ease the tension,

but only seemed to make things worse. They had parted company with him storming out, as his father turned to his anvil. Angry peels could be heard as he hammered out a piece of metal he had been working on.

Over the next few months the arguments got hotter until finally Ragush stood before his father and said "I hear your dissent with my choices, but it is something I want to do, need to do. This isn't a passing fancy, it is something I have thought long and hard about. I have written the Bard Guild hall and enquired about their apprenticeship program. I got a reply from the m yesterday. Da it is not a choice I make lightly" he tried to reason, "but one that I understand, including the implications. If I don't go and attempt this then I will never know. I can make a living at being a Swordsmith, but not the way you do. The metal sings to you as you work it, bend it, shape it into something only you can see. To me it is just a piece of metal that needs to be shaped, that's it. If this does no work out I will return and admit to my mistake, and enter into an apprentice program with you. To grow old with you, standing everyday in this forge has been a dream you have had for as long as I can remember, one that I don't share. Please try to understand."

"I do understand" said his father. "I understand the implications better than you think. If a bard is what you want to pursue then a bard you will become. There will always be a place for you here beside me.

"You must make your own way to the Guild House. Where is it?"

"Three days ride from here" he replied surprised at the sudden change in his father.

"Whish is four days ride, or six days by wagon. I am forbidden to help you, you do know that don't you?"

"No, I didn't" Ragush said gulping his plan beginning to fall apart.

"You work for me here, in the forge as an apprentice, for the next seven days and you will have earned enough gold to cover a wagon ride, your food and a little extra. That is the best I can do, and even that is stretching the boundaries. You start tomorrow morning. If you talk to farmer Jack I believe he sends a cart out once a month to the city for supplies, he might have room for you. His next trip is as soon as we get those wagon wheels re-rimmed, which I figure will take seven days with all the work we have."

The next seven days flew by, Ragush worked from sun up to sun down. His muscles ached each night as he crawled into bed, and were still sore the next day. It was good work, he added more muscle to his lanky frame and began to fill out. It was during these last few days that he grew closer to his father than he had ever been. He developed a better appreciation for the man and his craft as they shaped metal into shapes that seemed impossible.

At the end of the last day his father approached me an hour before sundown and told him to put his tools away, one of the other apprentices would clean up the forge tonight. "Wash up your mother is waiting for us inside." he said.

Quickly he scrubbed away the dirt and the grime from the forge, careful to make sure he put on clean clothes and boots, before entering his home of fourteen years. What greeted him was a feast like none he had ever imagined, amassed to feed a large group of friends that had quietly arrived making sure they were not seen.

"Ragush, my son, come take the place of honour" said his father leading him to the head of the table.

"In case you have forgotten today is the fourteenth anniversary of your birth, and we would celebrate it with you. Today you have become a man. On a sadder note, it is also the last night you will spend under this roof as your destiny takes you elsewhere."

Ragush looked at everyone assembled, and noticed his mother wouldn't look at him in the eye as tears ran down her face.

"We have gathered here to celebrate your birthday and to share in your last meal here. May these memories always keep your heart warm in times of cold, and may you always know there is a place at this table for you whenever you need it."

"Here, here." was heard all around the massive table as friends and relatives all lifted their tankards to toast him.

"I don't know what to say" he stammered. "Thank you everyone of you."

Ragush turned and raised his tankard, waiting for everyone to quiet down before speaking. "Dad I will treasure these last seven days for the rest of my life. You have taught me values that no book learning could ever do. You have instilled in me a sense of justice that I will always live by, and the desire, no I would say the need, to always give my best in everything I do. Mother, I will miss your gentleness, your love, the softness of your hair, and your warm arms. I take with me a love that is unbroken and hope that I can live to be able to share it with those I meet. To my friends, well what do I say to you lot, except, LETS PARTY." Laughing he drank to them all and sat down to begin eating,

The night passed quickly and at midnight they chased the last of the party goers out. The silence was amazing, yet eerie. His father drew him aside and handed him a bedroll and a small sack. "You have earned every copper of this" he said "And then some. Do not count it here, do that in private. If you are careful there is more than enough to get you to the Bard Guild House and back again, if needed. Good night my son. Sleep well" he said turning for his bed. On an impulse he stopped and hugged Ragush. His huge arms encircling him as his love poured out.

"Thank you father, I will do my best not to sully our family name."

Awkwardly they came apart, his dad heading up the stairs to the loft which his mother had retired to earlier, and he to his own cabin behind the house. He slipped the sack into his pocket and quietly closed the door, placing his bedroll on the small table. He reached for a light and was surprised when he heard a giggle behind him. "Who is there?" he demanded.

"Just me" came the reply.

"And who are you?"

"Rebecca, but you can call me Becky. If today is truly your fourteenth birthday then I wanted to be your first. Come join me before we lose the darkness of this glorious night and you have to leave us."

He quickly shed his clothing and headed for the bed before turning and dropping the bar in place, effectively locking his door. "We don't want to be disturbed, do we." he said with eagerness as he rushed the bed.

Becky taught him things about his body that thrilled and educated him. He was a fast leaner and soon had her moaning in his hands. She was a good teacher and the lessons he learned that night would help him out more than he ever expected.

Ragush smiled as he relived that night in his mind. "*Tomorrow is another one of those days*" he thought. "*What will it bring?*" Uneasily he slipped into a shallow sleep, waiting for the first cock to crow at the hint of a new day.

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He somehow knew that if he walked away before first light that he would never get another opportunity to enter their Guild. He would be resigned to becoming a Swordsmith. He could do well at that trade, but nothing like his father, or Uncle who could make the metal sing, and dance. It moved

in ways that Ragush couldn't believe. Their completed work was as much a piece of art as a functional weapon that was sought throughout the known world by nobles from every walk of life. His work had adorned the hips of Kings, and Queens, Nobles as well as rogues and thieves. It was a mark of prestige and quality that was second to none.

But did he want that? He wasn't sure what he wanted, but knew there was a very short time to decide. He laid out his meager possessions on the small table at one end of the room and carefully studied them. His lyre, while crudely made was a prized possession. He had suffered a lot of teasing because of its shape and design but it was his. It had been crafted by his hand from a block of wood he had bought with the extra money earned tending his uncle's forge. Surprisingly, the sound that came from it brought out nightingales that helped him create beautiful music. He had not written many songs, but had enjoyed getting lost in the rich sounds created when he played. With any luck they would return it to him some day, or he would find who they gave it to, and buy it back. It was like his history, his-story, was being erased and he was starting over.

Chapter 2

First light found Ragush waiting at the door carefully tracing the symbols from his last visit and patiently waiting for it to open. Nothing happened. He tried again, making sure he was standing in exactly the same place and following the exact pattern, but still nothing happened. As he reached down and pushed on a well-disguised latch, the door slowly opened. Stepping through it into a darkened hallway, he was not surprised when the door swung closed on its own. "I guess there is no turning back now." he mumbled, realizing there was no latch on his side.

With his back to the door he was surprised as a variety of symbols illuminated the floor. He recognized a few. *Another test, or just a way to get me killed?*

Settling onto his haunches, he studied the symbols, careful not to step off the sill in front of the door. *There is a recurring symbol here. But what does it represent? Where have I seen that symbol before? Why does it keep leaping out at me?*

His thoughts raced as he recalled each scene from his last visit. Suddenly his mind jolted to a halt as he realized where that symbol had played such a prominent part. It was on the door to the room the Guild Lord was in, and part of the pendant that had hung around his neck.

What does that symbol represent? Can I trust it?

Carefully he stepped out onto the first symbol. Nothing happened. He stepped diagonally and upward to his left, again nothing happened. No traps, no sudden sounds, nothing. Slowly he stepped from symbol to symbol following the pattern that only became evident with each completed step. Roughly half way down the hallway he stumbled, his left heel not quite on the symbol. To his shock everything around it disappeared. He fought to regain his balance, struggling hard not to look down by picking a spot on the far wall and concentrating on it. Regaining his balance, both feet firmly on the symbol below, he looked down. Everything was there; all the symbols on the floor were still there.

He shook his head. *Am I dreaming? What happened, how did they come back? They were all gone! No, I am not going to believe that they are gone. I could feel my feet slipping off the edge of the symbol. If this is a trick and they are truly gone, then believing my eyes will get me killed. Concentrate on the symbols, see just the symbols.*

Moving slowly from symbol to symbol, he finally reached the end of the hallway. The symbols disappeared. He was met by a young woman his age, who held her hand out to him. She waited patiently for him to accept it before leading him to the next doorway. He opened his mouth to speak and she put a finger to his lips, shaking her head, *no*. He noticed a faint scent that stirred his emotions, heightened his senses, and intrigued his mind.

Positioning him on the large door sill she slipped away into the darkness, and once again he was facing with a door with no visible markings. On the door was a simple statement:

*Ask the right question and
Receive the correct answer.
Ask the wrong question,
The fourth will kill you*

Mulling over the clue in his mind, he tried to formulate his thoughts into a coherent pattern. *What could the right question be?* A number, representing a large "1" lit up to his left.

Argh, I need to be careful; this thing can read my mind. Is this the right way to go? Wait, oh no, the second number lit up. A line joined the two numbers, cutting a nasty looking crack in the stone.

“Will you show me the way?” he asked. Nothing happened. The third number did not light up, and the line didn’t appear. *Seems like I am on the right track.*

“Am I supposed to go through this door?” He waited at length for a response, but no one came to tell him that he was on the right track.

Carefully, he pondered the next question before asking. “Is the latch located to the left or right of the door?” Again nothing happened.

I have a fifty-fifty chance. Here goes nothing. “Is the latch to the left of the door?” The third number lit up, and the line then continued cutting a thick hole through the rock.

Turning to his right, he carefully searched the sill for a catch, latch, glyphs, or anything that would provide a clue on how to open the door. All he could find was the symbol that he had walked across the floor on.

I have to remember what this symbol means and I have no questions left.

“Cimion help me,” he whispered “I am lost. I don’t know where to go or what to do.”

There was a barely audible click. The door swung slowly inwards to reveal a solid door sill, which lead to a stairway leading up. Carefully he stepped through the door, testing each step before transferring his weight onto it.

With a heavy sigh he moved onto the stairway allowing the door to shut. At the fourth step, a sound caught his attention. He looked hard behind him and saw the door sill and first step crumble. He ran up the stairs as fast as he could, glancing back from time to time to see the steps disappearing into the darkness. Whenever he stopped, the crumbling increased, but if he kept moving the rate that the stairs disappeared slowed. He kept climbing until he reached a point that he calculated would be on the same level as the third floor of the Keep before encountering a doorway. Not bothering to check for traps, he burst through the door, slamming it closed behind him. He was shoved to the floor by an unseen hand as darts imbedded themselves in the door behind him.

“This ends your first lesson. Never assume that what you see is what is actually going on. And don’t always believe that what you see is not truly happening. If you had stopped long enough to look at the top of the stairs, you would have noticed a change in the rock. The difference should have been a clue that you could safely stop there. Enough. You have made your decision, you are here. Now you must take your oath. Then we move to the final stage of your old life, and into the first stage of your new life.”

Two sets of very strong hands reached down and pulled him to his feet. Before he could get his balance they propelled him further into the room. He found himself standing in the centre of a large symbol, exactly like the ones that had lead him here. The area where he stood was suddenly flooded with light; the remainder of the room remained shrouded in darkness. As his eyes adjusted he began to slowly take stock of where he was. Before anything really registered, a voice boomed across the floor at him, “KNEEL! EYES DOWN!”

He was slow to respond, still reeling from the sudden light.

“KNEEL! EYES DOWN!”

As he slowly sank to his knees the room went dark again. The loud voice continued.

“Are you here of your own accord?”

Yes"

“Do you wish to become a Bard?”

"Yes"

‘Will you abide by the rules of the Guild and the laws established by our patron Saint Cimion?’

Um, I guess so."

“Yes or no!”

"Yes."

“Repeat after me: I, Ragush, do solemnly swear that I will uphold the rules of this Guild, the laws established by our patron Saint Cimion. If I divulge any of the secrets that I am taught my body will be torn in half and left to rot, my tongue cut out and burned, my eyes fed to the scavengers, and my name forgotten forever. No record will ever be found that I existed. My offspring will be slaughtered, innocent or not!”

As Ragush repeated these words he had a sense of impending doom, a fear that he had really messed up this time. Lost to him now were his parents, his friends, his lovers. He was truly alone, from this point onward.

“From this day forward, from this point in time, Ragush ceases to exist. You are now a member of the Bard's Guild, and have become a journeyman Bard. Your new name will be revealed to you when we assemble to welcome you. Rise, young Bard, and step into the light. May Cimion always be with you and protect you.”

What was once darkness, then blindness, and then darkness again was finally revealed. Still standing, he turned and took in room he took in the room. Benches lined every wall except for the eastern one, which held one highly ornate empty chair. From around the room hooded figures approached him and gently squeezed his shoulder before walking away towards a smaller door in the west wall. As he turned to follow a slender hand reached out to touch his chest, the familiar scent adding to his confusion. “No, it is not your time. You are not yet ready for that exit.”

Standing before him was a tall, slender woman. The little time he had to look at her allowed him only the briefest of glances from her feet to her pointed ears.

"Pointed ears," he gasped.

"Yes, I am of human elf descendant. is that a problem?"

"No. No problem," he sputtered. "I have never seen a real live elf before."

“Follow me; we have a lot to do, and so little time to do it in. All must be accomplished by first light. I am Kaori, I am to be your teacher, spiritual guide, and trainer.”

"You are the woman that met me at the door! I would recognize that scent anywhere!"

"Yes, that was me at the door. You will not interrupt anymore?" her voice changed from light and easy, to hard and businesslike.

"You answer to me for all your actions. But remember this, and remember it well - I answer to all the Bards here, especially the Guild Master and the Lord of the Guild, as well as Cimion. If you screw up, then I am punished. Screw up enough and we could both be put out. I am fair and honest, but if pressed I can be ruthless. Punishment will be handed out fairly, and I will defend you for your actions *if* you come and tell me immediately." Thumping her hard finger into the center of his chest for emphasis, he winced in pain. "But if I go out on a limb for you and I find your actions, words, or thoughts are literally cutting the branch out from behind me, well, let's just say there is no place on this planet where you will be able to hide from me. Do we understand each other?"

“Yes”.

“Good. From this point on, you will only speak when spoken to. You will do as you are told without question. Do you understand? There will be a time for questions, and a time for quiet. Learn them well.”

The room had finally emptied and she turned to a table along the eastern wall and picked up a crimson robe. Approaching him with the robe, she pushed her hood back. He gasped. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and she was his trainer!

Great. How do I concentrate on my work with her breathing over my shoulder?

“Strip!” she bellowed

“Huh?”

Before he could even react he was on the floor nursing a very sore cheek. She had punched him
This is no gentle woman.

“Stand up, now!”

Rising, he moved to the place she indicated.

“Strip. All of it. Hands at your side. I have seen it all before, you have nothing to hide.”

Reluctantly, he began to remove his clothing, dropping it in a pile in front of him. When he finally got to his undergarments, he hesitated out of embarrassment more than anything else. Stripping for sex was one thing, but in front of this woman, and by her command, was a real blow to his ego.

“All of it. Do we repeat the last lesson?”

He turned beet red as he dropped his last garment and kicked it into the pile. Remembering her first instruction he slowly moved his hands to his side and tried to pick a spot on the far wall to focus on. She circled his body, checking out the scars she found, lifting his arms, looking at his fingers, checking his hair for lice. She finally stood in front of him and staring into his eyes, she reached down and gently grasped his manhood. Struggling, he fought the urges that were running through his mind, trying to shut down his responding body. Losing the battle, he was surprised to see her smile before tossing the crimson robe at him.

“This is all you will wear until you are told otherwise. Daily baths are required. You will be shown where to find them. Put this on and follow me.”

She turned without even a glance in his direction and walked towards a door in the south wall. Quickly pulling the robe over his head, he formed an immediate dislike for it. It was woolen and itchy. The excitement she had caused was giving him great discomfort as he hurried to keep up with his teacher. They crossed the threshold of the door and into a long hallway. At the end of the hallway they descended a flight of stairs and stopped in front of a tapestry hanging on an otherwise blank wall. As Kaori pull back the tapestry, Ragush stopped and looked at the scene unfolding below.

“This is your funeral. The box contains ashes, representing your body. Your adopted parents were notified, but your mother wasn’t up to making the trip. I believe your dad understood the implications, and decided it was best not to attend. Look at your so-called friends. The bully strutting around like he was someone important, trying to direct the service, your little bed warmer with tears running down her cheeks. Good show, isn’t it? That life is over. Your new life is about to begin.” Dropping the cover back in place she walked away. He hurried to keep up with her.

They passed several more intersections and rounded a number of corners, before finally stopping before a door. “Every door we enter, you will open for me, and allow me to go through. You will only enter if invited. From this point on, you will answer everything that is said to you as ‘Yes, Mistress.’ or ‘No, Mistress.’ Do you understand?”

‘Yes, mistress’

Another smack and he was on the ground again, his other cheek burning in pain. “What did ...” Smack! Down he went again.

“Lesson number two – punishment can be handed out at anytime. You will thank me for it, *before getting up.*”

“Yes, Mistress. Thank you for punishing me, Mistress.”

What did I get myself in to?

Careful not to show any emotion, he reached forward and opened the door, struggling to hold it open for her and leave enough room for her to enter. He was surprised when he felt her rub against him. She had a firm body, nicely proportioned, under her robe. In another time and place she might have been an interesting challenge. But here, right now, she held all the cards and he wasn't about to find out just how badly he could lose.

“Enter, and stand over there,” she pointed to the corner. “Face me.”

“Yes, Mistress,” he said as he closed the door and stood where she pointed. Slowly she removed her robe and hung it on a peg. “Strip, and hang up your robe.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Studying Kaori, he was surprised to find she stood at his height. Muscles rippled under her skin as she stood before him. Her forest green hair was neatly tied back, revealing two rather pointed ears. By Human standards she was a tall woman, but by Elven standards she was considered petite. Scars that held stories of their own could be seen in various places on her body. She was not shy, but stood with a grace that did not flaunt her figure. He continued studying her, trying not to stare, totally engrossed in his first Elven woman, when her comments interrupted him.

“First training session is going to be simple. By my calculations it has been thirty hours since you last ate. A growing lad like you is probably not accustomed to going that long without a meal. This room serves several purposes, but the two we are interested in today are instruction and discipline. You will have one half of the turning of the hour glass to complete each stage of the test. The first stage will not be timed, to allow you to familiarize yourself with what is expected. But remember this, we have three and a half hours before I am due to report, and there is still a lot that needs to be accomplished.

"Stage one is simple. Climb the hill, reap the reward, then return to this spot where I am standing within the time allotted. The reward is a large juicy apple.

"Stage two becomes a little more complicated. The posts you have to balance and hop on will be moving up and down at random intervals. The reward will be a freshly cooked turkey leg; the penalty will be a painful slide down the walls to the bottom here. You cannot move onto the next stage until you complete the previous one.

"Stage three is where the fun begins. Oil will be spilled down the slope, making not only your footing dangerous, but making it impossible to stop your slide once it has started. The reward is a leg of mutton, nicely spiced and dressed. The penalty will be the effects of the oil. If your skin is light, like yours, it will turn bright red. If it is dark it becomes bright pink. With your tan you will look most interesting.

"Stage four is not only a race against time, but against me. We usually have two students compete against each other. Their reward is the winner moves on in their training, the penalty is the loser stays behind. You will notice small throwing axes and knives placed at various intervals. These become available only in phase four and are used on that board," she said, turning and pointing out two distinct boards on the outside walls. "One is yours, the other mine. The knives imbedded in the wall can change the pattern of your opponents' poles, messing up their advancement. They are not to be used against your opponent and if you try, well, let's just say don't miss, because I won't. One final note; each stage the poles move at a faster rate.

"Any questions?"

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Ragush stood rooted to the spot where she had left him. "Mistress I am, at a disadvantage," he said, pointing at his manhood.

Sneering, at him she pointed to the alcove behind him where he found several contraptions of varying sizes.

"Mistress, I am not familiar with these things. What are they for?"

Kaori approached him, checked his size and reached for two of the contraptions. The first one was too small and refused to slip into place. The second one fit snugly and he felt himself being drawn up tightly against his body. Two small sacks slipped over his testicles and held them tightly, preventing them from moving. Kaori reached around his back with one hand and slipped the other between his legs. Before he knew what she was doing, his body jumped. He heard her smirk as she tightened the cords, and everything was held firmly into place.

"That should solve the problem."

Moving to one side she motioned him to the starting plate. As he stepped onto it the posts began to move slowly up and down. He looked for and quickly identified a pattern.

"Begin when you are ready," she said.

Ragush stepped off the plate onto the first post, and moved easily from one to the next. *Whoa, I have to be careful, these damn things are not spaced evenly, nor do they rise to the same height.* He found that the route he had chosen was not the easiest, even if it was the most direct and was forced to backtrack several times. Reaching the top, he snatched the apple from the pedestal and bit into it hungrily. He wiped away the juices that ran down the sides of his mouth and when he couldn't find a rag to wipe his hands on, wiped them across his butt. Looking around he found a rope hanging off to one side. He worked his way down it carefully, trying to avoid a painful rope burn.

As he assumed his place back on the plate he fought to control his body. But thirty hours without food had an embarrassing effect on him; he burped and farted at the same time. The resulting noise and stench caused Kaori to take a step back.

"Are you ready?" she asked. Ragush nodded his head. As she turned the glass over, and the sand began to run out and she shouted, "Go!"

Ragush hopped from pole to pole, quickly adjusting to the random changes the posts were making. *Damn, they are sliding all the way back into the slope and the hole is closing. I didn't expect that,* he thought. His route changed on the fly as he stepped from post to post until finally he reached the top. As promised, a turkey leg was waiting for him. Glancing at the glass he noticed he had less time than he thought. Stripping off what meat he could, and stuffing it in his mouth, he quickly made his way down the rope. In his hurry he felt delicate skin being pulled away as his hair was snagged.

He paused before stepping on the plate to swallow the mouthful of meat and gasp for air, his foot making contact with the plate as the last few grains tumbled down.

"You are getting slower; you will never complete this test in time if you don't pick up the pace," said Kaori as she turned the glass over once again. This time he was not caught by surprise and leapt up to the second row of posts. Moving steadily, he made good time until he heard a door open above him. Looking up, he saw the oil begin to pour out towards him. Throwing caution to the wind, he kept moving from post to post, trying to stay ahead of it. He barely succeeded, as small drops of oil hit his skin and he felt it burn. He forced himself to ignore the sudden pain and to concentrate on the path ahead of him. He was almost at the top when the oil caught up to him. The last row of posts disappeared into the slope, their covers sliding in place as the oil poured out towards him. A split-second decision was the only thing between him and success, or a painful slide down the slope. He

knew that failure at this point would mean failure of the whole test, as the oil coated everything in its path.

He jumped towards the wall; his hands finding little purchase, but his toes finding a small ledge in the wood. His muscles screamed as he pushed off with all his strength, praying that his toehold wouldn't break off. He flew through the air in a mass of flailing arms and legs and rolled onto the upper platform, a groan escaping from his lips. Slowly rising, he looked for his prize and was surprised to see that he had a choice; a leg of mutton or a flask. By this point his body was hot, his muscles ached, and the sweat was dripping off of him and pooling on the floor. Carefully he picked up the flask and sniffed it, pleased that there was no odour coming from it. Tentatively he raised it to his lips and took a sip. *Water, cool clear water*, he thought with relief.

As he tipped it back, preparing to drink deeply, his father's voice flooded his memory *Ragush, sip it, lad. If you drink too much at one time you will get the bends and won't be able to work.*

Grateful for the memory, he sipped the water and then poured the remainder over his head to help cool his body off. Moving to the rope, he descended with care, his legs still sore from the last time. Moving over to the plate he resumed his place and waited.

In his absence, two large tubs had been placed on the floor before the plates. One held a dark liquid like substance, the other fine sand.

"Some of the posts are covered in oil, making their use dangerous. You are allowed to cover any part of your body with the black liquid and apply sand anywhere you choose. I must warn you that it takes some work to get it off. It might cost you a few hairs, but it will come off," said Kaori as she stepped into the liquid. Ragush quickly followed her example cursing when he realized just how sticky it really was. On impulse he stuck his left hand into the substance and smeared some of it on his butt before adding sand to both places.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

Ragush nodded his head and watched as she slowly turned the glass over. When its full weight settled on the pedestal the posts began to move and the oil poured down the slope. Kaori smiled at him as she stepped in front of him, causing him to falter before leaping onto the posts at her side. She was like a mountain goat, leaping from post to post and had reached the first point of interference before he was even halfway there. Her knife flew through the air and imbedded itself near the top, securely blocking a lever.

What is she up to? he thought.

Kaori reached the next two stashes of throwing knives before he did. Following the same strategy as before, she was working at blocking the upper levers. As he looked up he saw that she had managed to create a large gap that would soon be impassable, forcing him to concede or retreat. Neither option was not acceptable, as it was equivalent to admitting defeat.

He pushed harder and managed to reach the next station before she did. He threw his knife. His aim was not as accurate as hers and appeared to block only part of the lever. He quickly recalculated his route and reached the next point just seconds before she did, His knife hammering into the board at the same time as hers. *At the same time - she said nothing about what would happen if they hit at the same time.*

He worked hard and stayed even with her. The last point was just ahead when his posts started to disappear. He desperately looked for an alternate route and could find none. Looking at Kaori, she sneered at him, sensing an easy victory. He tensed his muscles and drove himself straight up towards the top, his left hand stretched out before him. With a grunt he slammed against the slope as his hand curled around the oil spout. Turning his back towards the wall, he began pushing with his feet in

agony as he slid across the slope. Slowly he inched upwards, as the liquid and sand wore off he moved faster until he could swing his leg up over the edge and onto the top.

He looked over the edge and saw a look of shock and surprise on Kaori's face, as all her posts began to disappear. Hooking his feet onto the oil apparatus, he reached down with his left hand and grasped a handful of her hair. She screamed in pain as the last post disappeared and her body weight tried to tear the hair from her head. She quickly reached up and wrapped her hands around his wrist, attempting to take the strain off of her hair. Ragush struggled, his muscles screaming in pain as he pulled her up the face of the slope. His feet were beginning to slip, the black liquid wearing thin. It was all up to him; there was nothing Kaori could do to help him. Either he managed to pull her up to safety or she would tumble down the slope missing a large piece of hair. He would rather slide down with her than cause that to happen.

Grunting, he pulled her up, praying that the years he had spent in the forge would finally pay off. Slowly Kaori moved up the wall, hanging helplessly by her hair. With a final heave, she screamed as some of her hair pulled away from her head. Landing hard on the surface she gasped for air.

They lay there for several minutes, maybe longer, before she could finally speak. "Well done. I have never been beaten on this wall. It is a feat to be proud of."

Ragush tried to remove his hand from her hair, causing her to wince in pain. "Don't," she growled. "We need to go soak in Hogsbor's solution to rid ourselves of this damn stuff... "

Struggling, they managed to get to their feet without too much trouble. She carefully led him through a door and into a large bath area.

"We must soak in here for at least the turning of the hour glass. Try not to drown me while the stuff comes out of my hair," she said, settling into the pool.

"Yes, Mistress," he said.

Settling into the hot tub she said, "Tonight, you will become a full member of the Guild. There must be something more to you than meets the eye for you to jump so high, so soon."

Over the next few hours he learned things about his partner, himself, and his skills and abilities - things that he never knew were possible, or even existed. "These skills are important, the Bard's Guild is a guild made up of bastards. None of us have lived with our fathers and hardly even with mothers. We have been raised by foster parents. Many of us do not know who the link to this Guild is through. That knowledge is very dangerous."

She continued with her instructions, walking him through the events that would unfold later that night, the requirements he must fulfill, as well as the expectations that would become evident when the ceremony was completed.

"At some point you will need to write your epic song, the pinnacle of your career, so to speak. It can take a lifetime; many Bards do not reach that pinnacle, so they remain as journeyman. They still receive all the benefits of that station, as well as privileges within the Guild, and are treated with reverence and respect. The topic, or subject of your song, is usually left to you. But there are times, very few times, when a Bard is requested to craft the song of someone important. There are many requests by the nobles whose egos are bigger than their estates, who want to be remembered forever. But many are turned down, graciously, mind you, but turned down none the less. Our Lord wrote the song that we now sing about his father. Before you get to hear that song, you will be required to study its history. It has been recorded and is one of our most prized possessions. You will not be allowed out of this Keep alone, until you have read it and can explain it completely. I hope you enjoy it; it is quite the tale - a history of monumental importance."

"Enough. It is time to clean up and prepare for the birth of a new Bard."

Returning to the other room, she paused and turned to face him. Placing her arms around his waist she pulled him to her and kissed him, a deep passionate kiss. "After sun up, I will no longer be your Mistress; we will either be equals in rank or you will be cold and stiff. I hope it is the first and not the latter. But until that time, you are to refer to me as Mistress. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mistress"

Ragush was confused, concerned, and surprised. Part of him was looking forward to the upcoming events with a curiosity that he had never felt before. His chest began to swell with pride, until he remembered his teacher's warnings: *Any Master can say no and refuse to vouch for you.*

"Towel yourself off, and don your crimson robe. You will only wear it for a short time." She reached into an alcove and pulled out an ornate gown made of fine teal silk. It was light and sheer, and did nothing to hide her young body, but enhanced it in a delightful way. When she was satisfied with her appearance she turned to him. "Mind what I have told you. I will have the last word, and if you embarrass me I will scuttle any and all thoughts you have of becoming a Bard."

A look of fear filled his face. "Please don't do that, Mistress," he whispered. "I will do anything, whatever it takes, to become a Bard. It is all I have ever dreamed of doing," he said desperately. "If I fail, I can't go home, at least not to the home I have left behind. Everything has changed, nothing is the same."

He saw a smile creep across her face and tried to imagine what she was thinking, but could not.

They left their room, wound through several passageways, and climbed at least one flight of stairs before finally stopping in front of the huge door he had entered the hall through just hours earlier. "You do remember what to do here, don't you?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"Good. Follow the lead of the person who answers your knock. Keep your answers simple, yet audible. This is a serious ceremony; do as you are asked or instructed."

The hours flew by, almost like he was in a trance. He moved from one scene to the next, each with a more serious penalty should he violate their sacred trust. Just after his entry into the room, he shed his robe and stood before those assembled, just like when he had entered the world as a new born child. At each stage of the ceremony he was provided with another piece of clothing until the very end. Fully clothed, the last ceremony completed he stood before the Lord, waiting for his decision. Masters had stepped forward and vouched for him, making statements about his character that he hadn't realized. His teacher, the last to step forward, described his roughness. While at first not sure whether he could master everything he needed to, she finally agreed with the rest, saying that he had much work still to do. His heart, thumping loudly in his chest at the possibility that she was going to sink his boat, sighed with almost audible relief.

"Who will now stand as guarantor for our young Bard? Who will make the ultimate sacrifice and accept responsibility for him until he has been taught the ways of our Guild?" asked the Guild Master.

Everyone waited expectantly. Ragush was an unknown. Would failure on his part mean instant death, not only to him, but to his sponsor? Who would step forward and risk everything for an unknown? A shuffle was heard from the back of the room as Kaori stepped forward, "I will."

"Ragush, you have completed everything required to become a Bard," the Lord said. "You have given your solemn word to live by the Guild rules and the laws established by Cimion. You have gone from the nakedness of a newborn, forsaking everything before you to stand before me as a young Bard. There are but two things left to do. One you are aware of, the other you are not. Prepare the candidate."

Strong hands reached out and grabbed his arms, pinning them to his sides. Other hands forced him to his knees. His teacher stood before him with a knife drawn and cut away his upper clothing, making sure to nick him in a few tender places and draw blood. When his chest had been bared she took the blade of her dagger and scraped away any hair that had grown there. After years of struggling to have hair on his chest, it was now gone in a flash like it didn't matter. It not only hurt his pride, his ego, but it physically hurt like hell as she dragged the blade across the area, removing hair and skin. Satisfied with her work, she said, "It has been done as you ordered"

"Cimion, you have heard this young initiate's desires; you know his heart, his innermost thoughts. If he is acceptable in your eyes, make him one of ours."

He had no idea what was about to happen. His eyes opened wide in terror as a hooded being approached him with a white hot poker and pressed it against his chest. He prepared to scream in pain - he had recognized the branding iron - and the expected stench of burning flesh. He had helped his father's squires test the irons used for branding chattel, both animal and Human, for customers far to the north. They had used dead pigs to ensure that the owners' designs were clear. Looking down, he expected to see his flesh bubbling and burning away from contact with the hot iron, but he saw and felt nothing. What was left behind was the small representation of a lyre. Tactfully placed on his chest to be visible only to people who knew what they were looking for.

"Rise, my brother. Cimion has accepted you as one of ours. Your oath has been sealed, and now can never be broken."

"Arise, Anorac, and welcome to the family of Bards. You may now enjoy all its privileges as a member."

Hands reached out pulling him up, shaking his hand, thumping him on the back. Others kissed his cheeks. Kaori kissed him fully on the lips, "We are equals now; this could get interesting."

Before he could react, she pulled away from him, mixed into the group, and melted away.

"Your training begins in earnest tomorrow, Anorac. But for the rest of the day enjoy the celebrations. We don't often get to celebrate the raising of a new Bard. There is a lot you need to learn, absorb, and do, in a very short time. But today is a day of refreshment, and relaxation. Mind you, don't play too hard, you need to be fresh in the morning. Kaori will come for you shortly and show you to your room, where you can change into something more appropriate." The Guild Master then turned to join the Lord and engage him in a quiet discussion.

"Hi there, remember me?" said Kaori.

"You need to explain the last 12 hours to me. It makes no sense at all."

"Sure it does, only we needed to compress several years of training into a few hours. By pushing you the way we did we learned that you get frustrated and failing, that you are not easily put off, and that you can be rough when required, and gentle when needed."

"And if I had turned nasty?"

"You would have been dead before you could have touched me. One of the training cadres you will learn is the art of weaponless defense. We have Monks here who could kill you from across the room before you drew your sword. They are our teachers. The lessons they teach you want to learn quickly - less pain that way."

"Follow me please, and I will show you to your rooms. I will also show you how to get around this place without getting lost," she laughed, as she walked down the hallway.

"Look for these symbols." She pointed to intricate artwork along the floor at every corner. "The tankard is for the common room, the cooked fowl is for the dining areas and kitchen, the book for the libraries, the hammer for the workshops, the crossed staves for the training areas, and finally the tree

for the outdoors. But before you use that one you need to learn how to get back inside - that is part of your training that starts tomorrow. This last one, a bed, is for the dorms. They are arranged by age, and sometimes level. If you come across a red one do not enter that area unless invited. Yellow is for official duties only, and finally ours, which is teal. You now know what they are, so lead the way.”

“I’d rather follow you -, the view is much better from back here.”

“And what makes you think I am not enjoying the view as well, hm? I need to make sure you can read the signs properly. Lead on.”

Reluctantly Anorac followed her directions, only once taking a wrong turn and having to backtrack. “We are in the dorm areas, which one is mine?”

“Remember what I told you before; you have to find your room. I am forbidden from showing you where it is. I will wait here until you have located it.”

Scratching his head, he walked up and down the hall. All of the symbols in front of the rooms were red, to signify no entry. None of them were blue, or even yellow. “They are all red, none of them are teal.”

“That can’t be, they have assigned you a room here. Check again!”

He walked a little farther down the hall. All the symbols stayed red until, at the far end of the hall tucked away from the rest, he found a blue one. “What do I do if I think I have found it?”

“Place your right hand over the symbol that you see on the door, and push. If it is your room, the door will open. If it isn’t, nothing will happen the first time. Any subsequent tries will have you writhing on the floor pain.”

Following her instructions he placed his hand on the brightly shining lyre and gently pushed. The door swung open freely to reveal a huge room, filled with bookshelves, a reading table, a moderate-sized fireplace, a large comfortably-looking bed and a workbench. His mouth hung open as he stared in disbelief. This room was huge; it was bigger than his father’s whole house.

This can’t be mine, there must be a mistake, he thought.

“Kaori, can you come here please? There seems to be some sort of a mistake.”

“If the door opened then there is no mistake. The first time anyone is allowed into your room, you must lead them there. Close the door and come and get me if you want me to look at it. Otherwise, I am forbidden from even seeing where it is. You will not be able to see into anyone else’s room, or even find them. They will be blocked from your view, even if they’re standing next to you. We have training rooms for the special times that you and I shared.”

“You need to see this, I do not want to make a mistake and offend the rightful owner of this room.”

Closing the door, he returned and led her down the hallway. When the symbol changed to yellow, she balked. “We shouldn’t be here,” she said. “This is not our area.”

“That’s what I am trying to tell you.” Reaching, up he touched a door and it opened, revealing the room beyond. She gasped with surprise. He entered the room, still amazed at what he saw. When he looked at the door, Kaori had not moved. “Come in,” he said.

“You need to formally invite me in. You must specify how often I can enter, whether it is with you or alone, what I can have access to, and what I cannot. This may seem a foolish requirement right now, but it could save your life at a later time. Our Guild is full of schemers, politicals that wouldn’t hesitate to step on me, you, and anyone else to get ahead. These rules were established to at least make this place neutral ground.”

“Kaori, I invite you into my rooms; you may have access to the privy, the fireplace and chairs before it, the bath and of course my bed, anytime I am with you. This can be revoked at any time,

without warning. There, is that good enough? Now come here, we have some unfinished business to attend to.”

“Do you think you are man enough to finish it?” she replied with an impish grin on her face.

Chapter 3

Freshly bathed Anorac and Kaori joined the remainder of the Guild in the common room, glowing like two kids in love. "Bards are like alley cats in heat; they couple with each other as often as they can. Special training rooms have been set aside for just that purpose. They are cautioned not to form a deep relationship with each other as we may never know when one of us is sent on assignment, away from the other. Sex must be the result of mutual consent, and if a child becomes the product of that coupling only the mother will know, the father is purposely kept in the dark. I really enjoy your attention, but I will have to share you. Just be careful who you couple with - politics run rampant through these halls and couplings have been used to pull a leader down. You must keep the location of your rooms quiet, and use a training room whenever possible. Giving too many people permission to enter your room is just as dangerous as not having the entry system we enjoy."

He listened to her carefully before saying "I agree to take any other liaisons to such a room, but you will always be welcome in my room, day or night."

As he mingled with the other Bards, listening to tales of conquest, feats of heroism, and failures, he learned more about the craft. He tried to avoid the pompous fools and braggarts, attempting to stay on the edges and listening, rather than participate. Some attempted to draw him into the conversations, carefully probing for information about his past, while offering none in return. He deflected them with the ease of a well-practiced politician; never quite answering anything, but always having something to say.

##

Kaori had gone off to work the crowd as well, being careful to avoid eye contact with him and trying not to any attract extra attention to herself. Her emotions confused her. Usually these couplings were purely a result of physical need, but this was different. She was still troubled about the location of his rooms. He had been elevated above the level of journeyman Bard almost to that of a Master, but he was still an initiate in many ways. He would be worth the effort to watch, maybe even form a liaison with, as he was destined to rise through the Guild. She would have to be careful how she played this, or she could end up as dead as him if things went sour.

As she glanced across the room she noticed that he had been cornered by one of the newer recruits. This one had just completed her initial entry and was waiting for her first training assignment. The council of instructors had been slow providing it - they were still not sure where she fit, or how best to use her talents. It was evident which talents she was attempting to use on Anorac as she brushed her breasts subtly against his arm and had maneuvered her leg between his legs, rubbing it against him.

The boy has stamina, I will give him that. He is going to have her howling in no time, she thought to herself, as a wave of jealousy rolled through her.

She watched as they left the room, trying to look like they were not connected. Everyone in the room knew what was going on though. *If he is smart he will use the training rooms. If he isn't, that could spell trouble, as she is a dangerous pawn in the game of politics being played here.*

"Hogsbor, do you have a minute?" she asked as she quietly moved in behind him.

"I always have a minute for you," he replied warmly. "What can I do for you?"

Kaori struggled to explain the emotional turmoil she was experiencing. It was strange, new and more than a little disconcerting.

Hogsbor gently grasped her elbow and steered her well away of the group, sending a menacing look towards anyone that dared to invade his space. The look was more than enough to send even the bravest Bard scampering away from them.

"It is..." she tried to get the words out but they just got tangled around her tongue. Her heart, beating three times as fast as normal, made her face flush and her ears burn.

Hogsbor smiled at her "Nice colouring," he said with a grin. "It matches your hair perfectly. I take it that our young Anorac has had an impact on you, and it is more than a professional one?"

She struggled and couldn't answer him, the words were there but she just couldn't get them out.

"Kaori, we both knew this was bound to happen sooner or later. Let your heart guide you. Share what you think you have to, and keep private those things which make you most vulnerable. Enjoy yourself; you are only young once. Cimion knows you deserve it."

Kaori looked at him with love and respect. "Thank you, I needed to hear that." Impulsively she wrapped her arms around him, giving him a big hug, then melted into the assembled groups, ignoring those around her.

##

The rest of the day progressed with little change. Couples paired off and casually strolled away for some afternoon delight. Schemes were hatched, gossip exchanged, new songs performed, all amidst huge tables of food, and a seemingly unending supply of wine. Bards were known for their lack of commitment. That was one of the requirements for entry into the Guild, you had to be the bastard son or daughter of a Bard. Sometimes, if you were really unfortunate, both parents were Bards, ending in absolutely no family connection. There were a number of surrogate families in the area that, for a small fee, would take on the responsibility of raising their illegitimate offspring. Not all children answered the call to become a Bard. In fact, all were highly discouraged from talking that path, and only the most determined ever made it to the gates of the school. Very few ever went beyond that. Young raw talent that could be molded into strong aspiring Bards was getting harder and harder to find.

##

Anorac finally had to admit that he was too tired to play. Fending off a number of advances from young ladies who were more than willing, he made his way down the hallway toward the dorms. As he came around a corner he found a young woman sobbing, her dress torn, and bruises on her arm. He rushed to her, calling for help, but no one heeded his call. Her whole body wracked with sobs as she clung to him, causing the tattered remains of her dress to slip even farther down her arms, revealing more than he wanted to see. Trying to be a gentleman he averted his eyes as he continued attempting to calm her. She managed to gasp out that she had been looking for a Bard, but couldn't remember his name, only that his room was down here, when she was attacked and raped.

Alarm bells were going off loudly in his head. Anorac quickly disengaged himself from the young woman and moved away. Kaori's stern warnings filled his mind as he fought the urge to continue to comfort her.

She isn't a Bard! She is from the streets, or the village beyond the gates. How did she get in here? Who brought her in? Am I being tested? Set up, maybe?

Backing away, he quickly retraced his steps until he reached the common room. It was all but empty, and those few that remained were too drunk to help him or advise him. He couldn't go to Kaori for help; he didn't know where her room was and besides, he knew that she used a training room.

"Cimion help me," he said quietly. "Is this for real, or is it my imagination playing tricks? Guide me, Lord. Show me the path to take."

Carefully he edged out of the common room and returned down to the corner where the young maid was in distress. There was almost no sign that she had been present, other than a single red rose.

As he reached for the rose a hand swatted his away. "Don't touch that, and be very quiet!" hissed a strange voice.

He could hear a sword being drawn and see the tip approach the rose, as he was pushed behind his mysterious helper. The rose suddenly turned black and gave off a hideous odour when the sword tip touched it. "Black Death. It hasn't been in these halls for over a century. Must let the Lord know it is back. He will know what to do," the stranger said as he gripped his chest and fell forward.

"How do I find him? Where is he?" Anorac called out, only to hear absolute silence in return.

The Lord, how do I find the Lord? Wait, the red symbols, must lead to him, or hopefully to someone who can tell me what is going on. Reluctant to leave the dead stranger lying in the hallway, Anorac dragged him into an empty training room, placed him on the bed, and covered him out of respect. He then washed his hands and exposed skin as well as he could before closing and sealing the room.

Red symbols, where did I see them? Think! his mind screamed.

Damn, wrong corridor. Turning, he quickly backtracked.

"Calm down and think. Look as you were taught to. Remember the inscription on the door when you first entered the Guild," said a calm voice.

"Ask, seek, and knock! Of course! Cimion where is the Lord and how do I find him?"

He felt foolish standing there at the intersection talking to no one in particular, until the red symbols illuminated. Instinct told him to follow them while staying hidden. As he wound through the endless corridors, stepping into the shadows when necessary to avoid detection, the illuminated symbols indicated the way. He found himself going deeper and deeper into the Keep, until was finally standing in front of a thick door at the end of a dark corridor.

Now what? he thought.

Ask, Seek, Knock.

Here goes nothing, he thought, as he formed a fist and rapped loudly on the door. He was surprised when a voice called out, "Yes, who is it?"

"It is I, Anorac, a newly formed member of the Guild. I have been sent to seek the Lord."

"He is not available. Come back later."

"This can't wait. I must see him now. The person who sent me said it was an immediate request."

"I said he is not available right now. Come back later," the voice replied tersely.

"Then I will wait right here until he is available!"

Something is not right! Something feels out of place. Why am I this deep within the Keep? The Lord's rooms were upstairs, not down.

The door in front of him slowly opened, and he stared into the eyes of a small man who he had never seen before. "I said to go away, the Lord is not available."

Seizing the opportunity he pushed the door open and forced his way into the room. If he was wrong then he would end up in the hallway, in pain, probably banished forever. But if he was right, then only Cimion knew what was going to happen. He had not thought it out enough to plan ahead.

Lying slumped in a chair, bound tightly by ropes, was the Lord. His mouth was working but nothing was heard as he glared at the little man furiously.

“What have you done? Who are you?” demanded Anorac. He carefully studied the little man standing in front of him. *This little guy can pose no danger. He is half my size and I can easily avoid his staff. That long gown he wears looks more like a dress than a cloak. He should be easy to handle.*”

“I am your downfall; the end of your meagre existence” laughed the little man as Anorac drew his dagger. You can’t hurt me, boy! You will be but a small diversion. Your hapless Lord can watch this Guilds future die a slow and painful death before I finish him off.”

When Anorac opened his mouth the little man said “None of that singing crap,” as he began his incantations.

Anorac looked at him perplexed, as he simply said, “Cimion, protect us. Cimion guide us. Cimion lead us.”

“NOOOOOOO” screamed the little man. “How do you know that prayer? You haven’t been here long enough. You are an initiate, a novice, not a Master! This is not possible!” Suddenly the little man was caught up in a whirlwind that lifted him easily off the ground, effectively silencing any spell he had tried to cast. In the blink of an eye, he was gone.

Where did that come from? wondered Anorac. *It wasn’t from me. Or was it?*

He quickly cut the bonds holding the Lord and caught him before he crumpled to the floor. Slowly Kooramish’s voice came back, as he choked in rage. “Help me. We must get out of here. He will be back, and this time he will be better prepared. How you found me is for another time. The fact that you went looking for me means that my faithful servant and longtime friend is now dead. You can tell me what has happened once we are safely away from here.”

Anorac had a lot of questions but no way, at least for now, to find the answers. “Where to, my Lord?”

“Not to my rooms, that is where he found me. And definitely not to yours, or he may gain access there as well. To the cathedral; there is a small prayer chapel off to one side that only Cimion’s faithful followers can enter. Anyone else who tries will die a horrible death. We must be careful.” His voice dripped with disgust as he said “He has friends, accomplices, among us; we must avoid them until we can ferret them out.”

A loud noise was heard from behind them, followed by a loud earsplitting crash as something substantial was destroyed. There was a howl of rage, and then commands that were unintelligible bounced off the walls towards them.

Groaning, Kooramish said, "Quicker, we must move quicker. Something has returned and it doesn't sound happy. Damn, he has hounds. Faster, or we won't make it."

Anorac struggled to support his Lord through the hallways, following the gentle prodding he felt on his shoulder, until they reached the doorway to the main cathedral. “It's over there,” said the Lord pointing to a smaller, slightly hidden portal. “You must enter on your own, I can’t help you. Be true to our beliefs and you will have no problems,” he said as he passed through the portal.

There was no doorway only an archway that had been sealed with bricks. *True to our beliefs - can this day get any stranger?*

Anorac walked into the wall, eyes closed, expecting to break his nose on the hard brick. He

opened his eyes, furtively looking around, surprised to find himself standing inside the chapel. A small number of people waited for him.

Some of the faces he recognized. But many of them were strange to him. They showed signs of having just returned from a long journey; dust still clung to their cloaks, grime from the road was still deeply buried in their faces. Those closest to him had drawn their swords and were approaching him, murder in their eyes.

“Hold!” commanded the Lord “He is one of us. He has been sent by Cimion. He is to be the catalyst for us to rally behind. He is to lead us into battle.”

“Huh? What did you just say? Who am I? I am supposed to do what? Um, I don’t think so,” Anorac said.

“Cimion has foretold your arrival decades ago. We have been waiting patiently for the day that would happen. But you are older than we expected, and we thought we would have time to properly train you. All that has changed now, the time frame has been sped up. We need to get you out of the Keep, before they realize what we have done with you. But first you need to hear the story of our founding Lord, my father. Every Bard learns this story by heart. Before continuing to the next level of training they must recite it, without stopping, complete and correct. For now, be satisfied that you will have heard it.”

And so he began:

"This story is about Aloura, our Guild Master of long ago. He was the bastard son of Regula, the Master Bard. This story inspired his grandson, Mondovi, to compose the great song we all love and cherish.

Aloura, Aloura
He’s the Chosen One,
Aloura, Aloura
To face the Nameless One.

There once was a Bard, a bastard son,
Who travelled the world far and wide
He was a silver tongued devil, lover of wine, women
And especially good song...

Aloura, Aloura
He’s the Chosen One,
Aloura, Aloura
To face the Nameless One.

He fought, he ran and he could hide
From the constabulary
Until he ended up in the sewers
So deep, deep, below the ground.
He fell from grace, into disgrace deep below the town.

Aloura, Aloura
He’s the Chosen One,
Aloura, Aloura

To face the Nameless One.

He sired a child, but didn't know,
And traveled the land far and wide.
Fight did he all that he met
From the Nameless one down to his bride.

Aloura, Aloura
He's the Chosen One,
Aloura, Aloura
To face the Nameless One.

Cimion blessed him, beyond his dreams,
A fine lute did he receive,
A sword, a bow and a wife to go did he also receive
And a singing tongue did take the
Nameless One down.

Aloura, Aloura
He's the Chosen One,
Aloura, Aloura
To face the Nameless One."

"All trainees learn the history that accompanies this song over a couple of months. If you had the time you would be able to recite it from memory. But circumstances are such that there is no longer any time left" said Kooramish. "My time is at an end; it is time for others to step forward and carry the torch, so to speak. They will help you in any way they can. Take their council seriously but remember; the ultimate decision will be yours and yours alone."

"Huh? What are you talking about? Just a few days ago I was a nobody. Someone that wanted to become a Bard - someone who didn't even know if they would be accepted. Now you are telling me that I need to fill some role foretold by a prophecy that is decades old! Something doesn't make sense. Someone has to explain to me what is going on, what my role in all of this is."

"I told you that we were rushing this, that this kid wasn't ready" said Hortega. "What have we done? What have we allowed to happen? Our order, our lives, the sacred trust that has been placed in our hands, is going to be lost because of a foolish kid."

"That is enough!" barked Kooramish. "We have no control over the events that have happened, nor do we know what is coming. We can only influence the here and now.

"Anorac, how you were chosen, and what you have been chosen to do, was set in motion long before you were born. Even I don't know all the details." Kooramish coughed up blood. "But understand this, you have to make a choice; either you are in for whatever happens or you walk away, never knowing what you could have truly become. Either way, your life will be forfeit and those that hunt you will not stop until you are dead. You must make that choice now. If you will accept your destiny and help us - allowing us to aid you in the process - we can and will protect you, with our lives if necessary. If not, we will turn you free at the gates, prepare for the worst, and pray that it will be enough to at least slow down the inevitable."

“What do you mean the Chosen One? Chosen for what?” he sputtered in disbelief. “I don’t know, this is all sort of sudden. How do I decide? What if I am not up to what you want, or need? What if I fail?”

“As long as you try no one can ask for anything more. But you must decide now, immediately, what you are going to do. Our enemies have breached the walls of our sanctuary and it is no longer safe here. Until you voice your commitment and place your life in Cimion’s hands, we can do nothing except wait.”

“What do I do? It seems I have little choice; to die waiting or to die fighting whatever, or whoever, it is I am supposed to fight. I thought Bards were composers, storytellers, entertainers, and lovers. Not fighters, especially not soldiers for some god.”

“DO NOT INSULT CIMION!” bellowed Kooramish. An awkward silence grew between them.

“We are all that, and more. Some of our order has learned how to shape majik for their own use and become legendary healers and aggressive defenders of our ways. Others have become extremely skilled rogues, even assassins. Some of us are Blade Masters, while others have woven the majik of song into such a deadly art that it has become a weapon. We don’t know which path you are to walk, but we are here to help you develop it and master it as quickly as possible. Only you will know what it is you need, and that may take some time for you to learn. But we need to ensure you have that opportunity, but this is no longer the place to do it in. Even now I can feel our borders eroding as the threat builds.”

“Come join us at the altar. It's time for your decision.”

The small group of Bards moved to the altar, each kneeling beside one another, forming a circle around it. The position of honour, to the east, was left open, obviously for Anorac to fill.

Anorac struggled with his decision. He had wanted to become a Bard more than anything else for as long as he could remember. But now it seemed there were conditions being inserted into that dream. Slowly, almost reluctantly he knelt and placed his hands on the altar, following the example of those around him.

"I don't fully understand what is expected of me, nor am I willing to blindly step into the unknown unprepared," he said. "But I'll come along until this makes sense."

"Anorac, the time for indecision is over. You must embrace your destiny, or turn and walk away from it to face whatever is out there waiting for you." said Kooramish. "You must act now, or allow us to continue doing what we must."

Hesitantly, Anorac joined the circle, a weak smile on his face, his eyes hiding considerably more doubt than he expressed.

“Repeat these words after me, Anorac. Do not take this oath lightly as it is not being made to us, but to our god, Cimion.”

“I, state your name, do freely make this oath.
To fulfill the destiny that has been set before me.
That I welcome these men, and women,
At my side to walk with me along this path.
Through their council and Cimion’s guidance I will,
To the best of my ability,
Complete the task set for me.
If I fail, or betray this task,
My punishment will be one of obscurity, death,

And forever more in a life of unknowns.

Being turned over to Dorganna and her minions would be a kinder death.”

The image on the altar of Cimion shone brightly, touching first his hands then the hands of each person around the altar, until it reached the Bard directly opposite Anorac. The image turned red then black. Screaming, he grabbed his throat as his tongue began to swell to immense proportions. His chest was ripped open, his heart torn out and tossed to a pack of hounds from the underworld. His life was blood drained away by worms, his spirit sucked screaming from his body, clawing to gain purchase on anything that would stop its downward spiral. Anorac gasped as the words of the oath he had uttered not more than a few days earlier came to life before him.

“Do not remove your hands from the altar!” cautioned Kooramish. “Cimion has judged a betrayer by his own words. Pray for his soul, that someday it may find peace. We all know the dangers, and the choices we make we must live with.”

The cycle of lights continued until everyone had been touched, their hearts judged, and their actions considered. “If you are ever in doubt of anyone within this circle, you simply need to invoke this ritual. Anyone that refuses dies like you have just seen. But use it wisely, in times of danger it could save your life, or it could end it.”

“Quickly now, introduce yourselves, and then we must be off. Make preparations to summon the portal, but first make sure this room is clean.”

One by one they approached Anorac and introduced themselves, indicating the areas they had mastered or were still working on. Jambala the Blade Master, a Troll, would teach him the art of self-defense. Kooramish, a Human, the Master of all Guild Masters, Guild Lord, taught the art of song as a weapon. Kaori, half elf, half human, would share the secrets of a Rogue and the art of silent killing. Zimdooga, a Black Elf, taught the art of healing. And finally Moustaffa, a Dwarf, would try to teach him the secrets of portal calling and control; a valued mode of transport that could move people and objects great distances safely. The roles of the other Bards in the group were not explained, but Anorac assumed that they were vital ones or else they would not have been there.

Once the room had been thoroughly cleansed, the unnamed Bards stepped through the newly opened portal first, quickly disappearing. A short period later a few more stepped through, and then Anorac was waved through. His stomach twisted and heaved as he fought to maintain his equilibrium. Time seemed to stop. He had no idea how long he was in the portal, or where he emerged. Rough hands pulled him aside as someone pressed a mug of mead into his. “Drink it. It will clear your head and settle your stomach.”

Chapter 4

“Where are we? What was that thing we stepped into?”

“Drink, just drink it all up. All will be explained in due time. We are not safe here. We have a short distance to travel before we can rest for the night.”

Once the entire group had passed through the portal, they departed. Anorac seemed to be the only one unaware of just where they were headed. People fanned out and formed a loose group around the Masters, with Anorac in the center, and quickly walked down an unseen path.

"The portal has been closed, and all traces of its existence have been removed. Our trail has become hidden to anyone attempting to track us," gasped the leader of a small group that had just caught up to them.

It would have been a nice early evening walk through the meadow and up the hill, if it had not been one filled with danger and fear. His escorts, constantly vigilant for any kind of threat, moved with extreme care as they approached an old run-down villa, set high on a mountain ridge. As the sun set in the west, Anorac could feel the dampness of the high altitude begin to seep through his cloak, settling into his bones, and chilling him deeply.

The scenery was breathtaking. The villa overlooked a mountain valley that was covered in colour as flowers gently swayed in the evening breeze. These were bordered by stands of huge trees that covered the far mountainside; maples, oaks, and birches, dotted with spruce, pine and the occasional hemlock. Flowing above the tress were rough snow covered peaks hinting at immensely cold temperatures, even at the height of summer.

Anorac's attention was drawn back to the villa - their destination. The walls, neglected for a long time, appeared to be falling apart, at least from a distance. The villa itself had not fared much better as moss and grass grew on its roof. Shingles were missing and shutters hung by their hinges. Doors were cracked and kicked in. Some were missing completely. The grounds were overgrown, weeds evident everywhere, the gardens filled with weeds, the pathways all but obscured and gone. The sight that greeted them was not one of safety or security, but one of foreboding and treachery. A simple fire in the hearth would have threatened their lives with dangerous flames and smoke.

The lead members of the group hurried ahead and searched the entrance to the villa for something. Anorac wondered what it was they so diligently sought. Moving cautiously onto the grounds, they continued their search until they were out of sight. Shortly after they heard “A-ha, found you,” as one of them returned hurriedly, waving at the rest of them to follow him.

As he rounded the corner all he could see was a deep, dark doorway, the door blown off its hinges, and a dark, damp, musty room behind it. “Quickly now, close your eyes and step through the doorway. Nothing is going to hurt you, you just need to shut down the sensory input to your brain until it can be trained to accept that which it cannot see,” said a voice in the dark.

With a gentle shove, Anorac found himself propelled towards the doorway. As his feet crossed the doorsill he felt a change in the temperature. Light peeked through his tightly closed eyes and he was greeted by enough noise to indicate lots of coordinated activity was going on.

“Anorac, don't step on me! Watch where you are going, and open your eyes.” Kaori poked him in the ribs.

His jaw fell open in shock. He had stepped into a huge complex, one his senses could not come to grips with. It contained a massive kitchen with a table that could hold dozens of people, and a hearth large enough to hold a whole cow on a massive spit. Darkened corridors ran off of this central

area leading to heaven only knew where.

“Where are we?” he sputtered. “This can’t be the ramshackled old building that we saw on the mountain side.”

“Yes and no” said Kaori. “It is one and the same but very cleverly hidden. Only those with the key - a majickly created key - could ever find the entrance, let alone access it. It has been our main staging area for centuries. No one knows who owns the villa that used to sit here, but locals stay away because it is haunted, or so they believe. Something we go to great pains to keep alive and well. We are safe here, as only a handful of select people could ever gain entry. They have proven their trust many times over.”

“Why not just open a portal into this place? It would make things a whole lot easier.”

“Portals are made up of majik that can be traced, even followed, if you know how to do it. Our most adept portal manipulators cannot completely remove all traces of them. That is why we exit them a good distance from our destination. Only the most powerful portal keepers move from place to place with little concern over who would track them. A couple of our people have created another portal that leads any trackers off on a wild goose chase. Portals have very strict guidelines, especially as to their length, use, and destination. Opening one up in an area of majik could prove deadly, and not only for the user. Anyone else getting caught inside one would result in a devastation that would close off areas completely for thousands of years. They are called dead zones. We can usually go around them and a few manipulators, if strong enough, can actually punch holes through them, but they could never open a portal in them. Those people are few and far between and we seldom need to use them.”

“Anorac, come here,” called Kooramish. “For the next little while this will be your home. Study hard, learn quickly, and ask any questions you can think of. Everyone here is dedicated to help you fulfill your destiny, your calling, but you need to help yourself. Time is running short. Your days are going to be grueling and hard. Your taskmasters, more like teachers, are not going to be kind and soft; they are going to be hard and relentless. You have a lot to learn while you are here, and we are not sure how much time you have to do it in.”

“That’s right, laddie,” bellowed a huge Dwarf. “While you’re here, there are but three rules. Rule number one: Hogsbor, that’s me,” he said, jerking his thumbs at his chest “is always right. Rule number two: Always have your travelling pack at the ready - you never know when we might have to leave with little or no warning.”

“What’s rule number three?”

“When in doubt, refer to rule number one. Kooramish you big oaf, get your damned muddy feet off my table before I have you scrubbing pots! Just because you’re a Lord doesn’t excuse you!”

Laughing Kooramish moved his feet off the table, got up and approached a scullery maid to borrow her rag and pot. Carefully he wiped all the mud off the table and along its edges before returning it to the maid.

He grinned at Hogsbor. “Some things never change, you old goat.”

Laughing to himself Hogsbor returned to his work, firing out orders in quick succession. “Last meal will be ready in three-quarters of the hourglass, Lad, see that you’re not late, because no one skips a meal here unless either you’re out and can’t return, or dead.”

Kaori grabbed his arm and pulled him down a side hallway. “It is my job, being the youngest member of this group, to be your guide. This hallway is where we will sleep. The rooms are sparse but adequate; the beds are large and comfortable. Everything you will need is in them.” They walked down a corridor talking along the way. “Once you are assigned a room, it is yours until you die. This

place is majikal. It was created millennia ago, and no one really knows how big it is, just that it adapts to the size that is required. This is your room. You still need to be careful here. The rules here are not as important as in the training Keep. Just because you know where someone's room is doesn't mean you can enter it"

Anorac stood before a plain-looking door which resembled every door they had already passed. "How do I know this one is mine?"

"It will sense your presence and open for you when you place your hand on it. No one may enter unless you open the door personally. There is a safety mechanism built into the door that will prevent anyone from say cutting your hand off and using it to gain entry. I don't understand how it works, just that it does work. My room is right next door to yours, for now." She said with an impish smile that told him he was a marked man, that she had plans for him.

"Go ahead open the door and step inside. That is the first order of business. I need to show you how and what to assemble for the travelling pack. Once you're packed, I will show you how to secure it so no one can get into it, and where to put it."

Kaori stood patiently at the door after he had entered and waited.

"Ahem," she coughed, "I can't enter unless invited."

"Oh, sorry, come on in."

"Anorac, you know better than that! Do it properly!"

"Kaori you are welcome to enter my room. Please come in. How was that?"

"Better." She laughed.

Kicking the door closed, she grabbed his pack from the floor and began assembling what he needed. She rattled off what the items were, and why he would need them. "Cold weather gear goes on the bottom, wet weather gear on the top. Extra clothing on top of the cold weather gear, empty wine skins, strings for your lute, cleaning kit for your wind instruments, parchment, quills, and ink kit next. We will forgo any of the stuff for the portals until you learn how to summon them. On second thought, we can stuff them in an outside pocket, just in case. Poisons go in here, arrows and extra strings for your bow in here. Your daggers slip in here," she said as she flipped the pack upside down and inserted them in specially-made holders on the bottom. "Hogsbor will make sure you have hardtack and water as well. You will learn how to pack this on your own, and quickly, even in the dark. In order to be judged ready for the outside world, you will need to gather your gear from a huge pile and pack it in less than two minutes blindfolded, and sometimes that may even be too long."

"You need to watch this carefully, and master it now." She tied a special knot while whispering words he had never heard before.

"The knot, anyone can tie it. It is called a thieves knot and is simple to tie. It won't fool most rogues, but the incantation that goes with it will mess up just about anyone else. I am going to teach you a simple incantation. You will learn several others as the days go on, and you will have to develop your own variation."

Kaori again tied the knot several times, each time without the incantation. Stepping back, she passed him the rope and said, "You try it. Tie the knot."

She watched, making him repeat it several times before she was satisfied. "Now you are going to tie it while being distracted and blindfolded." She reached up and quickly knotted a scarf around his eyes, pulling the knot tight so he couldn't see anything.

"Go ahead, tie the knot."

"This is going to be easy" As he felt for the laces she started nibbling on his ear, then worked her way down his neck, all the while running her hands all over his body.

“No fair!” he laughed and squirmed in response to her groping

“A minute and a half left.” She worked her hands down over his waist, below his belt, and grabbed him. His reaction to her manipulations had the effect she was looking for. He could barely finish the one knot. “Done! Proved and I know it is correct!”

She slipped to the side to check his work. “Sloppy, but it works. The knot needs to be tighter and located closer to one side. Next time I won’t be so generous.”

“Come here, you vixen!” He finally pulled the scarf off his eyes and grabbed for her.

“Sorry, but Hogsbor should be serving the last meal now, and I will not be late. My ass still hurts from his last beating. He has his own tricks to teach us lessons, and they are ones you do not soon forget.”

She slipped past his groping hands and out the door. “If you are still interested, we might consider continuing where we left off, later. Hmm. Grab your travelling pack or he will have both our hides.”

Turning, she strutted down the hallway towards the kitchen, wiggling her hips, teasing him even more. Just before she reached the dining area she stopped and walked normally. “Hey Hogsbor, what have you got on the menu tonight? I’m starved!”

“Wait and see, missy wait and see. Did you two work up a good appetite, or is that for later?” he asked slyly.

Kaori turned beat red. “Old man I don’t know how you do it, but you can still make me blush like a schoolgirl.”

“You can put your travelling pack over here, under the cloak that’s been provided for you. You’ll find a sword, daggers, and a bow there as well. If you wish, you can leave your main weapons here, instead of risking leaving them behind. You should, within the next day or so, move anything you can’t afford to leave behind into that alcove. That means anything: your weapons, cloaks, gear, and especially your musical instruments. We will provide you with anything needed to train with, but the ultimate choice is yours. After last meal, take the time to familiarize yourself with the contents of your alcove,” said Hogsbor.

“Now come, seat yourself at my table, and enjoy the day’s last meal with us. Let the talk be cheery and light-hearted. There will be no talk of politics or the events of the day allowed unless the Lord provides special dispensation for it. Do you all understand?”

Quickly settling into an open space at the table, Anorac waited and watched the rest as they joined them. Taking his cue from those around him, he waited. Hogsbor set huge platters on the table overflowing with fresh bread, meat, and fish, along with bowls of steaming vegetables and a stew. One of the young trainees reached for a piece of bread and was rewarded with a smack across his knuckles; Hogsbor had appeared out of nowhere, a huge, thick wooden spoon in his hand. “You know better than that! No one touches the food until we have given thanks! Lord Kooramish, would you do the honour please?”

“Cimion, our great and benevolent protector,” he began, “we seek your blessings on the food we are about to receive; that it may provide us the strength and the sustenance we require. We seek your blessings on the hands that have prepared this bountiful fare as well as those that have served it.”

“Anorac, as you are the newest member of our group would you do us the honour of being the first to select his food?”

Not sure if this was a trick question, he sat lost in thought for a few minutes before replying. “Lord Kooramish, while the honour is truly appreciated and unexpected, I am not worthy of such a

task. Please sir, take my place and enjoy the last meal first, before the rest of us.”

Heads around the table nodded in assent. Apparently he had made the right choice. His actions were exactly as had been expected. Smiling, Kooramish selected his meat, vegetables and bread. Before nodding for everyone else to eat, he rose and served Anorac. “Please everyone, help yourself,” he said as he resumed his place at the table.

The food was passed around the table, along with huge pitchers of mead. “Make sure the pitcher doesn't touch the table until its empty now,” warned Hogsbor. “It is one of our traditions.”

Great care was made to ensure that once a pitcher was picked up it did not touch the table again until empty. Each person made sure that not a drop was spilled or wasted. Between bites of food the conversation drifted from the training, to new songs that had been heard or learned. All of this was intermixed with the latest gossip from different Guild sites. The conversation was light, bantering back and forth. From time to time important politics were slipped into the conversation, only to be met by intense glares from both the Lord and Hogsbor.

The meal was followed by a round of song. Some Anorac recognized from the inns he had frequented, often hidden off to the side unseen by the patrons. Others were completely new to him. He made a mental note to learn them as soon as he could. People began to slip off, by themselves or in small groups, some obviously pairing off for the night. Trainers were patient but firm; slipping away from the trainees with stern warnings that the time after the last meal was theirs to relax and pursue their own studies, not a time to pester them. When a trainee got too pushy they were reminded quite forcefully, and in a few cases painfully, of the house rules and were seen writhing on the floor in intense pain.

That is one lesson I will need to remember. Anorac thought.

Getting up from the table, he looked for his alcove. Finding it, he stepped forward and hung his pack on one of the hooks before slipping his new cloak over it. Places for his musical instruments had been cut into the back of the alcove. Picking up the weapons, he was surprised at how well balanced they were, how easily they fit in his hand and how natural it felt to use them, almost as if they were an extension of his arm. He put everything back to its intended place and returned to the kitchen. Those who had not returned to their studies gathered in vocal groups. Arguments could be heard building as voices got louder, and political comments were getting rougher from the larger groups until a loud cough interrupted them.

“You all know my house rules! There will be none of that here while I am House Lord. Anyone care to challenge that decision?” growled Hogsbor. “I didn't think so. Behave yerselves, or we we'll go play a few rounds in the practice hall.”

What is that all about? Anorac mused puzzled and concerned. Am I the cause of this threat everyone is concerned about? That group is going to explode real soon, and I am not so sure I want to be around when it happens.

The tension still high, he returned to his careful study of each person in the room. He smiled to himself as pompous fools tried to establish their position in a perceived pecking order, only to be slapped down by those assembled. He quickly identified the darters that quickly moved from group to group in what appeared to be a ritual mating dance. Gathering information, or just trying to insert themselves into each conversation. A few were huddled off to the sides, heavily engrossed in discussion, with one always on the lookout for the darters, growling a warning not only to them, but to their companions when they got too close.

Off deep in the darker corners couples could be seen huddling together, obviously enjoying each other's company, not caring about the posturing or the political dance that was taking place

around them. Amongst this fray Anorac looked for Kaori, praying that she wasn't in one of those dark corners and already occupied. He was disappointed when he could not locate her. She was the only person he could call a friend. He didn't think it was right that he refer to the Guild Lord as his friend - still struggling with the concept that he was his father - even though he had insisted that he be called that.

With a shrug of his shoulders he turned for the hallway leading to his quarters, careful to give the groups a wide berth as he passed, not wanting to get drawn into their discussions. He was not sure what they were discussing, but they went strangely quiet as he passed, all turning to stare at him. Their stares made him feel uneasy, like he was on display for the very first time and the audience was examining every minute detail of his life. He quickened his pace a bit to get away. Once he had gained the hallway he slowed, observing the doorways as he searched for his own.

He was startled by a small noise behind him. He scanned the hallway, but found only the hint of shadows that danced in the flickering torchlight. Shrugging his shoulders, he continued down the hall. *Must have been hearing things.*

The noise came again. He spun on his heel and crouched low, falling into a fighting stance, instantly reaching for his sword and dagger. He suddenly realized that in the haste to flee the old Keep he had left them behind. He cursed himself for not having taken the weapons offered in the alcove. He slowly backed away from the source of the noise, his hand lightly resting on the wall, attempting to find the entrance to his room, knowing that safety was just beyond its threshold.

As his hand brushed across each entranceway, the pain from attempting to gain access to a room that was not his grew in intensity. Refusing to remove his hand, he desperately sought his own doorway, continuing this way past several others until he found himself standing in front of the entrance he had been seeking. He had almost missed it; his attention had been drawn to another sound, this time behind him. Blindly, he pressed his hand against the door, seeking the right position. The door swung open and he toppled inside, grateful for the release, and trusting in the ancient majik that had created it to keep all but him outside. Howls of frustration could be heard, as whatever had been trailing him fought to gain entry into the room and was being constantly rebuffed by the protective spells. He shuddered in fear as it tore through his body and the screams ripped at the very fabric of his soul. He tried to retreat deeper into the room, deeper into his own mind, to hide from the creatures. Creatures? Somehow they had multiplied, their assault increasing with each new form.

The Demons circled, swiping at him, ripping away layer after layer of protection that his maddened mind was desperately trying to erect. Suddenly they parted and one large Demon, armoured with bone plates and towering over the rest, stepped forward. He grinned wickedly as he prepared to attack the layers before him. Anorac groaned. As fear now ran rampant through his soul, he sensed that this could be the end.

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“Anorac, come back! Wake up. You, fetch the Lord. You, fetch Hogsbor. You over there, yes you, you damn fool, fetch Zimdooga. Now all of you, MOVE!” bellowed Kaori.

“Anorac, come back, fight it. Don't retreat from it. Stand up to it. Form a mental picture of your sword, your dagger, your lute. Let them sing, let them flow through you. Let your majik free, let it fight for you. Fight, fight for your life. If you don't we are all doomed.”

The conversation in the room had gone deathly quiet. A pin drop would have reverberated through the room like a cannon shot as everyone turned to stare at Kaori and Anorac in a dance for his

life. The curious began to gravitate towards them. The older ones held them back, shepherding them toward the walls, out of harms away, out of the direction of the stampede that was about to descend on this room. The first to arrive was Hogsbor. He began barking orders as he pushed the curious out of the way. Those too slow to move were roughly shoved, and stumbled over chairs and tables. Senior members arrived and began gathering staff and students. Instructions began to fly as each group set out on a particular task. Materials were gathered; potions, strange-coloured sands, powders of every hue and colour. Glyphs were drawn on the floors, around doorways, on the walls and even in the air. Other groups were gathered in the centre of the first large glyph; chanting could be heard as the last line was drawn.

“Who found him? Who tried to pull him back?” demanded Zimdooga.

“I did,” replied Kaori, “and I know the risk.”

“Good, that will make it easier, but it will still be dangerous.” Zimdooga's expression softened. “Clear the area, everyone back against the far wall. I need the white and black sands of time, rougemon powder, powder of the hornroot plant, a huge mug of mead and one of apple cider, and a large bowl to mix it in. We need equal amounts of each, so someone fetch a measuring cup.”

The bowl was the last item to arrive and was added to items already in front of Zimdooga as he began to measure out quantities of each powder, carefully adding it to the bowl. Starting with the darkest powder he worked his way to the lightest one, keeping them separate. “I need another mug to pour the liquid into. Hurry now, we are running out of time.” A mug was thrust into his hands. Zimdooga delicately measured out the exact quantity of mead and cider before mixing them together in the third mug. Slowly, he poured the mixture into the bowl stopping it from splashing onto his powders. As the fluid level rose, the contents began to bubble; first green then red, blue, and finally amber. Reaching into a deep pocket, he selected a number of brushes. He examined each one with care before he settling on the one he needed.

“You know the ritual, Kaori. I hope you are not shy or bashful,” he said with concern.

With a determined look on her face she rose and began removing her clothing, dropping it casually in a pile until she was completely naked. Turning, she knelt down and repeated the process with Anorac. She had to fight with him as he struggled against the Demons buried deep within his mind. In frustration, she reached over and removed a dagger from Zimdooga and began slicing his clothing away, taking care not to cut or nick him in the process. Satisfied with her progress she lay down beside him and cradled him in her arms. Looking at Zimdooga she nodded her head in assent - a silent plea that this be over quickly - as her eyes closed.

Zimdooga began the tricky task of drawing an intricate glyph on the floor, not only around them, but on them as well. Lines crossed their bodies and joined with those near them. Giggles could be heard behind them from the more nervous ones, followed by smacks that quickly quieted them. His task almost complete, Zimdooga stood and began an incantation in a strange tongue. As he finished he closed off the glyph. The pile of clothes next to him burst into flame as the majik worked.

####

Kaori and Anorac were locked in a battle to save his life. She provided the warmth that anchored him to this world, while the cold of the Demon tried threatened to overtake him and pull him free. He fought, struggled, slashed, and kicked, but could gain no headway. He was tiring. He had never trained for this kind of battle. He had no idea how to fight this Demon, let alone win against it. In desperation he cried out, “Cimion, I don't want to die, save me! Save us!” Deep within his soul a

spark came to life. As it grew he became stronger. The Demon, sensing it was beginning to lose the fight, renewed its attempt to crush the pulsing spark, several times almost extinguishing it. Sensing that victory was soon to be his, the Demon attacked viciously. His huge two-handed axe cut through each protective layer, occasionally drawing blood from the near misses. Dropping the axe, it reached in with its claws and began pulling at the tear it had opened, sensing its victory - smelling it - but missing the rising power of the wishsong.

Deep beneath the spark of life a song was birthing. It was a song of glory, of light, and of virtue. About battles won, and lost, and wars that ended. About compassion and life, even though life could be filled with death. This song began to take shape; its tendrils snaking out to surround first Anorac's soul, then finally his body. Enraged, the Demon switched its attack to Kaori. She shuddered in pain and a slight moan escaped her lips. The attack had caught her off-guard. She fought back, drawing on strength deep within her soul, finding her own song. It flourished, gained strength, pushing the Demon away. The battle was intense as the Demon refused to give ground. Their bodies twitched in pain. Their souls cried out in anguish, as the attacks ripped at the very core of their existence.

Cimion smiled upon them. His presence gave them courage to stand firm, his gentle touch soothed their aching bodies and souls. The battle diminished, the Demon was pursued and pushed from their souls. The link to that world shut firmly, sealed forever, and would never be used again unless they chose to open it.

####

Zimdooga watched over them like a mother hawk, never straying from their side, his chanting changing to match what only he could see and sense. With a smile his chanting slowed and eventually stopped. He paused to wipe the sweat from his brow, and motioned for a chair to be moved forward. Exhausted and drained he was relieved that the battle was over. One of many battles they hoped to win in this war. This was a new level of attack from their enemies. This one was personal, with much more dangerous implications than any they had witnessed before.

"Hogsbor, we will need to add another facet to our training," he gasped. "Everyone must learn how to defend against these attacks. They are something new, something very deadly. If not, be prepared to bury a lot of our Guild."

####

Kaori and Anorac had stopped twitching. Anorac began to show signs that he was regaining consciousness as he opened his eyes. He tried to sit up, only to find himself securely held in place by Kaori, who had wrapped herself around him like a cocoon. It was a pleasant feeling, even if he had no idea why she was nude and all the Bards were watching them uneasily. The last thing he remembered was being in the hallway and tumbling into his room, pursued by something he didn't recognize or ever want to meet again. Zimdooga raised a finger to his lips, "In time, my boy, I will explain".

Kaori began to stir. She slowly unwrapped herself from Anorac, stretching her muscles and groaning in pain. The wounds were not visible, but she hurt just the same.

"You gave us all quite a scare," said Kaori.

"Easy, girl," said Zimdooga. "You are hurt and will take a few days to heal. If you had not absorbed some of the Demonic attacks, Anorac would be dead right now, and you trapped with the Demon."

“What was that all about? How did I end up here? Did we...”

“Hush now. We are safe, for now. The answers to all your questions will come in due time. A hot bath and some sleep are more important now than questions. The Demons have been beaten back and I sealed the portal. We need to remove this sand before we experience the pain it can cause.” Rising, she extended a hand to him.

Embarrassed by the sudden realization that he was naked, Anorac did not want to get up. Laughing, Kaori winked at him and pulled at his hand. “After what they witnessed, your nakedness is nothing to worry about. Most will avoid us both for many weeks to come. Come, we need to wash this mixture off, and the sooner, the better. It will start to burn soon and that is extremely painful.”

Walking across the room and down the hallway, he was mesmerized by her swaying hips. “Hurry up before the water gets cold,” she called, as she disappeared around a corner.

A quick glance at his body told him that if there was pain connected with this stuff he definitely didn't want it there. Running across the floor he followed Kaori's wet tracks into a room that held a huge bathtub, large enough for several people. Lounging in the center lay Kaori, relishing the steam and the heat as it soothed her aching muscles. “We are stuck with each other for the next twelve hours. The potions that we will receive after our bath will help us sleep a dreamless sleep, allowing our souls to heal. Let's enjoy the bath and what little time we have before we must use them.”

He settled into the hot water, the heat raising his spirits, soothing his aching body. He worked hard at removing the mixture from his skin, scrubbing it clean, trying in vain to get to certain areas that were just out of reach.

“Here, let me help you, and then you can help me,” said a sultry voice behind him. Soft hands worked across his body as the mixture was washed away. She worked hard, leaving no area untouched, making sure that all the mixture was gone.

“Done. Your turn,” she said, smiling and turning her back to him.

His hands were rougher, lacking the gentle touch she had used on him. He scrubbed her skin and several times she cried out in pain. “Slow down, gentle, my skin is raw already; you don't have to remove it!” His touch became softer as he worked the remaining marks from her body. Already redness could be seen where the mixture had remained on too long. Gently, he finished the job as she stood up. He smiled at her.

“We need to move to another pool where the water will neutralize the mixture and keep us from burning any more. And then one last pool just to make sure there is nothing left on our skin.”

In the last pool, they began the gentle scrubbing and inspection needed to make sure everything was clean. Satisfied they rose from the heat of the pool and towed each other off, Anorac paying particular attention to the areas she just couldn't reach. Hand in hand they walked into the next room. A roaring fire had been lit and two steaming mugs were found sitting on a small table.

“We must drink these. Before you begin to pout too much, they take half to three quarters of the turning of the hourglass to work. Does that give you enough time?”

Picking up her mug she quickly drained it. Anorac did likewise and settled into bed with her. He toyed with her body, drawing little circles across her skin, pulling sensations from deep within her to the surface. She moaned as he worked his majik on her. At the height of her building pleasure she brought him to a feverous pitch. Seeking release, they eagerly moved together in anticipation of it only to fall unfulfilled into a deep sleep, leaving them wanting.

Chapter 5

The early morning activities created enough noise to raise the dead, but Anorac and Kaori slept through it. Several times throughout the night Zimdooga had slipped quietly in to check on them. He had pulled a warm fur cover over them, smiling at the way they slept; closely tucked into each other's arms, smiles on their faces.

####

Many of the residents in the warren had had little sleep. All the glyphs had been redrawn. The ashes from the discarded clothes were carefully examined in search of clues that would reveal how the Demon had breached their defenses. But none were found. Several bodies of the newer trainees had been found; their life soul sucked out of them like candy, the empty husks left behind. These were gathered and removed to a safe place in the Keep where they were burned, their ashes mixed with the natural flow of molten rock found deep within the earth.

Zimdooga, a Black Elf, stood before the assembled group. He was an imposing figure, standing well over six feet tall, rumoured to have come from a small Nation on the Equator. Used to high temperatures, he was somewhat out of his comfort zone buried beneath all of this rock. His dreadlocks were carefully formed, creating long ringlets that hung loosely across his shoulders. His bright clothing enhanced the darkness of his skin, causing his teeth to stand out prominently whenever he spoke. He looked up at those gathered, quickly taking in the assembled group.

Every trainee, Adept, and Bard had been ordered to assemble in the meeting room. He coughed a few times, silencing the inquisitive chatter that had begun to fill the chamber.

"Many of you can remember nothing but a balance between good and evil. There are some of you who have studied and read about the times when evil was predominant in our world. There are but a handful of us who were alive during those times. Once again we are entering that time, and as Bards we are called to fight evil wherever we find it. We are at war.

"The goddess Dorganna and her minions are once again on the move. If you meet up with them, then you are already dead. As trainees there is nothing you can do to stand against her, but her minions are another thing. In small groups you will have a chance, but you need to recognize a Demon before you can fight one. They are crafty buggers and can take the form of anyone their Masters and Mistresses control. That's what makes them incredibly dangerous.

A few of the trainees shifted nervously from foot to foot, looking for an exit they could bolt through. Smiling Zimdooga continued.

"You are about to take a crash course in Demon recognition, call it a Demon Primer if you will. In their natural form they radiate evil, they stink of evil, but some have the ability to hide what they are even from the most trained eye. Once you have had a chance to smell them you will never mistake it again. If you do, then you will die.

"They come in several types but we will only discuss the three main forms."

As he spoke a few of the Master Bards joined together in song to create a visual representation of each Demon. The first one was a large, two headed hound they placed at the edge of the group, close enough that those nearest to it panicked and tried to run.

"Enough. Settle down, there is nothing to fear," he said. "That is just a visual representation of

what you might expect. The first form is that of a two-headed hound that radiates heat and stinks of sulfur. Don't be fooled; these creatures can become as large as a warhorse or as small as a puppy. They have skin that is a natural armour, with spikes that are both offensive and defensive.

"They have a fire breath that will melt the flesh off your bones." On cue, the conjured hound spewed forth great amounts of green, fiery breath and charged through the group. More than a few of those assembled passed out in fear. "They can attack like any animal, using their massive teeth as well as charging over short distances that would stun you.

"The only defense against them is a ranged attack. You can move behind objects to avoid their breath. Like all Demons they are best killed quickly and can be rooted or frozen in place.

"The second type of Demon that you will come across is a small creature that looks like a hairless Winklezort but walks upright and is known as an Imp. Their normal habitat is the fires of the Underworld and when they enter this realm they bring it with them. They will hurl lava balls at you that really hurt." Suddenly a handful of Imps appeared right in the middle of the group. At first no one seemed to notice, until balls of lava started bouncing off the floor. They scattered like leaves in a whirlwind, running in all directions. Zimdooga struggled not to laugh before continuing.

"On his own, even a trainee would have little trouble dispatching them, but there lies the problem - they are never alone. They usually travel in packs of ten or more and can devastate anything they meet. They delight in burning things and will leave trails of lava behind in tiny footprints which, if there are enough of them, can cause fires. Again, like the previous Demon engage them from a distance.

"The last Demon you will encounter is perhaps the most dangerous. It is a shape-shifter that will devour your soul. Once it latches onto you there is little hope you will survive. These cunning monsters walk among us today and only the most attentive person can find them." A large, grotesque form began to take shape on the edge of the group. While those around it were uneasy, they had seen enough that they held their ground while nervously watching it grow.

"They are seven feet tall and resemble a collection of shadows which makes it easy for them to hide in shadows. Their natural form is not definable; they simply look like a dark purple cloud. They glide across the floor and have numerous forms of attack. They will hurl a shadow bolt that does incredible damage.

"While this is dangerous enough on its own, their worst attack is mind control. They will insert themselves into your mind and literally become you. The most adept ones can take your shape and form and move freely within a specific area while their Masters keep your body alive. These are best fought using a group of Bards and a spellnet. The spellnet is drawn tighter and tighter until they explode, covered in the light of Cimion."

"Master Zimdooga are there any others that we might face?" asked a younger trainee.

"There are a number of them, missy, and most you need not concern yourself with. If you encounter them you will be dead before you recognize them.

"The most feared Demon is such a mountain of a Demon, it makes Hogsbor look small. It is armoured with bone plates covering its legs and groin. Its forearms are covered in the same plates. There are huge spikes growing out of its shoulders. Its head is a bone-plated helm that has two ruby eyes hidden deep within the recesses. The skin that is exposed is as tough as mail armour and deep red in colour. It carries its favourite weapon, a huge two-handed axe which it wields in one hand." The group gasped as the Demon he was describing materialized right next to him, towering well over his six foot height. It shifted menacingly back and forth from foot to foot before charging at a trainee in the middle of the pack. Everyone scattered while the unfortunate victim stood his ground, locked in

fear, as a wet spot formed at his feet.

"It is a conjured being that takes immense strength to summon and control. There are only a handful of Dorganna's minions that have the power to petition their presence. As far as we can tell, she is afraid that if there are too many of them they will challenge her position as leader.

"No one is to travel alone unless under special dispensation from a Master, and then it is only to your destination. Remember that we are at war, and the first ones the enemy will go after are you people. If they can kill the trainees before they are ready it makes taking us out easier. There will be no one to step forward to take over."

Zimdooga stood perplexed in the center of the large meeting room. He could sense it, something dangerous, but it still eluded him. Mumbling, he began to cast a spell that he hadn't had time to teach to those assembled. As the chant was completed a figure changed shape on the edge of the group. One of the younger trainees suddenly vanished and a Demon stood in his place.

The Master Bards in the room quickly advanced on it, pushing the gathered assembly out of the way as those around it were quickly devoured. Many stood rooted to their spot, thinking that this was another clever image created by the Master Bard's only to fall rapidly. Those with the quickness of mind to survive managed to get out of its way, quickly casting personal shields. This didn't stop the Demon, but slowed it down enough that it moved onto easier prey. Body after body dropped at its feet like empty husks, their souls devoured, as the pile quickly grew.

A spellnet began to grow around the Demon as Zimdooga joined in the ritual chant. It quickly drew tighter and tighter as the Masters wove their spell, until all that remained was a tightly-glowing net. The Demon, howling in rage, pushed at the net, searching for openings, exploiting the ones it found. A tendril moved across the floor, in search of a host, only to be severed by the net, forcing it to retreat or die where it lay on the floor.

A voice could be heard in the background, ordering those assembled to pray to Cimion for his protection. As the assembled group began to pray the Demon pushed one final time. The net stretched and groaned before finally snapping back into place, exploding and ripping the Demon to pieces, and covered in the light of Cimion.

Turning to another Master Bard he said, "Teach them the spell, now, while this is all fresh in their minds. There is something I need to do."

His mind churning over the events of the last thirty hours, he quickly left the meeting room. Nothing stood out, yet a nagging feeling wouldn't go away. Walking down the hallway to check on his charges one last time, he came to a sudden halt. The hairs on the back of his neck stood tall. He shivered outside of the one room they had not searched. Respectfully, he knocked on Kooramish's door and waited, but no answer came from inside. Again he knocked but no one responded. The next time he thumped rather hard on the door, and still got no response. He was just about to rap it with his staff when a voice came from behind, "Yes? Is there something I can do for you?"

"Ah my Lord, I thought you were inside. We have a problem that I need to address with you. Could we do it in the privacy of my classroom?"

Kooramish hesitated, taken aback by the simple request. "Why of course, Master Zimdooga. Lead the way."

"Would you be so kind as to meet me there, I need to quickly check on my charges and relay some instructions to my assistants. I would not want to bore you with such menial chores. I will be but a few minutes. You will find a good selection of mead wine in the usual place, please help yourself. I will be along shortly."

He did not wait to see if his invitation was accepted. He quickly hurried down the hall and

disappeared around a corner. Seeing a senior student, he pulled him aside and whispered, "You missed a very important session, but we will deal with that later." He then chanted his identity spell. Satisfied the lad was actually a student, he continued, "Do you remember the lessons I taught about code warnings?" The student nodded his head in affirmation. "Do you remember what to do when one is given?" Again the student nodded his head in affirmation.

"Good. Starbreach, my lad, notify all those concerned except for the Lord Guild Master. He will already be there. Go and warn those you give the code to, to be extremely cautious. Do you understand? If anyone should ask what you are doing, or where you are going, just tell them you are on a mission for me. It is a surprise for Kaori and her young charge. Now go quickly."

Pushing the young lad down the hallway, he turned and rushed towards the room where he had secreted Kaori and Anorac. Checking that they slept safely, oblivious to their surroundings, he said. "Forgive me for what I am about to do." He wove an intricate shell net over them, wrapping them like a cocoon, yet not interfering with their breathing or movements on the bed, but expanding the safe area already in place. He strengthened it up with a variety of nasty surprises for anyone that tried to breach it.

Leaving the room he hurried down the hallway, taking a shorter path that few knew, to his classroom. Using his spy hole he checked and found the Lord Guild Master comfortably settled in one of his chairs in front of the fire, a glass of mead wine in his hand, apparently asleep. Quietly he slipped into the classroom.

I need to immobilize him before the others arrive, or this could get messy. Quickly he invoked several chants, layering one on top of the other. Glyphs sprang to life, first on the chair, and then in the air and on the floor surrounding it. The net closed quickly, snapping into place. As the last glyph snapped into place, Kooramish reached out to test the cage. Licking his lips in pain, he pulled back from its prison and glared at the wizard.

"What is it you want? Why can't we move from this place?"

"Where is our Lord? What have you done with him?"

"He is safe, for now. If I don't report back to my Master, he will die. No big loss, his form is almost gone anyway. Then he will be mine forever!" It cackled. "Another soul to add to my being, oh I can hardly wait." said the being, shivering in pleasure. "The joy of joining, the intense pleasure of absorbing another is so delicious. My Master has promised him to me."

The door behind Zimdooga opened and several of the warren's residents entered the room, Hogsbor in the lead. "What is the meaning of this? What have you done to our Lord? Release him immediately!"

"I can't and won't. That is not our Lord Kooramish, it is a Demon. Until you came barging in we were having such a nice discussion. I couldn't understand how a Demon could breach our defenses, especially one that gained access so easily."

"After the display in the meeting room I began searching the warren, and came across the signs of this thing outside the Lord's room. The only answer I could find was that it couldn't gain access to his room. The majik recognized the difference and wouldn't let him in. There is a taint to it, one that was subtle enough to be missed earlier, but when examined closely, it stood out. If you don't believe me, ask him a question that only you and the Lord would know the answer to. Be careful, mind you; it is smart and anything you ask must not contain information about this place."

Hogsbor thought carefully for a minute. "Simple enough. Where and when did we first meet, and under what circumstances?"

Kooramish's image stared at the old Dwarf for a minute before answering. He wove an

elaborate tale of mystic and mystery as he replied to Hogsbor.

“Are you satisfied that I am your Guild Lord?”

“Nope. How do we get the real Lord home, and how the hell do we kill this thing?”

“Killing it will be easy, but first there are some precautions we need to make. Do you remember the response to alert you were given, Hogsbor?”

“I may be turning grey you old buffoon, but my memory is still as sharp as a tack. Of course I do.”

“Good I need my senior students, plus yourself once you have things in place. You will find what you seek in the same place” he said rather cryptically. “Hurry now; I am not sure how long this spellnet will hold.”

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Hogsbor pushed everyone out of the room and closed the door. He told a guard at the door, “Nothing goes in there without my say-so. Anything comes out before we get back and you are to kill it, no questions asked. Understand?”

“Yes sir, but what if it is Master Zimdooga?”

“You heard me. Unless you get my say-so, kill whatever comes out of that room. I will have what’s left of your hide if you let me down. What that thing will do t’you will be mild compared to what I am going to do t’you if you fail. Understand?”

“Y-y-yes, sir.”

“You there, post archers with a clear vantage point of this door. Use heavy bolts, covered in poison and majik stingers. I want at least one company here now, and lots of light. You and you, round everyone up, call it a practice drill, move them to the meeting place. All of you move quickly now.” He took a deep breath and bellowed, “You heard me, move!”

“Moustaffa, old friend, I am sorry to ask this of you. I will have Jambala bring the staff and students to you. They are now your responsibility. If we don’t make it you know what to do. The lad must survive at all costs, even if it means we all die in the process.”

Nodding his head in agreement, Moustaffa disappeared around the corner, out of sight. Hogsbor turned and headed in the opposite direction, calling out the names he knew that Zimdooga would need to join him. Instructions were given, packs gathered, equipment loaded. Items were fetched, and the ones of great importance loaded for transport.

“Well done, everyone. You managed to complete everything in the best time ever. But I have the misfortune to inform you that this is not a drill, but the real thing. We have already fought one Demon but not before it killed a number of our younger trainees. Some of you witnessed it; most of you missed the briefing we had after the event. You will travel in groups of four, Master Moustaffa is waiting for you and Master Jambala will direct you. Hoist your packs up now. Make sure the groups contain at least one younger student with the older ones. Move quickly now, no chatter, and do not break your groups. Follow Master Moustaffa’s instructions and you will all be safe. We will all meet on the other side, soon.”

Hogsbor shepherded the younger ones out of the room, making sure they were with at least three of the senior trainees. He was impressed at how quickly and quietly they actually followed his instructions. He had expected chaos, but maybe it was fear of the unknown or the excitement that calmed them.

As the last one stepped through the portal, it collapsed behind him. Hogsbor turned to the

trainees that had stayed behind at Zimdooga's request and motioned for them to follow him. They hurried down the halls, cutting through several side tunnels that were narrow and seldom used, until they stood just down the hallway from Zimdooga's classroom.

"It is I, Hogsbor. I have ten Adepts with me. Stand down now and report to the portal room. Master Moustaffa is waiting for you and will direct you from there."

He turned his attention back to the assembled Adepts. "Do you have everything that I sent you to fetch?" They held up their prizes. "Good, now listen very carefully. Once you step into this room you are committed, there will be no backing down. Let the song flow from deep within your soul. Do not force it and for Cimion's sake, don't pretend it's there when it isn't. Concentrate on your song, regardless of what you see, hear or feel. You all know the consequences if we fail. Speak now if you can't do this, or hold your tongue once we are in there."

Two raised their hands. "I am not ready for this, I don't know if I will ever be ready. I can't go through with this," spoke one, while the other nodded her head in agreement, as fear radiated from their eyes.

"That's alright. Not everyone is cut out for this. It takes a bigger man, or lady, to admit they are not ready for something, than one who charges in knowing they are going to fail. Quickly return to Master Moustaffa and he will open a portal for you. We can't have you in the warren, there is too much at stake."

Hogsbor looked at them. "The first couple of times I had to do this I ran scared as well. It was only through our Lord's patience and compassion that I ever managed to get beyond that. My instructors at the time wanted to bounce me, but he wouldn't let them. Go, you will live to try again. Our Lord has told me many times he sees promise in your future in this Guild. With some of us it just takes a little longer to find out where we fit in." The pair ran down the hallway. Quickly turning the corner they disappeared from sight.

"Is it true what you just said, or were you just stringing them along so they would not feel so bad for skipping out on us?"

Hogsbor glared at the young man. "What is my first rule?"

"Y-y-you are always right."

"So don't question me when I say something, accept it as the truth! Quickly now, time is running out. As soon as I call for you, you must enter the room. Remember your positions and adjust for the number here. Make sure your instruments are tuned and at the ready. If you break a string, drop the instrument and just sing."

"Master Hogsbor" said an impish looking young lady. "Why are there eight of us, when the number for a team is seven?"

"In case one of you falls, lass. Seven is the strongest number, but you still have a lot of training to complete. It is just a precaution.

"You there," he said, selecting one of the young ladies. "You will be in position one, farthest from the door. The rest set yourselves up, move into the room so you cover both sides at the same time. Take your cue from ... sorry, I don't remember your name."

"Felicity."

"Take your cue from Felicity. When she begins to play, or sing, join her with your voice, whistling, or instrument. She will be the reed that vibrates throughout the room. It is her tone that will set the stage for what is about to happen. You must stay attuned to her, augment it, and support it. But most importantly do not fight it."

"Quickly now join in prayer, link your hands and minds together. Cimion, grant us your boon of

protection. Cimion watch over us. Cimion protect us and help us in this task.

“Be ready when I call.”

Slipping into the room he left the door ajar so the trainees wouldn't fumble with it when they entered. Zimdooga looked up from his questioning and silently acknowledged his presence, catching the ever so slight nod that all was ready.

“Hogsbor, I knows yous. Have yous come to play as well? I look forward to this, and will enjoy taking yous soul as mine!” said the Demon.

“Come, do your worst, it will never be enough! I have fed off of the souls of thousands since we last met. I am stronger than yous can imagine. These puny spells will not hold for long, and then yous will be mine, all of yous. My Master will be pleased when I show him yous captured and tormented souls.”

“Just who is your Master, Demon? Who is it that pulls your strings, keeps you under his, or her, finger?” Hogsbor asked.

“Wouldn't yous like to know? Yous will meet her in due time. But now I tire of this banter. Go away and hide so I can have sport finding yous.”

“Afraid to tell me that the name of your Master? The great Demon that has said he is my better, and is going to devour me? I think not, I think you are a puny little puppet to a Master who is afraid to meet me head-on. Afraid that I will recognize him for what he is? A stinking little coward who sends vermin out to do his dirty work. Someone like you, someone disposable.

“Why would he send something like you,” Hogsbor continued with contempt, “in an attempt to kill my young charge, when he knew you were going to fail? He already knows how strong we are, and that we can avoid him at our leisure. Ah, that's it; he is tired of you and wants to be rid of you. I see now. Your Master is really a weak, impotent, malingering puissant that can't face up to his weaknesses, and sends others weaker than himself to die so he doesn't have to.”

The air around the Demon began to crackle, its colour darkened, sucking in all the light around it. Tendrils reached out to Hogsbor only to be rebuffed by the spellnet encasing it. Hogsbor watched the rage building in the creature as its flesh bubbled and pushed at its chest, threatening to break free from its cage.

Come on you ugly brute, just a little farther, give me what I need, thought Hogsbor.

“Why are we wasting our time on this worthless peon? His not-so-great Master doesn't care what we do with him. Maybe we should turn him over to our youngest Adepts, they would enjoy tormenting him. His Master is so weak and impotent that he can't harm them.”

“Enough!” bellowed the Demon. “It is time to die, fleshling! My Masters, Master Stogol of Kharafan and Mistress Striekna of Zortoga, will feast on yous souls. They will relish the exquisite pain you endure in your final moments of life.”

“That's it, that's what I needed!” Long strides carried him quickly across the room. He opened the door and motioned the young trainees into the room. “Take your places and begin.

“When you greet your Masters in the Netherworld, give them this message. They are known to us now. We will hunt them down and kill them. No longer can they work in obscurity, hidden in the half-shadows, and weave their webs. Thank you Demon, you have brought them into the light, where their lies will never survive.”

Howling in anger at being tricked, the Demon pushed against his prison. The spellnet groaned and moved with him as he pushed against it, no longer simply testing for weakness, but attempting to break free.

“Hogsbor my friend, step back against the wall,” said Zimdooga. “If that thing breaks free it is

headed right for you."

The Demon was so preoccupied with Hogsbor that he didn't see the trainees taking up their positions until it was too late. Their song began to reinforce the net, weaving it stronger and tightening the bonds that held it together. Howling in rage, it turned to face its new attackers. Tendrils attempted to reach out to the assembled trainees, searching, probing for minute holes that it could exploit. As quickly as openings were found, the song snapped them closed, causing the tendrils to be pulled back, writhing in extreme pain. The mass of the Demon shrank back into itself, receding from the closing edges, attempting to move as far away as possible.

"Spare me! The pain, oh the pain! Turn off the light! It hurts so much! Arrgghhh!" It cried out. "I will tell you anything, anything, just stop the pain."

"Where are your Masters holding my Lord?"

"In your Keep. Deep within it is a seldom-used room, one that only a few are aware of. He has shielded it with earth majik."

"Is he alive?"

"Just barely, but yes, he is alive."

Looking at Zimdooga, Hogsbor nodded his head, "You know what to do. I will try and keep this thing alive until we hear from you. There are two trainees who will be waiting for you in the main room. Take them with you. Tell them I told you it was their destiny to help you." Zimdooga sprinted from the room.

"Now we wait. If you are lying to us the spellnet will close slowly and the pain will become so intense that what you hand out will seem mild in comparison. If you tell the truth, it will be quick and merciful."

Turning to the trainees, he said, "Keep the song steady and even. Do not advance or pull the spellnet away."

They waited, and waited. Hogsbor could see and hear the strain on the trainees' throats as their song fluctuated, losing pitch. A few who played stringed instruments had switched to them, allowing their voices to rest briefly as their song flowed through their fingers to the strings. Music took over as the others played their woodwinds, resting for the final battle they knew they had yet to fight.

"Demon, how did you gain access to the Keep?"

All Hogsbor heard in return was whimpering. "Make the net a little tighter, might get its attention! Demon, I will only ask one more time. How did you gain access to the Keep? How did you get past our protective spells?"

"At their weakest point. Where they join the portals, there are gaps that we could slip through."

"We? Are there more of you in here?"

"Only the most skilled can avoid your detection spells. If I had been able to breach this room, you would never have found me out."

"You didn't answer my question, are there more of your kind here? Where do we find your Masters? Where are they hiding?"

"No, I can't tell you. What they would do to me is beyond your comprehension."

"What I can do to you is beyond your belief as well. I can keep you locked in that spellnet for eternity in a tightly knit little ball, and then place you on the altar of light, in the presence of Cimion. There to remain forever as a warning to others who follow you. Do you understand? You would not die; pain would be your only companion. It would be with you forever. It would drive you mad; cut you off from everything but the pain. Or I can end this, spread you throughout the cosmos, and protect you from your Masters so they would never find you. What is your choice?"

“Argghhhhh,” it groaned, struggling with the decision. The pain intensified as the spellnet drew tighter. “You gave me your word you would not tighten this cage! You lied!”

“Just a subtle reminder of what I can do. Now, what is your answer?” Hogsbor waited tapping his foot.

“No, I can’t. The pain, the pain, make it stop! Take it away! I can’t tell them that my Masters are in the old caves on the north side of the mountain called Thule. You fool; they will figure it out soon enough. Tell them and be done with it. The pain, the pain, make it stop!”

Gibberish followed that no one understood. The deep descent into insanity had started sooner than expected; the creature was slipping precariously down the slope that leads to utter despair. A place of extreme danger, Hogsbor had wanted more time to deal with the Demon before it began that journey. The Demon would become exceptionally strong if he could slip completely into it, and their spellnet wouldn't hold. He wrestled with his decision, keeping careful watch over the Demon.

It is getting stronger, a lot faster than I anticipated. Hogsbor thought.

“Now close the net, tighten the ball, and destroy it, quickly. Don’t waste any time.”

As the net began a fast descent towards the Demon, tightening around it, forcing it smaller and smaller in an attempt to kill it, they missed a small tendril that had slipped out between the cracks. The tendril moved across the floor, its target already identified. Before they could react, the tendril snapped around its intended target and quickly sucked the life out of it. As the lifeless body dropped to the floor, the addition of another soul gave the Demon the energy it needed to continue the fight.

Before the Adepts could react, Hogsbor joined the attack and their combined effort pushed the Demon back into the spellnet. It fought back, the spellnet groaned. Places were showing signs of weakening as it cackled in mad glee, attempting to exploit the new weakness. But this time the spell weavers adapted, shifted with the changes, keeping the noose tightly bound around its neck.

Fresh energy had been injected into their song when Hogsbor joined them. His song filled their hearts, brought healing to their voices, and filled them with newfound energy. They still struggled to keep the Demon controlled. The tempo and intensity increased as their legs shook with the strain. Fatigue showed on their faces, and a few showed signs of reaching their breaking point. With one last burst of energy they slammed the doors shut, pulling the net together. With a mighty howl the Demon screamed in rage and pain as the spellnet burst in a cloud of light, dispersing it all over the cosmos. After the intense flash of bright light, their song continued for a short while as they wound down, thanking Cimion for his protection.

“Well done, you have all passed into the realm of Adepts. Not the exam you had hoped or planned for, but a much more realistic one. You are no longer to be called trainees, but have become full-fledged members of our Guild. Rest for a few minutes, and then we will go back to the great hall, share some food, and follow the others.”

Hogsbor cleaned up the mess that had been created in the classroom. He couldn't remove all evidence of what had just happened. He kept a close eye on the new Adepts, watching for any signs of control or adverse affects from their ordeal. A few of them were yawning, showing signs of severe fatigue. There was one who showed no signs of what they had just experienced.

There should be some indication that she was just involved in banishing a Demon, yet she shows nothing, reveals nothing. Nerves of iron maybe, or just good at hiding her emotions. She will bear watching closely.

Satisfied the room was as clean as he could make it, he sent the Adepts down the hallway to the great room. Slipping back inside the room he began drawing glyphs in the air, on the floor and along the walls. A small but subtle noise intruded on his work, almost like a rat running across a beam in

search of its next meal. Spinning on his heels with daggers drawn, the forward motion already started as he gripped them to throw them, he was surprised to see the young lass standing in the doorway.

“Master Hogsbor, do we get to discuss what we just experienced? I have so many questions, and don’t know where to begin. I am so tired and every time I think I have one of them answered it slips away, only to be replaced by another one. The cycle is endless.”

“Lass, you must have a death wish, sneaking up on an old man like that.” He hid the blood in his palm where he had fought to prevent himself from throwing the daggers at her. “We will discuss today’s events. Why are you here and not with the rest of the Adepts?”

“They have gone to the great room. I slipped away and they didn’t even notice I was gone. Zoor and Felicity were helping Charles and Reggie. Dergis and Hostuka were lost in thought. It was easy to slip away.”

“Do not interrupt me again. I need you watching out the door for anything that may be lurking out there.”

“Yes, Master Hogsbor.” She turned to face the open hallway.

Hogsbor quickly completed his task and quietly slipped up behind her. “What is your name, lass?”

“Melinda.”

“Melinda, I need you to step over the threshold now so I can close the door.” He gently pushed her out the door, his hand on the small of her back. From the touch, he could tell there was no Demon presence in her. He would still have to be wary of her.

Hogsbor locked the door and slipped the key back into a hidden pocket. Checking to make sure she was occupied looking down the hallway he quickly drew the last of the glyphs on the doorway.

“Melinda, head for the great room. I am right behind you.”

Their steps echoed menacingly in the halls of the empty warren. Doors had been carelessly left open, in their occupants' hurry to leave. Hogsbor made a mental note of each on a map buried deep in his mind. They would be back here again, some day when things were safer, and he would need to know if things had been tampered with. This was his domain, his warren, his home, and no one was going to mess with it.

Melinda appeared to be lost in thought when they finally entered the great room. Seated around a table by the cold hearth were the other six. They had managed to assemble a small meal, but they were just picking at it

“There you are,” said Hostuka, “we were worried you had got lost.”

“Why didn’t you come looking for me, then?” she demanded.

“Master Hogsbor had told us to come here and to wait for him, not to wander the halls. Besides, we had no idea where you had gotten off to.”

“You learned a number of lessons today. First,” said Hogsbor, “you are now a team, and a team sticks together. Secondly, you either succeed as a team or fail as a team. Finally it takes all seven of you to make up that team so get used to looking out for each other. It also means you don’t wander off without letting the others know where you're going,” he raised his voice. “Now eat, all of you. I don’t care if you don’t feel hungry. Eat anyway. If not, you will experience massive headaches that will render you useless. We are at war, and you must be prepared to do battle at anytime. Do you understand me?”

He looked at each of them, waiting for them to nod their heads in assent. “Good, now that we understand each other, I must fetch a few items from my kitchen. You will not leave this room for any reason until I return. Do you understand me?”

A weak chorus of, "Yes, Master Hogsbor, we understand you," could be heard.

Banging and shuffling, mixed in with various curses in several languages could be heard coming from the cooking area. When he returned, Hogsbor's arms were filled with several items he needed from his kitchen; his precious knife set that had been given to him by a Lord of the Guild over 150 years prior, some other cooking implements, four huge cookbooks, and eight packages wrapped in a strange-looking leaf. Setting it all down on a table, he withdrew a small bag from an inside pocket in his cloak and began stuffing everything inside, everything except seven of the packages. The eyes of the Adepts bulged as they saw everything slide easily into the bag, a look of confusion spreading across their faces as he added each of the items.

"That is one of the many secrets you will become privy to now that you are Guild members. But that will have to wait until you give your oath of fealty and loyalty. For now, you need to carry this package wherever you go. These leaves contain a hardtack biscuit that will provide the energy to either keep fighting, or to replenish what you have burned during a fight. It is only temporary, but it could make the difference between living and dying. You only need a small amount. These bricks are for you and only you. Open them, feel their surface, smell them."

"They are attuned to you. They are poison to anyone else that tries to use them. Especially someone with majik in them.

"Gather your packs and the rest of your gear. If you have left something in your room, you have a choice to make: Come with us or stay behind and fetch it. The difference is that today's portals are timed and will only accept those that help make them. Quickly now, we must be off before that Demon's Masters figure out what has happened and send reinforcements."

Grabbing his pack, Hogsbor hoisted it onto his back, attached his weapons to his belt, and grabbed his musical instrument. Checking to make sure he had left nothing behind, he headed down the hallway. The Adepts snatched their items from their alcoves, stuffed the biscuit package in an inner pocket and followed him. Hogsbor knew they would be more worried about being left behind to find out what these reinforcements were, than where they were going.

Hogsbor made a few quick turns and trotted down a couple of hallways before stopping before an ancient doorway. He raised his hand to the door and it swung open smoothly.

"We have never seen this doorway before. Where does it go? Why has it been hidden?" asked Melinda.

"Before you were members of the Guild, things were hidden because you had no need to know about them. Now you do. But understand this: many things are not what they seem. If you have even the slightest inclination of turning to the darkness, then it will get quite painful. Each of these portals will examine your soul so deeply and intently that you cannot hide what it contains. Failure to pass that examination will exclude you from using them. Ah, here we are. Zimdooga my friend, it is I, Master Hogsbor."

What followed was in a strange language, one the assembled group did not recognize or understand. Hogsbor stood, patiently waiting for a response. The Adepts were fidgeting, fearing the worst. Hogsbor understood that they didn't know whether to prepare for a fight or to flee. Zimdooga replied in the same guttural tongue as Hogsbor, sounding like a challenge.

"There are eight of us, myself and seven new Adepts, who must still take their oaths."

"Enter and be recognized. You first, Hogsbor. Remember the consequences for lying!"

Hogsbor entered the room where he was challenged again by Zimdooga, and then welcomed.

"Call your young Adepts in that they may be received as well."

For each one, he said, "You do not know this young adept, but I vouch for them. By the strength

of my word and honour, you are to receive them until they can be properly challenged and respond on their own.”

“Then they must be blindfolded, and linked by a piece of rope, so they do not get lost. Hurry, our time is running short; we will need to open the portal quickly. I fear our expected company will be here very soon.”

They heard bloodcurdling howls coming from the other side of the door. The Adepts began to shiver in what looked like fear. Everyone sensed that they were the prey. If whatever was hunting them ever found them, it wouldn't be pretty, at least according to the legends they had studied.

Slamming the door closed, Hogsbor dropped a huge bar across it before completing several chants. Turning, he then followed Zimdooga and the Adepts down a narrow hallway. "Zimdooga, we don't have time to blindfold them. We are at war - if we can't trust them after what they have seen and done tonight, we will never be able to trust them. Lead on, quickly!"

“Watch your step. Duck. Stay to the left. Stay to the right” Zimdooga ordered, as they moved along the darkened passageway. Deep with the bowels of the warren Zimdooga finally stopped and said, “This may seem a moot point to you, and quite foolish, but there are things you are not ready to see, things that must not only be protected from you, but you from them. Hopefully you will live long enough to understand.” Turning to Hogsbor, he said, “Your two young charges have been safely moved and are waiting our arrival. We can port from here directly to them with little fear of being detected or followed, if the new Adepts follow my instructions to the letter and do not hesitate. What is your choice, Master Hogsbor, a direct route or a circuitous one that could take days, if not weeks?”

“As direct as you can make it. We don't have the liberty of time, we are at war, again” he sighed.

Zimdooga positioned the Adepts and Hogsbor before beginning to chant.

“Ignore everything going on around you except what Master Zimdooga is doing. Do you understand? Remember, the team is one, without one of you, you are nothing.”

Nodding their heads they watched the Master intently. The noise around them grew in intensity. The howling switched from the hunt, to eagerness in finding their prey, to rage that they were being denied access to them. Zimdooga indicated that they all needed to link hands to complete the circle they had created. Slowly the portal began to take shape until it shimmered in the air before them. Zimdooga nodded at Hogsbor, and released the hand to his left, and stepped into the portal, pulling the one on his right with him. The chain quickly slipped through. The last was Hogsbor as the first of the hounds burst into the room, slashing out in an attempt to pull him back. The cloak tied to the back of his pack was ripped to shreds as he melded into the portal. The hound, screaming in rage, tried to follow, only to be rebuffed, bursting into tiny pieces as a bright light ripped through its body.

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A lone figure stepped into the room, clucking to herself, “A private portal, how quaint. No fear, my pets, we will find them again, and then you will have your fun.” Mistress Striekna stopped to inspect the room. “Now, my pets, search this wretched hovel, find that which we seek, but do not destroy it just yet. We have many questions that still need to be answered.”

Chapter 6

The sun was cresting the horizon, and its warmth filled the valley spread out before them. The chill of the night air had long burned off as the morning birds began their daily ritual of bringing thanks to the sun. The spring flowers had reached the height of their bloom, and were giving way to the hardier summer ones. Bees were busy pollinating the old and new plants, bringing the hopes of the fruit they would soon produce. This serenity was interrupted by a voice filled with exasperated anger.

“Again. Only this time concentrate and do it right. You have to learn this, or some day you will die because your head was stuck in the clouds. Stop daydreaming, pay attention! Dammit Anorac, maybe we need to move this back inside, at least there you paid attention,” Kaori yelled at him.

She attacked again, feigning left and right, pushing him back farther and farther into the meadow. Each attack brought a stinging retort from her and a yelp of pain from him. “This is pointless. You just don’t seem to get it, do you? We need to find something else that you can use to defend yourself with. A staff maybe, or even unarmed combat. Nah, that won’t work because the unarmed fighters all use things that resemble a sword or daggers. Maybe Master Hogsbor has an idea or a suggestion, something has to work and click. I give up. Four weeks of this and you are no closer to grasping this than when we started.”

Picking up the training swords and daggers, she walked back towards the Keep, dejected that she had failed not only Anorac and the Guild, but possibly the world. “If he is the Chosen One, then why doesn’t he grasp this? Why is it so hard for him? He can easily pick the finest locks and lift items from the tightest pockets, but mastering the sword is a lost art for him.”

“Still no luck?” asked Hogsbor.

“No, nothing yet, I just don’t understand it. It doesn’t make any sense.” Shaking her head she walked off into the shadows of the Keep, not sure how or what to do to proceed.

#####

Hogsbor walked through the morning sun, enjoying its warmth after spending so many seasons buried deep beneath the ground. At first it was a strange sensation, and difficult to grow accustomed to, but eventually it grew on him. He had promised himself that when he returned to his Warren for good, that changes would be made. The structure would be altered; sunlight would be allowed to creep in to be part of their everyday lives. They had made a preliminary inspection only to find evidence that Mistress Striekna of Zortoga had literally ripped it apart in her rage. Thankfully Anorac had managed to escape her clutches again.

“Greetings, Anorac. I see you are running Kaori through her patience lessons again. Be careful lad, that she doesn’t fail them one day and lay a real beating on you,” he said, laughing.

“Lord Kooramish has put me in charge of all yer training, an overseer if you may. Need to step up your training a bit. Find out what you are good at, proficient at, and what you need to avoid. Time is running short and we still have a lot to do.

“Jambala is determined to make sure you have at least mastered the basics of the sword, or he says he will kill you himself in the process. I have requested trainers from different parts of the realm to come and help. White Willow, a night elf from the north, will be here shortly. She will teach you the use of the staff not only for spells, but as a defensive and offensive weapon. Azinga, the monk,

arrived yesterday and is ready to start your training immediately.

"Zimdooga wants to start your healing training and Moustaffa is pleased with your portal training, but you still need plenty of work, and Kooramish would like to continue your spiritual and musical guidance. He has recovered quite well after his last escapade, thanks to you. Your duties within the Guild have been suspended. For now, training takes priority. We should be safe here for a while, Striekna and Stogol are not strong enough to challenge us here."

"I guess if we must continue, then we must," Anorac said with a deep sigh. "A day or two to myself would be nice. When I was a trainee they never pushed us this hard, it seems like child's play compared to this. What is next, where do I go now?"

"First, you need to take a bath and change into something that doesn't smell, and relax for the rest of the day. They can all wait another day. You need to unwind, maybe catch up on some of your reading, perhaps?"

"Sounds like a good idea, except for the reading part. I could use a day to relax and unwind," he said, stretching.

Smacking him on the back of the head, Hogsbor looked at him and growled, "Enough of your shenanigans, you have several tomes to read and you're behind in most of them. It is still early, go take a bath, clean that stench off, and start reading. I expect you to finish the 'Guild History' as well 'Introduction to Healing' by last meal TODAY. Understand?"

"That isn't relaxing."

"Would you like to start your unarmed training today? I understand that Master Azinga starts his classes by showing you just what an unarmed Master can do. Not only is it painful, leaves lots of bruises, but he uses it as a motivator not to fail him. I believe we could arrange for that in less than an hour."

"No, the reading is fine. I will have it finished before last meal" He held his hands up in surrender. "A hot bath is not only appealing, but something I am looking forward to."

"Sorry lad, but your bath is going to be a cold one, in the stream that runs through the Keep. You will need to earn your hot baths from this point on. Same with all the pleasure you have been enjoying. Your training has shown a decent improvement, but now that it has become very important we need to step it up, intensify it. There is a council of the nations meeting in six weeks time and I need to be able to report to Lord Kooramish that your training is proceeding. You don't want to disappoint me, do you?"

"Ah, not really, not if the stories I have been hearing about you are even remotely true. I need a clean change of clothes, then I will take my bath and find a quiet place to read my books."

"Bath yes, quiet place, no. You need to learn how to tune out distractions. You will read in the great hall, on one of the benches. I expect you there in half the turning of an hour glass. Don't make me come looking for you."

"Half an hour, it will take me that long just to gather everything I need."

"Then you best get moving, shouldn't you?"

Anorac picked up his gear and raced off in the direction of the Keep, cursing at his bad luck, lamenting about how good he had it before.

Hogsbor noticed Kaori as she slipped from the shadows. "I hope you know what you are doing? This could backfire and we will be no farther along than we were before."

"Trust me missy, it will work. It has to work or everything else may fail with it. Just keep your end of the bargain, and he will dance to my tune until his training is completed."

"That I will Hogsbor. That I will," she replied, smiling as he watched her walk up the path

towards the Keep.

#####

Anorac raced into the Keep, up the stairs, and into his room. Grabbing clean clothes, the books he needed to read, and a pack to shove it all in, he raced for the small bathing pond. As he approached, he pulled off his clothes and hit the water at a dead run. Bellowing out in shock from the intense cold, he surfaced sputtering, to find that he was not alone. Many of the younger trainees were in various stages of undress, this being their time to bathe.

Anorac's face turned beet red in embarrassment as comments were made about his physique. Some of the lasses were dropping not so subtle hints for him to join them some night. As he scrubbed the stench from his body, a few of the bolder ones approached him to help in his cleaning.

"Oh no," he groaned, "Hogsbor has set me up again. Not now ladies, I have a deadline that I intend to keep." As he scrambled out he quickly toweled off. Replacing his smelly clothes with clean ones, he stuffed everything into his bag and raced for the great hall.

Catcalls could be heard behind him as the lasses heckled and called out invitations. His embarrassment was just fading when he found himself flying through the air. He had barreled around a corner, not paying attention to where he was going, only to encounter a short individual dressed in what looked like a full dress and a large straw hat. Anorac didn't have time to sort out who this person was, or the pain that shot through his back as he lay in the centre of the hall.

"Young sir, must be most careful of, hisself. Could end up getting hurt?"

"Huh," he said, gasping for air. "Who are you? I am sorry I almost ran you over."

"Get up young sir, I fixee breath." The stranger approached Anorac from behind, and grasped his shoulders. He twisted his back, first one way, and then the other. Anorac felt a pop as ribs slipped back into place. Suddenly he could breathe again.

"Thankyou sir. I don't know how you did what you did, but it really helped."

"I am Azinga, a monk from another land. I have been sent for to teach you how to fight like a snake, a crane, a monkey, and a lion. I am pleased to meet you, young sir. We will continue lesson tomorrow, at dawn. Be ready," he said and continued on his way.

Azinga, a monk? Is this the one Hogsbor was referring to? Damn, can't stop now, I am going to be late. Grabbing his pack he charged into the great room, found a seat on one of the benches, and flipped open one of his books.

"I see you made it, just in time as well. The last grain of sand had just started to drop when you opened your book. Next time try to be earlier," growled Hogsbor.

Anorac engrossed himself in the history of the Bard's Guild in general, as well as the specifics of his Guild chapter. He was surprised to learn that Kooramish was the first Guild Lord in over 500 years and had united all the different Guild chapters. They had found new power and authority under his guidance. Their members were no longer at the whim of a local nobleman or king. Working conditions had improved dramatically as the Guild gained more respect, until the only way to gain employment was through the local Guild chapter. Anything else was not only frowned, upon but had become a very dangerous adventure.

Kooramish had rekindled the desire for Bards to learn skills and develop their song from deep within their souls. It had been known at one time as the wishsong, but many were reluctant to use the name due to the stigma and threat it carried. Try as he might, Anorac could find no reference to either the threat or the stigma. He made a mental note to follow up his studies in that area, maybe even discuss it with the Lord.

Finished with the history book, he reluctantly put it down, just after mid meal, and started to

grind his way through the ‘Introductory Guide to the Art of Healing’. While interesting, this book did not hold his attention as much as the history had. It contained many references to healers he had never heard of, discussed mundane potions and their uses, and described herbs and where to find, cure, prepare, and use them. His attention kept slipping back to the history book. By the end of the afternoon, he had finished his reading and felt he had a good understanding of the information contained in the tomes.

He sought Hogsbor to inquire about other books dealing with Guild History. Smiling, Hogsbor was quick to point him towards the Keep's Library. He reminded him that he only had a few short hours before last meal, and that missing it would be considered an insult to today's head cook, namely Hogsbor.

Anorac immediately caught the implications and promised to return in time. He hurried down the halls of the Keep. These halls were stationary and didn't change as the user required them to. His trip covered over half of the Keep, running up stairs until he finally reached the top floors of one of the internal towers. Minding his manners, especially after his run-in with Master Azinga, he paused and rapped on the door, and waited for an answer. He rapped again, this time a little louder. Still no response. Trying the latch, he was surprised to find the door locked. “A library door that is locked; interesting. Why would they keep people out?”

Pulling out his lock picking tools he settled in and attempted to pick the lock. His first attempt failed, as well as his second one. “None of the practice locks gave me any trouble, why is this one? It is a standard lock, there are no hidden traps that I can see, and it looks well oiled and used.”

When he failed once more, he looked around expecting someone to jump out of the shadows and burst out laughing at him. No one appeared. He was about to give up when he noticed a small sign nailed to the door frame of the hallway leading to the library:

*Knowledge is power
Power is dangerous.
If what you truly seek is
knowledge for power,
then prepare to fail.
If you seek knowledge
for understanding
All you need to do is A.S.K.*

Why does this seem familiar? he thought. *Wait a minute, A.S.K.. Of course! The same as the door into the Guild! Ask and ye shall find, Seek and it shall be given to you, Knock and it will be open to you.*

Approaching the door, he spoke, “I seek more knowledge of our Guild Chapter and Guild's history. My journey has led me here to the library in search of that knowledge.” Reaching up he wrapped lightly on the door. To his amazement the door swung open. What stood before him were rows upon rows of shelves, filled floor to ceiling with tomes, some so ancient their spine showed heavy damage. Others were so new the ink hadn't had time to dry. Walking down each row he read titles, at least in the language he recognized. There were books from many different realms; languages he couldn't read, some he recognized, a lot he didn't. His gaze roamed from tome to tome, looking for anything that might contain the information he was searching for.

Reaching up, he removed a few from their location and carried them over to a table he found at

the back. Pulling up a bench he began to slowly and gingerly search through each page, quickly scanning it for anything that would give him a better understanding of the Guild history.

"In the 17th year of King Hildebrandt's reign a Royal Charter was decreed giving the Bard's Guild all the rights and privileges accorded to their craft. It was not until the 22nd year of his reign that the Guild's duties and responsibilities were outlined on paper and attached to the charter. "

In smaller text, more like a sidebar, was written, "The parchment containing the duties and responsibilities mysteriously disappeared the night the King died. Many Guild historians believe that whoever killed the King wanted to see our Guild disavowed. This was prevented by the Queen who, recognizing the potential danger to the crown if they lost their own group of spies, declared that the Bard's Guild no longer required the definition. The only footnote added was that the Guild Masters and Guild Lord were to be personally bound to the Crown. In return they would be allowed to function within the laws of the land, sometimes pushing those boundaries to the breaking point."

Interesting piece of information. Quickly he pulled another tome out and traced the dates of the Kings, and their heirs. *That proclamation was made over two thousand years ago. Wow.*

He was beginning to fill in some of the gaps he had encountered earlier, but there still remained a number of areas that he just couldn't fill in.

He finished one tome and was picking up the next, when he paused and looked out the window. The sun was beginning to slip below the horizon, the shadows were growing. *Damn! Last meal, did I miss it or am I late? Either way, this is going to hurt.*

Putting the first tome away he grabbed the other and headed for the door where he was stopped dead in his tracks, like he had run into an invisible wall. "What the..." he gasped.

Trying again, he was faced with a wall, a wall that prevented him from leaving. "Damn!" Turning, he placed the book on the table and walked towards the door once again. This time he passed through it freely, no resistance. "I will need to find out how to remove tomes from here, take them to my room so I can continue my studies."

Running down the stairs to the hallway, he stayed in the centre not wanting to run into anyone again. The doors to the great hall suddenly appeared and he pulled them open and quickly slowed down to a walk, and entered the room, trying not to make a scene. He was surprised to find the hall almost empty. He stood there, wondering if he had missed last meal when Hogsbor came walking out of the kitchen, a large platter in his hands. "Ah, Anorac, I see you are early. Good, take a seat, the others will be here soon. Not down there with the Adepts, or trainees, but up here with the Guild members."

"Master Hogsbor, do you have a moment? I have a question?" he asked.

"Yes what is it? Hurry now; I have a meal to finish preparing."

"How would I remove a tome from the library? I would like to continue my studies of some topics after last meal. I would like to do it my room where I can make notes and begin my own tome of reference."

"Ah, I see, you will need to talk to Lord Kooramish. I know how to do it, but am forbidden from telling you. Now I need to continue getting dishes ready. You have a time scheduled with the Lord tomorrow afternoon, you can ask him then."

Hogsbor started barking orders, ending any chance Anorac had to ask any more questions. Trainees and Adepts as well as other Guild members trickled in and settled down waiting for the Lord.

Kaori settled in next to him. "How goes your day, Anorac?" she whispered? "Better, I hope."

"Busy, very busy," he groaned. "Hogsbor had me read the Guild History and an Introductory

Guide to the Art of Healing. Interesting tomes, but they have created more questions than they have answered.”

“We will have to discuss them after the meal then.”

“The Lord is in the house. Everyone rise,” barked Hogsbor. “Greetings M’lord, we are honoured that you have chosen our humble abode for your evening meal. Please take the seat of honour while we bring you our fare. We apologize for the mediocrity of it - if we had known you were joining us we would have prepared a feast fit for a king, not this bland meal.”

“Hogsbor, I have never been disappointed in your cooking. Your food is beyond comparison. It is not only unique but you are a wizard with spices and have created some fantastic dishes. It is I that is honoured to eat at your table. Please continue.”

“M’lord, would you bless us by returning thanks for our meagre meal.”

Kooramish rose and gave thanks for the meal, for the safety of their Guild, and in remembrance of those that had recently died, admonishing everyone not to forget their sacrifice and to learn from it.

Hogsbor presented the meal to Kooramish first. The usual order provided for service based on rank; Guild members, Adepts, and then the trainees. He raised his eyebrows in surprise, when Kooramish spoke up, but inwardly was pleased. “Hogsbor, please serve the trainees first. We must honour their work as well as our Guild members.”

As the meal was served, the trainees whispered loudly amongst themselves about their surprise at being treated as special guests. The port was brought out, toasts were made, some celebrating joyous occasions, others remembering those that had died. Kooramish raised his hand and waited for silence.

“Tonight we celebrate the life of our members, and welcome new members into the Guild. We will gather in the lodge room and complete Anorac’s progression, lay witness to the completion of his vows, and welcome him. He will be afforded all the rights and privileges of a Guild Master, as well as the responsibilities involved in gaining that position. Brothers and sisters, we will gather in the lodge in a full turning of the hour glass. You will be challenged. If you cannot answer that challenge you will be escorted out. If you persist, the secrets of the lodge will be defended even if it means your death. Take these warnings seriously.”

Rising, Kooramish looked at Hogsbor, “A superb meal, as always, my friend. I would be honoured if you were to fill the seat of the Master of the Keep this evening. After all we, had planned to do it in the Guild Warren but were disturbed before we could complete it. I will take my seat as Lord and preside over the ceremonies,.”

“Of course, I would be honoured, Lord. I must prepare then. Who will be our young Bard’s sponsor? They must also prepare.”

“Young Anorac’s sponsor will be Kaori,” he said, turning to her. “You will be responsible for him until the ceremony and all its obligations have been fulfilled. Go now and prepare him for his trial.”

As he headed out of the great hall, he paused at the door and addressed the trainees. Standing with his back stiff, a stern look on his face, he looked directly into each trainee's eyes as he spoke, “Things have changed in the last few weeks, changed to the point that we are now at war. Everything that could have been done to prevent this war was tried, and failed. Be forewarned that there will now be severe changes in your training, both here in this Keep and abroad in any Keep or Warren for that matter. Your testing will become more vigorous and you will face new challenges, both in training and in person. Walking away from us, your training, and in many cases your calling, will not be possible. You have been marked by the enemy.

“From this point on, you will travel in a minimum of two, preferably four. Room assignments have changed; you will find the rooms have been rearranged to accommodate two sets of bunk beds. Some rooms have both men and women, others are strictly men or women. Those that are integrated had better get along. If any of the Masters have to step in and settle squabbles, there will be severe consequences.”

“Access to the outdoors is now limited to between an hour after first meal and an hour before last meal. You will not venture outside at any time without express permission from one of the Masters. Anyone caught violating this will be removed from the Guild.” He paused as the trainees looked nervously at each other. “TRAINEES DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” he bellowed.

In unison they replied, “Yes Lord, we understand.”

“Check the board posted just outside these doors for your room and bed assignments. Good evening.” He disappeared and the room exploded in conversation.

Everything was in chaos, nothing made sense. “At war? With whom, why? What did he mean, 'marked'?” Comments like these were heard from all throughout the room.

“ENOUGH!” bellowed Hogsbor. “I have work to do, you have work to do. It will get done. Tonight you will have until the lodge convenes to move into your new rooms. Bards have been set throughout the Keep, ready to help you. Listen carefully to their instructions, and follow them to the letter. Those on kitchen duty are excused, for tonight only. You can pick up where you left off tomorrow night.” The short-lived cheer was followed by a huge groan.

“Kaori, you know what has to be done. Be off now, prepare your charge. Masters Zimdooga and Moustaffa, would you accompany me to the Guild Lodge Room. We need to make sure all is prepared. My kitchen staff will clean up. They are in the capable hands of my assistant.”

Trainees scurried out, first to check the board, then to assemble their meagre personal belongings in preparation of the move. Some grumbled - they had waited years for their single rooms, only to find out they had lost them and were now sharing rooms with at least one other person, in most cases three others. The Adepts were surprised to find they had been moved to another part of the Keep, and actually shared rooms that lead off one common room, allowing their teams to stay together.

Kaori grabbed Anorac’s arm, dragging him down the hallway, into the lower regions of the Keep. “Our lodges are always in the lowest part of a Keep or Warren,” she said. “The entrance is marked in such a way that any full lodge member can find them. Tonight that secret will be revealed to you. When your name is entered in the book of life you will become a full member of the lodge. Like before, you will be questioned. You can lie to me, yourself, and the members of this lodge but you cannot lie to Cimion. Consider the consequences of that action very carefully. As you progress through the ritual, you will be clothed by members of the lodge, until finally you will stand before the lodge and make your vows. This oath is filled with repercussions if you betray us. It will be my job as your sponsor to carry out the sentence, and I have grown quite fond of you and really would not want to have to do that. But if you force my hand the lodge, this Guild comes first, and you will die a slow and painful death. Or I will die in the process, then someone else will take my place.”

“Ah, here we are. Cover your eyes.”

She quickly drew several glyphs on the wall; Anorac heard a door grind open as he was pulled through it into an alcove. There was a small anteroom, set before a huge iron door. To one side of the room was a smaller door that stood ajar. In it he could see hooks on the wall, and paraphernalia he did not understand.

“Do we go in there?” he asked?

“No, that is where the Master of The Keep will go to prepare. We go in here,” she pulled him into a room that he had missed. “We are in here until they call for us. You have had your instructions; it is now up to you decide. Are you becoming a member of this Guild under your own free will? Have you been coerced in any way to join? If your answer indicates that you have been forced in anyway, then leave under your own power, and nothing will be said or done to you. What is your answer?”

“Why the formality, why not a simple question?” he asked?

“The reason for the formality is twofold. First tradition, and second, it helps remind you of what you previously stated. What is your answer?”

“Yes, I am doing this under my own free will and I am not being coerced in any way.”

“Push the door closed; once it closes you are completely committed. This is your last chance to walk out alive.”

Reaching over, Anorac pushed the door closed. He heard a distinct click as a lock fell into place.

“I know it is cold in here, but you will now strip. Hang all your clothing here on these pegs. Remove any rings, bracelets, necklaces, earrings that you may have and place them in that basket. When you are done step into the centre of the room.”

"But I don't have any of the stuff you just listed!" he protested.

"It is part of the ceremony; a Bard would usually take years, possibly decades, to get to this point. They accumulate the trappings of the world and sometimes need to be reminded to leave it all behind."

Quickly he removed his clothing, and boots, placing them as he had been told. Moving into the centre of the room Kaori gave him his next set of instructions. He did not see her stand up on the bench behind him as she instructed him to reach above his head and pull on a bar suspended from the ceiling. He gasped in shock as the cold mountain spring water washed over his body, completely drenching him.

Anorac stood in the center of the room, shivering and cussing her out. “The least you could have done is warned me.”

“Not allowed.”

He turned to see her stripping herself, carefully placing her clothes on hooks next to his. *Hm, we have time, this could be interesting*, he thought.

“Before you get any ideas, you might want to reconsider where you are standing. You cannot leave that spot, if you do you have failed the entrance requirements, you ...” A huge deluge of cold spring water burst over his head, soaking him again.

There is no way anything is going to happen, at least not here, or now. Maybe later that will change” he thought.

Slipping into a deep maroon red robe, she pulled the hood over her head, careful to tuck her hair inside and out of sight. He admired the colour of her hair, how it augmented the cape, how the fiery red patch matched the well-kept hair on her head. She carefully wound a cord around her waist, tying it tightly in place.

Kaori reached into a pocket and removed a blindfold. Pointing at him she twirled her hand, indicating he was to turn around. Reaching up, she tightly covered his eyes, making sure there was no way he could see anything. The room suddenly plunged into darkness; he was completely at her mercy. He could hear the rustling of clothing, but could only guess at what she was doing. He felt a cold device snap around his neck, then felt the gentle tug of it.

“This part of the ceremony is like the first one, you will not speak unless spoken to, and you

will not do anything unless told to. Even if they tug on the cord, your feet are to remain firmly planted on the ground. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do," he said almost nonchalantly. He didn't hear the movement through the air, but he felt the stinging smack across his buttocks.

"Insolence will not be tolerated!" This time he answered with respect in his voice, his backside stinging from the assault.

His legs had begun to ache from standing for so long in the same spot, not allowed to move. Finally they heard a knock on the wall, or was it on a door? He wasn't sure; he thought he had only seen one door when they had entered.

The knock was answered by three more. After a short pause a door opened and he felt a cold breeze blow over his body. There was a tug on the cord and he was lead away. A hand pressed against his chest, causing him to stop. "Remember my warnings, and this will be over quicker than you can imagine. We all have done it; even the Lord had to go through this."

The idea was reassuring, but the fear of the unknown kept crawling out from the depths of his mind, threatening to overtake him. He stood, trying to anticipate what was going to happen, ears straining for the slightest hint of what lay ahead, but heard nothing.

Two sharp raps on the door were answered by three more. A short pause, then the three were answered by two.

"Who goes there? Stand and be recognized. None may enter but members of this Guild."

"It is I, Mistress Kaori, who challenges the keeper for entrance. I bring with me a young man who wishes to become a full member and Master of this Guild, and a lifelong servant of Cimion our protector and benefactor."

The hours flew by as the Guild tirelessly worked through the traditional method of accepting not only a new member but inducting a new Master into the Guild. It finally came time for the vote. Anorac shifted nervously as he heard a loud booming voice ask, "You have heard the answers, my brothers and sisters. Are they truthful and worthy of our Guild, of our commitment to Cimion? Is this young charge to be considered for membership in this Guild, to be elevated to the rank of a Master? How vote you?"

"Our Guild has spoken. It shall be done," came Hogsbor's voice.

"You have heard the command of our Guild Master. Who will stand as sponsor for this man? Who will accept the responsibility of his failure and carry out the penalties we ascribe to?"

Kaori answered "I will. I will stand before the Guild and make that pledge."

"So will I, as well," was heard from the back. Heads turned in surprise. This had never happened before; the Lord of the Bard's, Cimion's representative, standing for a new Master Bard.

"M'lord," sputtered the Guild Master, "this is out of order!"

The Master at Arms, the oldest living Bard in the Guild, coughed discreetly.

"Yes, Master at Arms."

"It has happened once before, long before any of you were members of this Guild. It happened the day our Lord Kooramish here was accepted as a journeyman Bard. If you refer to pages seven, seventy-seven and seven hundred and seventy-seven of the Guild laws you will find that he is well within his rights to make that statement," he said, a twinkle in his eye and a smile of recognition and remembrance on his lips.

The remainder of the ceremony sped quickly by. Anorac found himself being dressed, one piece of clothing at a time, but not the way he expected, by members of the Guild. First a loincloth was tied around his waist. A battle dress was added, which resembled a skirt or kilt more than anything else. A

shirt came next, followed by boots. He was finally led to the centre of the room where he was pushed to his knees, the blindfold ripped from his eyes. He was momentarily blinded by a bright light. As he jerked his head back he found the cord had been fastened to a stone alter which had the symbols for Cimion carved onto its surface.

“Anorac, you have now been received as a Master into the Guild. Before you can complete your journey you must receive a new name from Cimion. You were born into this world as Ragush, renamed Anorac. Cimion will bless you with a name that has been yours since before the time of your birth. Only he knows what that name is. We fight the perils of evil and by providing you with this name you will be marked as a servant of Cimion. That name is Vardash and it will be entered into the book of life. Only a Bard will be aware of that name, and only a Bard will be able to use it. Anyone else will not be able to pronounce it. Share this with no one and remember; knowledge is power, power is dangerous,” said the Lord.

“Welcome to the Guild, brother. Stand that we may greet you and welcome you.”

As he rose, both Kaori and Kooramish removed his collar; the cord was removed from the collar and pressed into his hand. “This is yours as a symbol of what has transpired here tonight as well as a reminder of what you have sworn to. Do not treat it lightly,” said Kooramish.

Guild members assembled and welcomed him, thumping him on the back, shaking his hand, kissing his cheek. A few of the braver women whispered that they just might enjoy his company on a cold night.

Laughing, Kaori slipped her arm through his “You are mine tonight! We have some unfinished business!” she said, smiling at him.

The remainder of the night was filled with mead, fine pastries, and sliced meats. Anorac was beginning to worry. It was getting late and Hogsbor had set a grueling schedule up for him. He needed to get to bed, and soon, or he would miss the call for first meal. He had no chances of slipping away from Kaori; she watched him like a hawk, cutting any interlopers away from him like an experienced cattle hand.

“Welcome lad. You couldn’t have joined a better group of people. This bunch will do you well” Hogsbor said. “I understand that you have some unfinished business to attend to. Classes will start after mid meal. Go have fun. Mind, if you are late for your first class tomorrow I will personally skin your hide from your back.”

“How do you know I have unfinished business to attend to?”

“Nothing escapes me. Absolutely nothing,” he said winking.

Slipping an his arm around his shoulders, Hogsbor steered him through the crowd to Kaori. He casually slipped his arm around her waist and winked at her. Deftly, he danced them through the crowd to a side entrance. Releasing Kaori he reached over and opened the door. Looking Anorac straight in the eye, he said, “You treat her right now, you hear? She's had a rough life and this is the first sign of a spark that I have seen in a long time. If you don’t you will have me to answer to! Understand?”

“Yes, Master Hogsbor, I understand,” he replied, with an impish grin on his face.

“Remember, right after mid meal. Not a minute later or you both will be scrubbing pots for a month. Now off with you,” he said pushing them out the door. His massive frame blocked the door, preventing anyone from following them, much to the protest of the younger Guild members.

“We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow. You all need to check your charges before turning in. First meal will be upon us soon enough.”

The Master of the Keep had spoken. Grumbling to themselves they all filed out disappointed the

party was over so soon. Some still engaged in speculative talk about what they had witnessed that night, but no one had the answer, and Kooramish had indicated they would get none.

Anorac and Kaori ran down the hallway, eager to be alone together for the first time in weeks. Kaori's gown flapping in the air kept tempting Anorac as he tried to keep pushing the hem of his kilt down. This failed every now and then giving her hints of what lay ahead. She decided to raise the stakes a bit and worked at the cord that kept her robe closed as she pranced down the hallway ahead of him.

The cord removed, she stuffed it in her pocket and jumped into the air, turning as she did. She grasped the edges of her robe and pulled them open, flashing him before she landed. Giggling like a schoolgirl she charged ahead with a burst of speed that surprised Anorac, until she reached the door she was looking for. Pushing her hand against her symbol, the door swung open as she dashed inside. Turning to face the door she slowly removed the robe, revealing her smooth skin to him as she seductively dropped the robe on the floor. Growling, he charged her, only to be rebuffed. Turning, she bent over, and grabbed her ankles, and wiggled her butt. "What's wrong, poor little boy doesn't want to play anymore?"

He tried again, still no luck. The effect she was having on him was becoming very evident. In frustration he placed his palm against the door frame to catch his breath as he pushed against the barrier, expecting to be rebuffed, for the umpteenth time. Surprised, he tumbled into the room onto the floor. "What the...?" he said.

"This is OUR room, how do you think you could see me? We have to double up remember, and I chose you. You are mine now; don't even think about trying to get away." She pushed the door closed. In no time, his clothes were scattered all over their room. His kilt ended up hanging from a chair, the shirt in a ball under the bed, his boots in opposite corners of the room. As he reached for the ties for the loin cloth, she slapped his hand away. "That is my job and don't you forget it!"

Seductively she removed the cord with her teeth, all the while staring deep into his eyes. The look was intoxicating, invigorating, enticing, and had a very definite physical affect on him. She smiled at the affect as she licked her lips.

"Now, where were we the last time we tried this?" he laughed, as he scooped her up and laid her gently on the bed before joining her.

"Right about here." She kissed him deeply. The rest of their evening was a blur. They made up for lost time and invested well into the future. Sometime around the beginning of last watch they snuggled into each other's arms and drifted off to sleep. Anorac absently toyed with a couple of scars, trying to remember to ask her about them in the morning.

####

Mid meal the following day came and passed very quickly. Training continued, and Anorac soon found himself once again immersed in the daily routine. His bruises began to heal as he grasped the intricacies of each art. His life with Kaori settled into a routine as well. The more he asked about her scars, the more she resisted telling him. It was like a secret part of her life she wanted to keep buried. Did she fear releasing the Demons from her past that she couldn't control?

Anorac ventured outside the Keep a couple of times, but only under heavy guard. Each step he took along his training path was being choreographed by someone unknown, as he followed pre-determined steps along a path he could not control. His lessons moved from the physical to more challenging mental ones, especially when they now had an unknown time frame to follow. He was

easily breezing through them, sensing his training would soon come to an end.

He had crafted a reasonable lyre and a woodwind from a unique wood found in the far reaches of the country, picked from a small quantity and carefully stored in the Keep. He had become more than proficient in the use of his hands and feet to defend himself with, and if necessary could attack with a savage burst of speed that did heavy damage. His song could bend items to his will, control others, and was capable of a tale that enveloped the listener, bringing them into the story, making them feel like they were an integral part of it.

Anorac had walked in on Lord Kooramish one afternoon, early for his next training lesson, and overheard a conversation he was having with a stranger. As he stood in the shadows, just out of sight, he strained all his senses as he listened carefully to the conversation.

"His training is progressing well beyond anything we could have expected," said Lord Kooramish.

"Perhaps it is time to continue his training in another location. He may be getting too comfortable here and needs to be challenged more before he learns his true potential."

"That is something we have been considering, but no decision has been made yet. We should still discuss it with him."

"We may have a problem moving him though. Portal travel is becoming more dangerous as it becomes easier to track."

"Yes Master Zimdooga informed me we had lost a few more well-seasoned Bards last week as their portals strangely collapsed on them, killing them before they could exit. We still have not been able to locate their bodies."

"It is time for Anorac's training. I expect him anytime now. We will continue this discussion at another time," said Kooramish.

Anorac heard a slight popping, followed by a flash of light. He knew from experience that the stranger had left, leaving the Lord all alone. He slipped back to the entrance where he momentarily paused before pulling the door open from the inside, and called out. "Lord Kooramish, are you here? I am sorry I am a few minutes late."

"Yes Anorac, do come in. We have a number of things to work on today."

Chapter 7

Anorac rose early one fall day and was greeted by a smiling Kaori. Their lives had become so intertwined that any thought of ending what they had become over the last three years brought him great pain. *I must talk to Lord Kooramish about making this arrangement permanent, then ask Kaori. I am not sure what she will say - I hope it is yes!*

####

“Time to get up, sleepy head,” Kaori shook his shoulder. “You were a little more adventurous than usual last night so I decided to let you sleep through today’s session. You needed the extra rest. Lord Kooramish is waiting for you in his private study. He expects you within the half turning of the hourglass, and you don’t want to be late. Hogsbor, Zimdooga, and Moustaffa will be there as well. Breakfast is on the table. I have some things I need to look after.” She walked out of the room, tears flowing down her cheeks, choking back the sobs building in her throat. *This is our last time together,* she thought, remembering that she would never see him again after that night. *I need to stay busy and out of sight until after he leaves.*

As soon as she had moved far enough away from the door so as not to be seen or heard, she slumped to the floor in a dark corner and began to sob uncontrollably. Her pain, pushing its way to the surface, overwhelmed her, consumed her. Struggling, she fought to regain her composure, to bring her emotions back under control, embarrassed at her outburst and lack of control. Slowly she regained her feet and moved away from the room they had shared for the last two years, memories flooding over her like an early morning rain. At first they were gentle, one flowing into the other, but soon they blended into one continuous stream, moving from one into the other, scene after scene filling her mind, ripping her heart apart.

She struggled for control and began to run - where to she didn’t know - just wanting to put as much distance as she could between them.

How she ended up at the top of the highest turret she could never explain. She had found passages she never knew were there, doors that she should not have been able to open had suddenly sprung to life at her touch. She had passed through parts of the Keep that were forbidden to her, forbidden to everyone. Even the Lord never came in here. It held a history that was always considered dangerous, one that could be easily manipulated for personal gain, and worse, used to control others. All of the recruits, and trainees had been taught:

*Knowledge is power
Power is dangerous.
If what you truly seek is
knowledge for power,
then prepare to fail.
If you seek knowledge
for understanding
All you need to do is A.S.K.*

It was because of what these rooms contained. She had breezed through them without thinking, without registering where she was, without understanding the danger she had placed not only herself,

but all of mankind in. It wasn't until she had reached the top of the turret and had burst through the trapdoor into the midmorning sun that she realized where she was, her mind still not registering how she had gotten there.

####

Anorac dressed at a leisurely pace and ate sparingly from the cold breakfast set out before him on the table. Next to a mug of warm tea he found a small envelope with his name on it, inscribed in a delicate yet intricate handwriting that he knew well. Sipping from the tea he studied the envelope, wondering what she had written. As he set his mug down to open the envelope he was interrupted by a loud thumping on the door, "Master Anorac, the Lord awaits you!"

"I will be right with you," he replied slipping the envelope into his inner pocket making a mental note to open it later in privacy.

Grabbing his cloak and the tray with the uneaten breakfast, he opened the door. Cedric, a young trainee of about ten years, waited for him shaking like a leaf. Anorac was aware that the trainees had discussed his amazing ascent through the Guild. He'd gone from trainee, to Adept and finally to Master in such a short period that he was considered a living legend. Cedric had been assigned as his errand runner and had fulfilled his duties vigorously over the last few months. He had stood guard over the door in the event that his Master just might desire something. Anorac had caught him sitting outside their rooms after a rather passionate evening and had banished him from his post. Realizing the implications of what had happened, he had made sure that glyphs of silence were erected, cutting off any sound that Cedric might hear.

"Cedric, take this to the kitchen for me, you know how Kaori hates it when I leave a mess in there," he said, smiling. "I am not sure how long the meeting will take. Make sure you go to your lessons after dropping off the tray. I will send word if I need you. Off you go now."

He watched the young boy scramble down the hall toward the kitchen. *How many years did I dream of the opportunity he has, he mused. He will make a fine Bard someday, if he studies hard. Hopefully his trainers will not make it too hard on him for being selected to be my runner.*

Reaching the Lord's Library, he knocked three times on the door, and then waited patiently for a response. Patience had been the hardest lesson; he had often gotten his knuckles rapped for being in too much of a hurry. Lessons that he didn't forget, the scars on the backs of his hands there to remind him.

His knock was eventually answered. A coded question was rapped on the inside of the door, which he responded to with ease, checking the hallway for interlopers before supplying the answer demanded. Satisfied the individual requesting entry was someone who should be allowed access, the door was opened. Anorac stepped into the room and greeted Moustaffa, Zimdooga, Hogsbor and Lord Kooramish. He was about to question where ask Kaori was when Kooramish spoke. "Welcome Anorac, let us begin."

"Ahh my Lord, where is Kaori? Is she not to be part of the discussion this morn?"

"Not today lad. Yyou will understand why when we are finished."

"Before you start then, My Lord," he said interrupting him, "I have something I need to ask first."

Before Hogsbor could protest, Kooramish first looked at Hogsbor and nodded, then gazed at Anorac, "What is it you have that is so important that it can't wait?"

"I have been doing a lot of thinking and have researched every book I can find for a precedent that would deny what I am about to ask, but found nothing. I did find a small suggestion that it had been granted once before, though. Let me show you." He walked to a bookshelf and pulled down a

very old and dusty tome. Carefully he opened it, and read the text to those assembled.

"If a member of the Guild desires to establish a permanent relationship with another Guild member it may only be granted under exceptional circumstances. Both must be a Master in their respective Guilds. Both must be willing to work together as a team. If such a relationship must be terminated, both Guild members would lose their Master status and would be removed from their Guild. This statute must be approved by the serving Guild Lord. Only under rare circumstances will this statute be evoked."

"And what is it you are seeking that would cause you to read this ancient history of our Guild to us?" asked Kooramish.

Anorac fumbled for the right words, made several false starts, seemingly somewhat embarrassed with the situation.

"I do believe the young man is tongue-tied. That is a first," said Zimdooga approaching laughter.

Anorac's embarrassment deepening, he finally looked directly into Kooramish's eyes, "I want to take Kaori as my wife. I understand the dangers of this as does she. But I can't even broach the topic with her unless I have your blessings. It is not a passing fancy, it is out of a deep love and respect for her. I can't even imagine what my life would be like without her. I am not prepared to go on without her."

Anorac noted the surprised looks on their faces, as Kooramish turned the text and re-read the lines inscribed in the ancient tome. He moved several pages before and after the entry Anorac had found, continuing to study the text.

"My son, I am not sure how to proceed with your request," he said, his words surprising those in the room. "A Bard traditionally does not marry, as it is not safe for a spouse or any children they produce. Our calling is inherently dangerous, and giving our enemies any advantage puts us in danger. Having a wife allows them to generate leverage that can be used against you and us. Are you sure you wish to evoke this request? Are you sure you understand its consequences? Does Kaori understand the consequences?"

Anorac's hand had slipped into his pocket for the envelope he had picked up at the edge of his tea mug. Carefully he pulled it free, his hand trembling. His name was inscribed in intricate calligraphy.

"I think she does. Could I have a moment please? This envelope was left for me. I need to read it before continuing."

He walked over to an area where he had some privacy, not waiting for permission or approval. Once he was sure there were no traps concealed in it, he slit the edge with his dagger and gently removed a delicate slip of paper from the envelope.

Anorac, my love,

I know you are leaving today and wish I could be there to see you off. These last three years have been absolutely amazing, and I thank you for them. But my heart is aching, breaking, threatening to tear me apart. I know you have to leave, that everything you have worked for, completed, been pushed through, is all in preparation to meet your destiny.

But it is a destiny that doesn't include me. I cannot hold you back. It would be dangerous and very selfish. Do not try to find me. Keep me in a secret place in your heart where you lock up all your sacred possessions.

I will love you forever.

K

The page was covered with tiny splashes; ink had been smeared away where they had fallen. Anorac's heart cried out in anguish. *No, it can't be.*

He looked at the group assembled "It is all your fault that she won't come with me! Destiny or not, I am not leaving this Keep without her and will tear it apart, stone by stone, until I find her. Get in my way and you will die!"

He charged for the door, ripping it open with enough force that it slammed against the wall.

"Maybe we made a mistake, misjudged the lad," said Hogsbor.

"Should we at least follow him to make sure he lives long enough to look at this rationally?" asked Zimdooga.

"I will go after him. Hogsbor, watch the front gate, place extra sentries at all the entrance points. No one is to stop him from leaving, but we must know if he does. Zimdooga, make sure the majik clamp is strengthened; we don't need him trying to use a portal in here and announcing to the world where he is. Moustaffa, come with me. These old bones are not what they used to be. If we hurry we can catch up to him. Be careful, I don't think it would take much to set him off on a killing spree."

"But where did he go? How do we track him when we don't know where to look for him?"

"Simple, my friend, he went back to their rooms. He will begin his search from there. Any ideas on where Kaori may have slipped away to would be greatly appreciated. It might even save us some time."

Taking advantage of secret passageways, Kooramish and Moustaffa met Anorac as he was exiting his rooms. Holding his hands up, Kooramish said, "I am sorry. We made a mistake for all the right reasons. We did not understand how strong your bond with her had grown, and she wouldn't tell us. There are areas in this Keep that no one has entered in thousands of years, and if you wander into one of them it will kill you, no questions asked. Let us join you; we may be able to find a way around them for you."

"You can come, but at the first sign of interference or an attempt to stop me, and you die. My destiny means nothing to me without Kaori at my side. If she is to stay here and wait for me, then it is a decision we need to make, not you. Understand?" he growled.

They both nodded.

"She has not been back since she left earlier. She did not take anything with her but what she had been wearing." Anorac paced as he spoke, his eyes darting back and forth as he looked for more clues. His agitation was evidence that his nerves were raw, his attitude indicating that he was very close to exploding. "Her tracks lead around the corner there where she spent some time slumped against the wall. By the mess that is there she cried really hard. From that point she slipped down the hall. I lost her track a few times but picked it up again a little farther on. She is really upset and has left a trail that a three year old could follow, which is not like her."

"Show us where her trail ends," said Moustaffa. "There are hidden passages in this place you will never find; they are keyed to specific people, and only they can use them, plus myself, of course. I can change them at will and force them, if necessary to adapt to my needs."

As they approached the last set of tracks Anorac had found, Moustaffa began to smile. "Ah, she has finally learned how to do it. Good for her."

"Learned what?" demanded Anorac.

“Not now lad, we can discuss it later.” Quickly he manipulated the air and a portal appeared before them. Anorac stepped forward into the portal, but a firm hand held him back. “There are many things you still need to learn, lad. This is one of them. Never rush into a new portal, give it time to stabilize, or you may find yourself someplace rather unpleasant, like encased in rock,” said Zimdooga.

Anorac waited a few minutes. The portal colour changed from a dark, ominous red to a softer fuchsia. “It is safe now, remember the colours.”

Anorac stepped through the opening, conjured up a small amount of light, and followed Kaori’s trail through the dust. It changed direction a few times, sometimes doubling back on itself, following no logical pattern. They had moved farther and farther into the Keep. Occasionally they stepped into hallways he didn’t recognize or through rooms he hadn’t known existed. Once, his advance was abruptly halted by two strong hands on his shoulders, as they yanked him back off of his feet. As he struggled to draw his sword, a hand clamped over it, another over his mouth. A voice in his ear hissed, “Stop or we will all die. Tell me what you see, and do it quietly.”

“I see an entrance way, to a vast room filled with tomes, gadgets, pieces of armour, weapons, orbs, flasks, and countless other things I can’t describe. I also see Kaori’s path as clearly as if she were walking in the snow. It winds through the room and goes up that grand staircase at the other end.”

Kooramish whispered again, “This area is protected by a glyph, a very powerful spell that will incinerate you on the spot if you make too much noise. We have found no known defense for it. What we do know is that if you touch anything in that room that has not called you to it, you die instantly. Everything will be gone, not even a speck of dust will remain behind. If you are going in there then we need to take a few precautions, but we must quietly exit this room to make them. Nod your head if you understand, then back slowly out of the room.”

Anorac followed the lead of the other two. Outside the room Kooramish said. “Moustaffa, how the hell did she get in there? No one could survive that walk. Is there something going on here you have neglected to tell me about?”

“No, my Lord. Nothing that I know off.”

“Strange. Who is playing with us now? All right lad, if you are determined to follow Kaori there are a few very simple rules you need to understand and obey, or it will kill at the very least both of you, and most likely all of us if you mess up. Remove your cloak and lay it on the floor. Remove all your weapons, and I mean all of them, including your thieves’ weapons, and place them on your cloak. Remove your pouches from your belt and yes you can put your belt back on. Put them on the cloak. Roll your cloak up, tie it closed, and seal it with a spell, just like you were taught in class. Place it quietly in the center of the doorway and return here.”

Anorac did as he was asked, becoming more and more agitated, wanting to find Kaori as quickly as he could.

“You will be enticed, almost compelled, to pick up things up as you go through the room. They will sing out to you, they will tweak your desire, spike your lust. Each attempt to persuade you to handle them, to possess them, will be stronger than the previous. Do not touch anything, do you understand?”

He nodded and waited for Kooramish to continue. “Once, long ago, I had to make this very same walk and it terrified me. I fully understood the implications of what I was doing. It was, shall we say, a rite of passage to becoming Lord of this Guild. There is one other condition for you to enter this room.” Grasping his scarf he securely bound Anorac’s eyes. “You must be blindfolded to survive

the temptation of sight, and deaf to survive the temptation of sound. Follow your instincts; it is the only way to get through there.”

Nodding his head yes, he felt the ends of the scarf being pushed into his ears. He was led to the door entrance and placed so that his bundle was against his right foot. Looking up, he gasped; the room had come alive. He could see beyond the barrier things that had not been seen before suddenly came alive. He saw two huge dog-like creatures, one on either side of the door, just inside the room. These two-headed animals had immense bodies covered in thick, blood red fur. He could see skin with huge spikes protruding through it around their necks. Heat poured off them in waves, rising from the fire that emanated from their skin. They watched his every move. They would be ready to pounce on him. He hesitated, not sure whether or not to turn back. As fear crept into his mind Kooramish's warnings fought to gain his attention: *Follow your instincts; it is the only way to get through there.* The desire and the need to find Kaori became stronger, pushing away his fear. Beyond the dogs floated harpies, nasty looking creatures that would swoop down between the piles of items. Across the floor scurried spiders, as they competed with multi-coloured snakes for the mice and rats that inhabited the corners and darkest reaches of the library. He shuddered at the thought of even brushing up against any of these creatures. He understood Kooramish's warnings, the dangers that he faced, and the impact of failure. If this collection was released on the Keep no one would survive - how do you fight that which you cannot see?

Kaori's track lit up in his mind. He wanted to hurry, but caution took a firm grip on his steps. Sometimes he paused in mid-step, sometimes having to retreat or simply wait as something slithered or scurried across his path. Several times he felt his gaze being pulled to something that lay hidden just beyond his grasp. The tug was tantalizing, promising huge wealth, fame, strength, prowess, but it was just that, a temptation. He pushed on, struggling to stay focused, the fear of what lay beyond his path becoming greater than the enticement to pick something up. Beautiful, half-dressed women reached out to him, singing, or so he assumed, urging him to join them, promising tantalizing adventures. His firm resolve to find Kaori, to take her with him, or to die trying, kept his path the same as hers. Step by weary step he worked his way through the room.

He mounted the stairs and faced the next obstacle. Before him stood a huge Ruby Red Dragon. When he moved to one side to go around it, it moved with him. When he moved the other way, the same thing happened.

“What is your business here, mortal?” it hissed.

“I seek someone who is important to me. Someone I would give my life for.”

“You are trespassing mortal! No one but your Lord is allowed up here, and he is still alive! Why should I let you pass? Why should I not just eat you and be done with this charade, you are obviously an interloper, a trespasser.”

“What are you?” he asked, struggling to maintain his composure. Every nerve in his body was screaming for him to run, but his feet refused to move.

“I am an Ethereal Ruby Red Dragon, and you are uninvited. What is it you seek? Riches, fame, fortune?”

“I seek someone who has become part of me, someone without whom I will die. Either way I have nothing to lose. Move or be moved,” he growled.

Laughing, the huge Dragon spit fire from its mouth. “Such big talk for such a little mortal, one without a weapon, one without armour. Alright, little one, I will play your game. What do you propose? If it bores me I will eat you, after I cook you of course.

“You may ask me one question, and one question only. If I get it right, then you will let me pass.

If I get it wrong then you are free to do what you will. If either of us breaks these rules, he loses and the other wins. Agreed?"

"Hmmm interesting concept. How do you know that I will not simply eat you anyway?"

"Because Dragons are honourable creatures. Even twisted evil ones."

It roared, "Don't try my patience little one, or insult my intelligence."

Anorac found a huge tree in full colour standing before him. The leaves were rich green and the vines that encircled it were deep ruby red, like the scales of the Dragon. "All right little one, here is your question. How many leaves are on the tree?"

Without missing a beat Anorac said, "Five million, seven hundred fifty-five thousand, nine hundred and six."

The Dragon stood there looking at him, shaking his head "Are you sure?"

Anorac smiled, walked right up to the Dragon and stared into his big beady eye. "That is your second question. Step aside and allow me to pass!"

Howls of rage escaped the Dragon as it rose to its full height. Drawing a huge breath Anorac could feel the heat beginning to build within the Dragon as he prepared to die. He was surprised when the huge beast settled back down and allowed the building fire to subside.

"Well played little one, well played. I have not been beaten that easily in a very long time. We will need to play some more one day, only I won't be so easily fooled. You may pass, but remember; once you go beyond these doors the only way to return through them is to fight your way out." Snorting a ball of flame that filled the air, a portal appeared. Kaori's tracks led right into the portal, and along the hallway beyond. Anorac hurried to follow them, carefully putting his foot in each of the tracks she had left behind.

The trail wound through other anterooms, crossing hallways and along the openings for armouries, galleries, and more libraries, each with their own enticing features. He passed swords of legends, armour that gave off different colours, tomes that danced with hidden secrets, jewelry that filled him with promises that he knew they couldn't keep. Each he resolutely rebuffed, keeping his mind on Kaori, keeping his heart alive.

Rounding a corner, Kaori's track simply vanished into complete and utter darkness. Tearing at the blindfold he pulled it free from his eyes and the ends from his ears. He blinked several times as his eyesight adjusted, his attention drawn to a loud noise that could be heard in front of him. The air was swirling the dust as he found the reason for the disappearance of Kaori's tracks. Anorac pushed on, fighting the wind, forcing his way through the doorway. What he saw made him gasp. Kaori was encircled within a cyclone, scant feet off of the floor. Standing next to her was a harpy, cackling with glee as she twisted her hands and spoke in an unrecognizable tongue. Each of its movements and sounds brought a moan of pain from his beloved's lips.

Instinct caused him to reach for a throwing knife, but he found none there. His hand went for his sword before he remembered he had left it behind as well. Then his hand brushed against the pommel of a sword. Without hesitation he drew it and charged the harpy. Without saying a word, the sword cleaved the creature in half. As it fell, the cyclone dissipated, and Kaori slumped to the ground, unconscious and writhing in pain. Whatever the harpy had inflicted on her continued to engulf her. He needed to move fast, he needed to get her help, or he would lose her forever. Sheathing the sword, he kicked the harpy's remains out of the way, scooped Kaori up in his arms, and ran for the upper floors, searching for a wall, a walkway, anything that would join it to another room or tower. But he found nothing. Frantically he searched, but was faced with a sheer wall. The only way off of the tower was to jump, retreat back down the stairs and face the Dragon, or fly, and he was not prepared to do any of

them.

“A portal, I have to create a portal.”

Anorac withdrew a small sack from his cloak and began drawing the glyphs on the floor and in the air with its contents. Before invoking the chant that would open it he made one subtle change. Anyone seeking to backtrack through this portal would find themselves standing before the Dragon, whose foul mood would not likely improve anytime soon. Picking Kaori up he quickly recited the chant, his personal portal chant, and stepped into the circle that appeared before him, forgetting the earlier warning about waiting for it to stabilize. He stepped out of the portal into the infirmary of the Keep, clutching his beloved to his chest.

The healers scattered in panic. Assuming they were under attack, they rushed out of the room looking for a place to hide as the guards stepped out to challenge him. Only two healers stepped forward; one pointed to a bed where Anorac could place Kaori, the other already gathering potions and herbs. He watched helplessly as her aura changed colours, as the lines of flux that the harpy had disrupted were slowly and carefully untangled, the knots undone, and the life lines restored. The exhausted healer kept at it, not stopping, not wanting to waste time. Several others joined him, boosting his powers, providing him support, keeping him up.

Anorac didn't notice Kooramish, Moustaffa, Zimdooga and Hogsbor as they entered the room. The Dragon's howls still rang through the Keep. The territory of an Ethereal Ruby Red Dragon was well protected and it was obvious someone had entered it uninvited.

Kooramish tried to draw Anorac aside, to ask a few questions while the healers were working on Kaori, but he shrugged him off.

Kaori's moaning had lessened and she no longer writhed in pain. The lines of flux that conveyed her health and lifeline had straightened out and were slowly returning to blue, indicating that the healing process had started. Anorac, grateful for what the healer had done, slumped to the floor next to her bed and reached for her hand.

The healer attending Kaori slapped his hand away. "Master Anorac, you may lay in that bed but you may not touch her. You will interrupt the healing process," he said, forcefully steering him to the bed. When he wouldn't move, two burly attendants picked him up and placed him in it.

Kooramish stepped forward to warn them not to do that, but was held back by a hand on his shoulder. "Look at the pommel of the sword on his hip! I think things have changed, again!"

"It can't be," gasped Kooramish. "That is the Eye of Zul. Anorac, if you please."

Pulling him to one side, Kooramish placed an arm around his shoulder, in an almost fatherly way and whispered quietly to him, shielding the sword from even a casual glance by those in the room, "Where did you get that sword?"

Puzzled, he looked at Kooramish, as his hand rested on the pommel. "I have no idea. When I searched for my sword to fight the harpy, it was just there."

Kooramish stared at it, a puzzled expression on his face. "I have seen this blade once before, a long time ago. But I never expected to see it again in my life time."

Quickly placing his hand over Anorac's, which was already on the pommel preparing to draw it, he said, "Not here. I will explain later. Keep it covered, hidden, and only use it in absolutely dire emergencies. Anything else could get you killed. We must explain to you what it is. For now stay with Kaori; I will post my most trusted guards outside the room to keep all away. You will challenge all that enter this room, regardless of who or what they are. Do you understand?"

Nodding his head yes he stared first at Kaori.

Kooramish cut him off before he could speak, "Not here, not now. The challenge you will use

is..." Kooramish leaned very close to his ear and whispered a single word in a language he didn't recognize. "Repeat it to me softly, in my ear.

"Good you got it. The response must be ..." and he followed the same procedure. "Any deviation from those two words and you are to kill whatever it is that is standing in front of you. Regardless of who it is. Your action must be swift and sure. Do not hesitate, even if it is me. It could, and probably will mean your life and Kaori's if you don't. Now rest, stay with Kaori until she is well," he said covering Anorac with a soft blanket. The last thing Anorac saw was Hogsbor grasping one end of the bed and Kooramish the other as they shifted the beds closer.

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Kooramish turned and walked away from Anorac, satisfied that he had at least grasped part of the predicament, as he had covered the sword with his cloak. He stopped in the centre of the room and coughed rather loudly. When he had everyone's attention he simply said "Kungarogesh." Kooramish watched carefully as the room emptied, only those that were absolutely necessary remained behind. The Master Healer pointed at three other members of his team and nodded his head, the rest were ushered out of the room. The door was barred as Kooramish stepped through it, herding the last of them ahead of him. Glyph's were quickly drawn in the four corners as Anorac reached for Kaori's hand, their beds now side-by-side.

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"Master Bard, you will remain here inside these inner glyphs. Do not cross them." The Master Healer warned.

Anorac watched as they completed their work, struggling to stay awake. The healers returned to their work on Kaori. When a dagger appeared in the hand of a healer, Anorac sprang to his feet, hand on the hilt of his sword, and spoke the challenge Kooramish had given him. The healer looked up, smiled and replied appropriately, then turned and began cutting away Kaori's clothes.

"Everyone has heard the challenge and reply - no one will be allowed to leave until Kaori has recovered," Anorac said.

"Carefully remove her clothing and place the pieces under the bed," said a healer. "Hurry now, we are running out of time."

Her healing lines were still not aligned properly. They bent over her and moved their hands while chanting, some pulling, others pushing the tiny flux lines. The Master healer busied himself untying any knots that were found, careful to return the ends to where they belonged before they were secured together once again. Kaori began to moan then writhe as they quickened their pace, working feverishly to return her life force to harmony, and prevent any more damage.

Anorac lay in the bed next to them, fighting to stay awake as his exhaustion threatened to overwhelm him. "What are you doing to her?" he asked, a sharp edge in his voice.

"Her life lines are all out of order, they have been shortened, cut where they should be whole, and her life is slipping away. We are joining them back together. It requires all our attention. No more questions. Let us do our work"

Shaking his head, Anorac kept trying to focus on the problem at hand - healing Kaori.

A loud clap reverberated through the room, as a portal began to take form. It grew to full size and a figure stepped through. It was a tall woman with a sleek figure, enhanced by a tight fitting dress, that reeked of power, both physical and majikal. Behind her were several hounds, each licking its chops in anticipation of what lay ahead. "Ah, what have we here? A would-be hero and his tramp. How quaint, how amusing. But in due time, in due time. We shall see how much of a slave you can be. Maybe I will reward your efforts by letting her live for a short while. I know my guards would enjoy

her, over and over,” she cackled.

Anorac looked at her and spoke, “Resemblemfirt,” and waited.

The healers, protected within the glyphs, continued their work. One called out for help.

“We will have none of that,” said the woman. A look of shock crept across her face as she was thrown back. “I see that old fool has been one step ahead of me again. But that will soon come to an end. His time in this realm will be ending soon, and mine beginning. Then he will pay for his interference,” she hissed.

“Now BOY, we need to chat. You know like the ones you used to have with your gran before the fire, on those cold nights. You will listen, and then obey. I will not tolerate anything else!”

With a twist of her wrist a huge chair appeared behind her. As she settled into it, her gown parted revealing a body that was beyond distraction. Anorac couldn't help himself, he just stared at her. The smooth alabaster skin of her neck led to two firm breasts that would just fit into the palm of his hand comfortably. His gaze moved down across a flat stomach, gracefully adorned with a gold chain that held a fertility symbol at the end of it. He fought to pull his eyes away, but found them drawn to the patch of flaming red down that adorned the top of two perfect hips. She purred as she saw his reaction and smiled to herself.

“I am Mistress Striekna of Zortoga and you have been messing with the plans of my Mistress, and that is about to stop. If you surrender now I will let you live and you can become my slave. Your pet back there will live in a nice little glass house I have made, just for her. As long as you continue to please me she will live; when you stop, she will become a plaything. When I'm bored with both of you, well, we just don't know what will happen, do we?”

Anorac looked at her, a puzzled look on his face. His right hand had found its way to the hilt of his sword. What he now saw standing before him was a hideous-looking hag, toothless, her hair almost gone, and what was left of it grey, dirty and maggot infested. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. His eyes were not deceiving him; she was indeed a horrid-looking creature. The throne she was seated on was not the finely-crafted one he had originally seen, but one made from skeletons, held together by a multitude of souls. The sight made him shiver.

Once again he challenged her by saying, “Resemblemfirt,” and waited for the reply.

She smiled and cackled again as a hiss came from her. The hounds on each side leapt at him as he stepped forward through the protective glyphs, drawing his sword. They tried to gain access to Kaori and the healers through the hole he had created. But the power from the sword closed the gap and they were faced by the only thing they feared more than their mistress' wrath; the Eye of Zul. He swung it at the closest hound and sliced it neatly in half, the second one lost a couple of limbs before its head flopped onto the ground. The remaining two backed carefully away from him, staying out of sword's reach.

“Kill him! Now!” she screeched, “Or what I do to you will be far worse than what he can!”

Fear and determination pushed them forward as they moved in from different sides. The sword dipped, flashing through the air, cutting one of the beasts before Anorac turned and quickly removed the head of the other one. Kicking it aside, he turned and faced the last hound. Advancing on the whimpering, wounded hound, it cried before lunging at him, impaling itself on his sword, twisting as it fell in an attempt to pull the blade free from his hands. It's hot blood splattered Anorac like an early morning rain, burning his skin and clothing, leaving behind painful welts. Scrambling for a cloth while never taking his eyes off Striekna, he rubbed his exposed skin as best he could to take the edge off of the pain.

The hag rose to her full height, changing shape again from her Human form to a harpy and

finally to that of a huge black Dragon. "Mess with me, will you, and I will crush you like a gnat!"

She raised her front foot and he could see the ooze of death dripping from between huge claws. As he swung his sword, she laughed, "No sword can cut me, no sword can hurt me! Prepare to die."

Stamping her foot in an attempt to crush him, she was faced with blinding pain as three of her four toes were surgically removed from her foot. Howling in rage and pain, her precious life force spurting from her foot she glared at him. "What is that you have? What is it that can hurt poor Mistress Striekna of Zortoga? I must have it! I will have it! Give it here boy, or I will take it."

Striekna drew her breath. As she exhaled the room was filled with hot acrid gas and a dangerous green flame engulfed him. Anorac instinctively raised his sword, the flat of the blade towards her, and stood in amazement as the flame parted and rushed down both sides. He chanced a glance behind him and was satisfied that the glyphs still held; the healers feverishly working at completing their task as the rest of the room began to burn.

Slowly he advanced on the Dragon, swinging at her flailing appendages, lopping them off piece by piece. The floor quickly became covered in her sickening green blood, the smell burning his eyes and nose as he felt the soles of his boots slowly dissolve. Her rage intensified, and he prepared for her final attack. Instead she fled as quickly as she appeared, leaving her assortment of body parts behind, littered across the floor. They all wormed and struggled to join her through the portal. Carefully he flicked them out of the way with his sword, not wanting to come into contact with them. As he approached the portal he could hear a sound building from the other side. As he lifted the sword in front of himself, a huge flame burst from the portal incinerating everything she had left behind. Once again the sword's majik had protected him. How, he didn't understand; all that mattered is that it did.

He slashed the air, cutting the portal in two. The two halves cracked loudly before disappearing from sight with a loud boom. The room returned to normal as if nothing had happened.

Scrambling, he sheathed the sword and began pulling off his clothes and tossing them aside. First came the boots, which he tossed into the fire as the soles completely disappeared. His clothing quickly followed, until he was standing in his under garments. By now the smoke from the fire had alerted the Keep to the danger, and noises could be heard on the other side of the door as they tried to force their way in. Too exhausted to care, he slipped through the glyphs and settled onto the bed next to Kaori as the door burst open. Hogsbor was in the lead, quickly directing them to the fire as he surveyed the damage.

Anorac was relieved to hear the healers had stopped chanting and his beloved was stirring. He rose to look at her, presenting a strange sight. His sword was sheathed and he was dressed solely in his undergarments and sword, his skin spotted by the blood of the hounds and their mistress. It had left large, angry, red splotches, much like an outbreak of childhood measles. A pair of healers was trying to put salve on the worst of them, but he kept pushing them aside.

"You gave us quite a scare. Are you alright?" he said.

"Fine, but a little weak. Where did you find me? The last thing I remember is being on a turret atop a tower somewhere in the Keep."

"It is a long story that will keep until later. Now all I am interested in is you; that you are healthy and safe. Oh yeah, and one other thing," he said, gallantly dropping to one knee beside her bed while holding her hand, "Will you marry me?"

Taken aback, she sat with her mouth open. "You seem to have me at a disadvantage." She pulled sheets over her body. "This is not the way I imagined it would happen, if at all. What you ask is forbidden by the Guild."

“They are about to make an exception. If you agree, we can be married tomorrow at midday, spend the rest of the day here, and the night alone especially the night, and then be away on the following one. What do you say, my love? I will not leave without you, and no one else shall have you.”

He drew her into his arms and kissed her deeply. “I thought I had lost you not once, but twice, today. Never again will that happen. We will face the future together side-by-side.”

“Yes m’love, we will. Yes, we will.”

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The last few days had flown by; the wedding ceremony completed, the wedding night enjoyed by more than just the newly-married couple. Anorac and Kaori found themselves seated in Lord Kooramish’s study with the other leaders of the Guild, discussing their future. Anorac’s destiny - now both of their destinies - had changed, taken a twist that no one had anticipated

“He can still complete what he has been called to do,” argued Zimdooga. “He has completed all his training, mastered all the arts, some even better than his teachers, and he will have Kaori with him now.”

“What he was called to do as a single traveler has now become complicated, two are a lot harder to hide, or to travel as inconspicuously. They will be easier to spot and follow; he has a weak spot now.” argued Moustaffa.

“I believe they’ll be able to travel quicker, quieter, and easier as newlyweds,” said Hogsbor. “The enemy is looking for him, and him alone, not a newly married couple on their honeymoon. We could craft a story about their parents being nobility - not too high a rank mind you - but nobility just the same, who are off to see the world before settling down to their family business.”

“And just what would that business be?” asked Kooramish, his interest piqued.

“He is good with his hands and he’s crafted some very fine musical instruments. We create the story that he is the only son of a Master Musician who has played before Kings and Queens. His performances are so well-regarded that he has enough commissions for new work to last three lifetimes, and that his son is going to follow in his footsteps. ”

“Anorac is already a noted musician and has crafted some of the finest instruments in this land,” said Hogsbor proudly. “We could hint of a vague location on another continent, in a remote area very difficult to get to. His father does his best work in solitude and has chosen such a location to allow his creativity to flow. His works are so well-known that he is extremely well protected throughout the lands. The right seeds, planted in the right place, would almost guarantee their anonymity and safety.”

“It has the ring of plausibility, yet enough mystique that we just might be able to pull it off,” said Kooramish. “How much time would we need to set this up, and make it work?”

“Two, maybe three, weeks. Our Bards could start dropping subtle hints about a great Master’s work that has recently arrived, and how they are all scrambling to learn it. Then we add a few choice tidbits about his son and his new bride with descriptions about their make-up that run from the close, to the accurate, to the outrageous. Basically confuse the hell out of anyone trying to piece anything useful out of it. It should work to our advantage, especially if we plant false sightings well away from them, and in no particular order. There would be enough rabbit trails out there that they could walk right down the main street and not be recognized.”

“Hmm” mused Kooramish “Do it. But you have seven days, ten max, to make it work. In the meantime we need to find a route that will get you to where you need to go.”

“And where is that, my Lord?” they asked in unison.

Chapter 8

Twelve days later a small group assembled around a huge map of the world. It showed three continents; two larger ones running north-south, with one smaller one, to the extreme north which extended from east to west. In the southwestern corner was a large group of islands, none of a size to provide a threat to the others.

“We are here,” said Hogsbor, pointing to a spot in the southern regions of the Mountain of Thule. “You need to travel to here.” He pushed his finger into an area on the other continent. “Some of your travel can be done through portals, but they will have to be public ones, avoiding the ones that only the nobility can access. They are costly and can only be found in major cities. You'll need to be very careful traveling through them as they can be closely monitored. Only in extreme danger, and in a life-threatening situation are you to open a private portal and use it.

“Your trip should take you about a week or so. Limit your traveling to well used areas and travel by private coach as much as possible. Occasionally you can buy a couple of horses, nothing to extravagant, mind you - ride them from city to city, but only if you cannot access the portal. Not all cities are linked, many have had their portals damaged and made useless by pirates and assassins. Just be careful what you use and where. If in doubt, walk away, make up any kind of excuse you can think of, and most importantly, trust your instincts. It would be best to travel mid-morning. At the height of the portal use people would be less apt to remember who you are or where you are headed.”

“Tip generously, but not extravagantly.” Continued Zimdooga. “If you are in doubt ask a courtier quietly what the acceptable tip for that city is, and then use it wisely. Always carry your own bags - traveling light would be the best method of moving around - and keep your weapons hidden. We have had a leather cover crafted for the pommel of your sword, Anorac that will help disguise it from most. The array of weapons that you carry will have to be removed, nobility are not known for their prowess with what we use.”

“Kaori, you will need to wear something that at least resembles a dress.” Kooramish feigned mock frustration. “Before you go off half-cocked, see Matilda, she has had a few days to come up with some suggestions and ideas that might work. She also has one dress that will have to be fitted properly. You must make sure you have it with you at all times because you never know when you will be invited to a formal ball. Turning one down would not only insult your host but it would definitely undermine your cover.”

“Anorac, Matilda also has formal attire for you which she will need to fit. All of this will be completed today; tomorrow at first light you will be long gone from here, headed for the city for your first portal jump which has been reserved for mid morning. Hogsbor has handpicked a few trusted compatriots to go with you who will lead portal-chasers away on a wild goose chase. You can make two jumps before first light, which should bring you close enough to hire a carriage to take you into the city. Remember everything that you have learned over these last few days. It just might keep you alive.”

Hogsbor answered a quiet knock at the door. He could see that it was Matilda's assistant, “Masters, Mistress, my Mistress requests your presence so she may finish the fittings. If it pleases you, follow me.”

The Page left the room and waited patiently for them to join him. Anorac and Kaori stepped outside and followed him down the hallway into another part of the Keep. They passed a

leatherworkers shop, a blacksmith's forge as well as a tanner's workshop, and an animal shearing station. They walked past the open door of a room that held racks of the finest silks and materials. Eventually they walked into an elegantly-decorated sitting room, where they were asked to wait while the page let Matilda know they were there.

They walked around the room, looking at the sketches that adorned the wall, sketches of fine dresses and of men in formal attire that made them look like peacocks. "I am not wearing a getup like that," Anorac pointed at one particularly garish outfit. "Not even on my deathbed."

"Ah, not even for me?" pouted Kaori as she teased him.

"Sorry m'love, but there are some lines I just won't cross," he said.

"Lucky for you then that that is only worn by a King, or you'd be in a whole lot of trouble," said Matilda. "Now Kaori, please accompany Missy and follow her instructions. You will find hooks for your clothes in the fitting room. She will need to take some measurements for me."

"I can help with that," said Anorac with a wolfish smile spreading across his face.

"Roderick will take your measurements; he has the same instructions."

"Yes ma'am," they replied, as they moved out of the sitting room.

Sounds could be heard in the main room as cloth was cut, orders given, and a flurry of activity ensued. Roderick returned several times to confirm some final measurements and to re-assure him that things were proceeding nicely. The first set of clothing was delivered by a young maiden. She set them on a table and began handing him items. When he turned to face her she gasped, turned beet red, and fled the room. Whispers could be heard on the other side of the door that made him smile, and then laugh. Matilda could be heard marching in on the idle chatter, a loud smack followed and the young girl returned, flustered and unsure of herself.

"It is normal to react the way you did. It doesn't bite, but it will grow. Too bad we are in a hurry or we could play a bit," he said, grinning.

Shyly she resumed handing him one piece of clothing after another, checking to make sure he had put it on correctly, desperately trying to avoid any contact with him that would make 'it' grow. Piece after piece was fitted; soft hands fluttered across his skin, laces were tightened to hold items in place, but not too tight to be restrictive. Outfit after outfit was fitted, and things progressed well into the afternoon until the last outfit was left. Carefully she handed Anorac the layers of clothing he would need.

"Ahh, we have a problem," he said. "The pants don't fit properly."

"That can't be, Master, they are cut the same as the others," replied the maiden. "Let me see."

He turned to face her, his shirt hanging down, free of the waistband. She reached and lifted up the hem of the shirt and jumped back in surprise. 'It' had grown to full size and just wouldn't fit in his breeches.

"Now what do we do?" he asked. "You were charged with making sure everything would fit properly."

The young maid worked hard at making sure that everything fit as required. After an hour of strenuous activity, she sighed as they cleaned up, carefully putting everything back in place, not only for herself, but for Anorac as well. "You see Master, it all fits, and quite nicely I might add. It just needed a little adjustment. I see 'he' is stirring again; does he need more room? I am quite sure we could make him fit again," she said with a wistful look in her eyes.

"No, 'he' is fine, but thank you for the offer. Will you have these clothes sent to my rooms please? I must meet my wife for last meal before we retire for the night."

With a pout she rose, gathered up his outfits, and folded them carefully. "Yes, Master."

Last meal approached, and was quickly finished. Many of the senior journeymen stopped and wished them good luck on their adventures, not yet realizing just what was in store for them.

Anorac, taking his role as a Guild Leader quite seriously, nonchalantly walked over to the table of assembled students. Picking one overly loud braggart, he tapped him on the shoulder, looked him straight in the eye and said loud enough for everyone to hear, "A good lover never brags about his exploits, his exploits do all the bragging for him. You would do well to remember that, my lad!"

Smiling, he turned and left, leaving the student standing there in stunned silence, not quite sure if his honour had been assaulted, or if he had just been reprimanded. His classmates had a field day with the reproof though, teasing him, jabbing at his ego.

Anorac turned and looked at all of them and said, "Pitiful is the person, man, woman or child, that must deride someone else to make themselves feel important. You will all compose a sonnet expanding on that idea and it must be finished by, hm, let's say no later than three days from now. The sonnet must be 77 lines long using the acceptable format, and you must work on it alone. Your Guild Masters will grade them and provide the necessary corrections. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?" The stunned crowd nodded their understanding and sat there in silence.

"You heard him, you have work to do. I expect to see your completed work in my hands before mid meal, three days from now, or you'll not be eating," said Hogsbor. "Now off with you."

Watching as the crowd of students rushed out brought smiles to many of the Bard's sitting around the tables.

"I am glad you weren't a Guild Master when I was here," laughed one of them.

"We would never have had any of the fun we did," said another.

"It is not about fun," said Anorac, "but about being able to be discreet and sensitive to others. We are Bards; we are expected to sing about triumphant accomplishments and deepest sorrows and everything that runs between them. Yes, good-natured teasing helps our creativity, but that good nature can turn nasty real fast, and they must learn the difference. A jealous lover will run you through with a dagger or his sword just as quickly as a man at arms can. If they learn the difference here they may just live to sing about it someday and not be the subject of their latest song, after their death."

Many of the older Bards, Guild Leaders, and Masters nodded their heads in agreement. "That boy is wise beyond his years," said Hogsbor. "We have made a wise choice in him. Anorac and Kaori, the Lord seeks a few minutes with ye. He is waiting in his study."

The two strolled towards the hallway leading to Lord Kooramish's study, linking arms as they turned and approached Hogsbor. "We are leaving tomorrow for a short honeymoon before seeking our post in another part of the country. If we do not see you again, thank you for helping us make these last few days the happiest ones in our lives. We will never forget you."

Bowing in an elaborate display of formality they turned and hurried down the hallway. The doorway to the study opened as they approached. As they entered they noticed a small group had assembled and were waiting for them.

Lord Kooramish waved them to seats at the middle of the table. "We all know each other so let's keep the formalities to a minimum. Anorac, you and Kaori will depart the Keep at last watch tonight. We are trying to keep your departure time quiet, to thwart the spies that are around here. You will leave in a specially modified meat wagon driven by Hogsbor and a couple of his helpers making their weekly meat and cheese run to the markets. You will slip away just outside of town where a one-way portal will be set up for you. Here is a small map with its location as well as the challenges and replies."

"This portal will drop you a few miles outside of the city where another contact will provide a

carriage. Remember your cover is you are the heir to a nobleman's estate, just newly married, who is traveling incognito to enjoy a little of the world before settling into the family business. Spend a little, but not too extravagantly. Buy your blushing bride some fancy things, but be careful not to overspend. All of our Guild Masters have been alerted about you and a system has been established for you to obtain more gold if you run out."

Spreading the map out, he pointed at a city on the east coast. "You will need to be here no later than the beginning of the Fall Festival, which is in twenty-seven days. A priority port has been booked for you on the first day of the Festival, mid morning. If you miss it, you are stuck with travelling by ship. Crossing this expanse of water during Fall Festival is not a wise choice. These waters are plied by some of the world's most ruthless pirates who would gladly ransom you off to your father or his enemies. What they would do to you, my dear, is beyond description, especially once they discover you are a member of this Guild. Plan to arrive here early, even if it means spending a week there while you wait."

"Once you port to the city of Fruchita, simply disappear in the crowd. Your cover will be useless to you and more dangerous than the work required to maintaining it. Travel from here becomes interesting; not only will you need to avoid the pirates and assassins, but the trolls and ogres whose lands you must travel through as well. This is where your skills will be put to the ultimate test. Before using this portal, make sure you pack away sufficient gold to meet your needs at the other end. We are not exactly sure who we can or cannot trust over there.

"Any questions? Everything you need is in this leather wrap. "He passed it to Anorac. "Protect it with your life. Treat it as if your life, or each other's, depends on it. If it falls into the wrong hands, the world will be doomed.

"I have one last item for both of you. During my morning vespers, long before the two of you were born, I came across these medallions. They are meant for you. What they do, or how they work I do not know, except that in dire need you will learn what they are meant for. Treat them as a gift from a father who has blessed your union. Protect them as if your life was contained in them." Gently, Kooramish slipped a finely crafted chain around each of their necks. The work on the medallions was so intricate you could get lost studying the design. "Keep them hidden. Thieves are like ravens, attracted to shiny things, and these would be an irresistible temptation," he said, smiling.

"Sleep well tonight, someone will wake you just before last watch. Make sure your packs are ready to go. Oh yeah, do not start the honeymoon until you are safely away from here. We need you sharp and fresh in the morning," Kooramish said with a sly smile. "Your extra clothes are already in your room, as well as everything you will need. Your formal clothes can be sold in Fruchita to provide money for your journey inland."

"I heard about your assignment. Not so sure I like the idea of the extra work, but well done, just the same. Keep them on their toes," said Zimdooga grinning.

Anorac and Kaori quickly gathered the items on the table before them. They paused at the door as if to say something, then left the room. They didn't speak during the trip to their room, both were lost in deep thought as they trudged down the hall. Anorac thought Kaori also felt the fear that was in his mind.

"We're here." Anorac reached over and keyed the door. Their extra travelling items were neatly piled on a table just inside it. A small reception area had been created, to allow limited entrance into their rooms for just this occasion. They quickly crossed the room and dumped everything they had been carrying onto a large table before carefully sorting through it. Some of them would be secreted away in hidden pockets; others wrapped tightly and slipped into special tubes that

were flexible yet easily camouflaged. Those that had to be left out for daily use were gathered and placed in an oilskin pouch, to keep them dry.

They assembled their clothing and gear they would need for the trip. Nobles were accustomed to travelling with large containers and a troupe of baggage handlers. They hoped to be travelling incognito with a minimum of baggage. They packed their belongings, for the second half of their trip, in a pair Demon bags, small in appearance but huge in size. The first half was packed into backpacks that they could easily carry, indicating they were modest travelers.

"Matilda and her team have outdone themselves with these backpacks," commented Kaori.

Anorac's traveling garb was made of rugged but superb leather, supple yet extremely resilient. It made excellent armour that would be initially hidden from any attackers view. Kaori's clothing was also made out of leather but resembled a cross between a dress and pants. The skirt was slit up the front, allowing her unencumbered movement, with a pair of pants underneath to fulfill the need for modesty and privacy. All this was topped with a loose fitting blouse that complimented the colours of the skirt, her hair, and her eyes. It was a dashing outfit that enhanced her charms but did not advertise their availability. Seamstress Matilda had outdone herself. The work was magnificent, not only was it functional, but it was fashionable and well-suited for their travels.

Exhausted they crawled out of their clothing and slipped into bed. Snuggling into each other, Anorac whispered, "I had a surprise for you tonight but with everything going on it had to be canceled."

"Oh, what was that?"

"Do you remember that young maiden that helped me fit my pants? She was going to join us tonight. She was my gift, at least for the night."

Giggling, she replied, "That would have been interesting, I have never...."

She never finished. Anorac put his finger on her lips and pulled her close, "I love you" he said.

"I love you too."

They lay there holding each other, enjoying the warmth of two lovers spooned together, and drifted off to sleep, exhausted after a busy day.

Chapter 9

Mid watch found them already on the trail, a dozen leagues away from their first real test. A carriage had been waiting for them at the portal opening, and after the necessary identity challenges, they were quickly on their way. The local Guild had provided a guide to lead them into the city. Their first jump went off without a problem. Over the next few days they moved from portal to portal, slowly making their way north before having to turn eastward to the coast.

They had just completed a whirlwind tour of some of the local sights, had overnighted in a few places and were now hard pressed to keep their schedule, to make their next portal jump. They had told people that Father had placed a restriction on the time they could be away, and they didn't want to squander it with business. Contracts in hand, they were sure Father would be pleased with their efforts in securing an order for several dozen flutes they had been using in the area.

Dawn approached, burning off the morning dew, bringing the colour of the surroundings to life. Flowers opened up exposing rich and vibrant shades of reds, yellows, oranges and blues. Trees turned their leaves upwards to drink in the early morning sun, revealing shades of green that were intermixed with the soft silver of birch trees. The lush fields could be seen rolling into the distance disappearing behind the rise, only to resume again.

They had almost forgotten the role they were to play in all of this - the limited amount that they had been able to piece together. They were to meet with a Lady - a sorceress, a complete stranger - thousands of leagues away. On any other occasion the trip would have been difficult enough, but they were being pursued by an enemy that no one would talk about. Someone they couldn't identify, one that could use the portals at will, breach even the most complicated defenses, yet be repelled by the simplest glyph. Constantly on their guard, they were determined to at least play their role as newlyweds as best as they could.

Mid-morning found them saddle-weary and hot, entering the gates of the city. They had crested a hill, rounded a sharp corner, and there it was. The guards gave them a casual once-over - spending a little too much time on Kaori - then nodded at Anorac. He could see the lust in their faces; they would give anything to trade places with him, even just for a night.

Their guide led them through the trade district, staying on the well-travelled routes, to the entrance to the upper section of the city. It had been built on a plateau and could be sealed off from the rest of the city in the event of an attack. Here they were questioned more seriously by the elite guard of the city, their cover story challenged and examined more closely. It wasn't until Kaori descended from her horse, removed one of their flutes, and showed the guard the neatly signed but forged contracts, that they were allowed entrance. Carefully she slipped the flute back into place, stretching to make sure the guards got a good look at her, then climbed back into the saddle. They rode into the upper section.

"We are being watched," whispered their guide. "Remember your role in all of this."

They quickly conferred with their guide and decided to take the portal now, rather than wait. They were exhausted and preferred to rest where the heat was not as stifling.

Reluctantly their guide led them to the portal station, constantly reminding them that their portal time was not for a couple of hours and they would end up waiting in line.

"We know that if the right palms are greased we can move to the front of the line and be put through with little fuss. If we are going to travel this way this will add to our cover story and add to

the mystique about us and our purpose," said Kaori quietly.

They had a basis for their routine; spending a few days in a city to see the sights and attend a high culture performance of some kind, before taking the portal to the next city. Each time they left with contracts for more flutes, some legitimate, the majority forged, but contracts on flutes so impeccably crafted that people were agreeing to them just for the prestige of owning one. The cover story began taking on a life of its own, building from a simple deception. Their free time diminished as people demanded they attend function after function, fighting for their limited time, until they had no time for each other. Lords and Ladies attempted to lure them into torrid love affairs with promises of fortunes and business opportunities that would guarantee their family work for generations to come. Publically they carefully rebuffed each one, privately they laughed at the offers.

"Enough of this crap," growled Anorac one foul morning. They had been dragged from party to party, ogled, groped, and propositioned so many times he couldn't keep track of who was doing what anymore. "Today we leave for the coast! Cover story or not, business propositions or not, it is time to make the jump across the water and shed this farce before we get any softer. What was supposed to be a leisurely trip to the coast has become a nightmare. We will make contact, obtain the gold we need, and begin tomorrow. My dear you have just come down with a highly contagious flu, possibly even life-threatening. We are forced to cancel all our engagements until you are better. No one will be allowed into these rooms, with few exceptions. Being a doting husband, I will look after your every need until you are well. I will wash you, brush your hair, make you comfortable, and even cook for you."

"Sounds absolutely intriguing!" Kaori purred. "If I get felt up by one more of those bastards, I am going to start cutting some rather pricey meat from them!"

"I will inform the owner of this fine establishment what has happened, and ask him to call for Dr. Fairlea. That is the sign for the Guild to contact us. Until he arrives, no one is to come near these rooms."

He stood by the door. "What would you like for breakfast, my dear?"

"Um, let's see, how about, just you" she said with a sly smile.

"Hm, not sure I can get that, but let me check with the cook. How would you like that prepared ma'am?"

"Well-cleaned, raw, and ready for carving," she said laughing. "While you are gone, I am going to add a few glyphs to the area to ward off eavesdroppers and spies. I should be done by the time you get back. Might even be in the tub soaking, you never know..."

Anorac softly closed the door, made sure it was locked, and went looking for the owner. He found him at the front desk, discussing some documents with his assistant.

"Excuse me," interrupted Anorac, "but I need your help, it may be rather urgent. My wife seems to have come down with the flu. We need your help in locating Dr. Fairlea. We met him at the Minister's dinner party last night. He is a visitor in your fine city. Apparently he has studied extensively viral sicknesses in the areas we have travelled. She seems deathly ill, and I am not sure the Doctors here would recognize her illness."

It was an easy lie to tell for someone who was overtired, testy, and concerned. The owner barked orders to send runners out looking for Dr. Fairlea and had a huge breakfast platter, complete with a large selection of fruit, prepared for Anorac and Kaori. It arrived, at the same time as the last runner returned.

"I have found him sir ... you were lucky ... he was just getting ready to use the portal ... he has an emergency to take care of but will be back within twelve hours to check on your wife ... in the

meantime no one is to go near your rooms,” the runner gasped. “From your description, he thinks she may have contracted the Zandorian Virus and for the next 48 hours is to be considered highly contagious. He says you had quite a discussion with him last night concerning your recent travels. The area you are in must be quarantined or he will quarantine the hotel and the few blocks surrounding it. This virus can take up to fourteen days to show itself. He will be back as quickly as he can and has written out explicit instructions for you to follow, just in case I didn't make it back before you retired to your rooms.”

Anorac broke the seal on the note and read:

My dear Anorac;

So sorry to hear about your young wife but don't fret, if you follow these instructions she will recover quite nicely.

No one is to enter your rooms, or they will have to be isolated for fourteen days.

Regular meals, not too heavy mind you - and lots of fluids.

Peace and quiet.

Lots of hot baths using the powder I have given this young man. A small handful per tub.

Wouldn't hurt you to soak in it as well.

This virus affects mostly women, but has been known to affect men as well. If you come down with her symptoms then hang a red scarf on the doorknob, to warn everyone to stay away.

I expect to be back within twelve hours, an emergency has arisen that requires my attention. I will check on both of you upon my return.

Dr. F

“Thank you my fine young man,” Anorac said as he was handed him a small, soft sack. “The powder the Doctor was referring to?” The runner nodded his head breathlessly. “This is for your extra efforts in tracking him down.” Anorac flipped him a gold sovereign. Before the owner or anyone else could react, the runner snatched the coin from the air and was gone.

Picking up the platter, Anorac stopped at the door. “I expect a table to be set up just outside our door; a place where I can put my requests and they can leave the items we need.”

“I will have a staff member placed at the end of the hallway to keep any nosy people from disturbing you. The Doctor's orders will be followed exactly as written.”

“Thank you; we will make sure you are all handsomely rewarded for your efforts. Do not fail us or the results could be disastrous.”

“Yes sir, we will,” the owner said.

The owner was barking out orders as Anorac left for their room. He heard footsteps scurrying around the hotel. Anorac entered the hallway to their rooms and was surprised to see notices had been posted warning patrons to stay away. A table had already been set up, complete with a bottle of ink, quills and parchment. Carefully he set the platter down and unlocked the door, announcing himself as he entered. *No point in getting a knife in my back*, he thought, smiling to himself.

Setting the platter of food on the table, he noticed a note on it as he turned to close the door.

“Lock the door, draw these glyphs, then come and wash my back.”

He locked the door, carefully drew the glyphs Kaori wanted, then headed for the bath, shedding his clothing as he went. Kaori lay in clear water from which steam rose. Seeing her that way caused his body to respond.

“Saints preserve me!” she squealed. “What do you plan on doing with that?”

“What do you think I am going to do with it,” he growled, smiling. “Does the little girl want to play?”

“Yes I do; come here.”

“We have twelve hours before Dr Fairlea shows up; is that enough time?”

“It will have to be, for now,” she purred.

Fired by their forced abstinence, their passion took a long time to sate. “My dear, we have three days to kill and nowhere to go; what shall we do? I do not like the idea of resembling a wrinkled old prune the whole time we are in here.”

Laughing, Kaori stood up and stretched. Anorac lay back enjoying the heat of the water, and the goddess that stood before him. Smiling she stepped out of the bath, wrapping herself in a large towel. She approached the table and began to pick at the food that had been prepared.

“Something is not quite right. Can you smell the almonds? I just got a brief whiff of them,” said Kaori suspiciously. Quickly Anorac left the bath and toweled off, before rummaging through his pack for a small pouch of strange looking dust, that he sprinkled on the food, while chanting a small rhyme under his breath. The food went through an array of colours before most of it turned blue; only the fresh fruit had turned red.

“Damn, now who would want us dead?”

“Any number of people, for any number of reasons,” replied Kaori. “But it was good to see you are still on your toes. We will need to be extra cautious now. We might even need to move up our schedule and leave before Dr Fairlea returns.”

“We need to use the portal, and it is going to be heavily guarded. I am not sure my skills as a Bard are sufficient to get us through without being seen or challenged. Without the resources of the Guild we will be lost when we arrive in the next city. The seventy-two hours was a reference to 720 gold that will be available when the good Doctor returns. He was going to collect it.

“How do we get word back to Lord Kooramish and Hogsbor about the change in our plans?” asked Kaori.

“Before we left they gave me this.” He unwrapped a small club. One end had a sharpened point while the other end was shaped as a hand and held an orb, about the size of a large fist. The wood was jet black - ebony in colour and name - and pulsed with power. “We are only to use this in dire emergencies, and only with extreme caution. Contact is to be brief, and cryptic, and at specific times. Lord Kooramish and Hogsbor are the only ones with access, or knowledge of its mate.”

“We will need to wait until an hour after sundown before we can use it. In the meantime, we should check our glyphs, double them up where they seem weak, and include them on the floors and ceilings. I need to make sure the windows are shuttered and locked. Then we can prepare to leave tonight, if necessary and make an attempt to slip into the portal room, and be off before anyone knows we are gone. We can leave a small sack of gems as payment for our rooms, or better yet, a note of credit that the local Bards' Guild honours from the down payment for the flutes they ordered,” Anorac said laughing.

The rest of the day was spent preparing their equipment and repairing items that were frayed or tattered. They set out their night clothes and carried on business as if everything was normal. Kaori kept watch while Anorac slept, then they switched so she could sleep. Occasionally Anorac would open the door and request more ice water and fresh fruit, explaining that he needed to keep his wife hydrated and alcohol-free.

Midday came and went, with nothing strange happening. Last meal approached and the staff

made sure they had a good selection of food to pick from, and that it was fresh and hot. Not trusting anyone, they checked all dishes for tampering. The empty dishes were set on the table outside the room, the door closed and locked. The appointed time approached and both Kaori and Anorac checked their wards and glyphs before slipping the small club out of its wraps and shoving it into the sand hearth. Carefully Anorac cupped the orb and thought first of Hogsbor and then Lord Kooramish. An image appeared before him of the two of them, sitting in the Lord's private study, concentrating on some papers before them, until they realized that he was attempting to contact them.

Hogsbor reached out and cupped the orb in a club that was similar to his. "What's wrong, my son?"

"Interesting developments; many contracts; some not the most savoury. Food great, at least most of it. Dr. Fairlea contacted; no response for at least another twelve hours; expect one less than two. Need direction. Is it time to jump?"

"Hm interesting indeed. Reviewing contracts now. Some seem very shady. Food is a concern, must just be local cuisine. Jump seems imminent, if not imperative. Doctor's return of twelve hours too long. No one should be gone that long. Time to review work."

The contact was broken and Hogsbor had withdrawn from his mind. Puzzled, Anorac sat for a few minutes before removing his hands. "It seems our plight has already reached their ears and we need to move tonight. Our dear Dr Fairlea is not what he appears to be. He may be more of a problem than a help. Our work here is definitely finished and if we wait for the doctor to return it may be too late. I got the impression that staying the night would not only be dangerous, but unhealthy."

Carefully he wrapped the club in its soft bag before slipping it into his pack. Their travelling cases had been stuffed inside their Demon bags and reduced to a small satchel that would fit quite nicely on their backs, under their cloaks. Their weapons and harnesses lay on the bed. Before changing, Anorac opened the door, removed the fresh water jug, and said in a loud voice, "Time to retire, my love. I hope you are feeling better in the morning," he closed and locked the door.

They had prepared wedges which he carefully slipped under the door sill. Quickly they changed into their dark clothing and slipped out a door they had discovered just after taking up residence in the room. It appeared seldom used but opened into a series of walkways with not only spyholes, but entrances, into every room in the hotel. There was evidence of spilled food everywhere; indicating that meals had been moved through these hallways, as well as only the hotel knew what else. Dust covered all surfaces and it took all their skill not to disturb it. They opened the spyholes to check the rooms. Some rooms were occupied, some still empty, while others showed signs of continued use but no occupant. The second last spyhole they checked looked into the owner's office and revealed a scene that Anorac had witnessed a mere day or so ago. The office was a hub of activity, with people arriving and departing constantly. The hotel owner seemed to have more information than Anorac thought. *Important to store this away for future use.* The last spyhole opened into a small room with a doorway leading to an inner courtyard. "This is the room we have been looking for." Anorac whispered.

They eased the secret door open and stepped into the room, checking for any subtly placed glyphs or traps. The few they found had been easy enough to bypass; only an amateur would have set them off. They thoroughly examined the room before deciding on their next move. They huddled in the center to quietly discuss their options, whispering into each other's ear. Anyone setting traps to catch an unwary escape artist would definitely cover the path to the ground as well as to the roof, but would they have covered the route along the walls to another area of the hotel? Could they slip along the walls and reenter the hotel, find a place to disguise themselves, and slip out with the morning crowd

resembling someone else? Their other choice was a portal, but it would leave their portal signature, which would make it easier to track them.

Gently they opened the door to the balcony, checking for traps. A quick inspection revealed it was safe to use, but not necessarily safe to stand on. It was meant more for show than any functional use. They found a number of minor traps that, mixed with crumbling brickwork, made their planned exit impassable.

They backed into the room and went to the doorway opening into the hall. They opened it, checking for traps, and slipped into the hallway. By the sounds in the hallway, the kitchen was off to their right; the hallway leading to the left reached a dead end wall with no visible doors.

"Do we have the time to inspect the rest of the walls and floor for a hidden passageway?" asked Anorac.

"No, we have been in this hallway too long; we are exposed here. We need to quickly slip away before we are caught," whispered Kaori as they repeated the same routing they had used earlier.

They had slipped from shadow to shadow toward the kitchen, just settling into a dark recess in the wall, when two youth walked down the hallway, yawning and stretching.

"We need to hang these up on the pegs or he'll beat us again, maybe even kill us this time."

"I'ze sore, donr't know if'n I kin tarke another one of dem kerrective wumpens."

"In here, our street clothes are where we left them. Quickly, before he finds something else for us to do. I still have that stranger's gold sovereign, maybe we can find us a couple of warm ladies and a good bottle, and get lost for a couple of days."

"Yarp, zounds good."

They turned into the alcove, where Anorac and Kaori knocked them unconscious and tied them up. Anorac and Kaori quickly slipped into the youths' street clothes, trying to shake off the bugs they found scurrying across them. Moving to the outer doorway they nonchalantly slipped out into an alley. Blending into the crowd, they disappeared. Anorac finally said, "Why do you keep stopping? You are going to draw attention to us."

"Bugs, all kinds of vermin, and they are biting me! I need a bath and the sooner the better!" she hissed.

Anorac searched for a place to get out of the clothes, remove most of the vermin, and slip back into their professional garb before the sun rose; otherwise the portal access would be pointless. Travelling anywhere near the portal in their current clothing would not only raise alarms but likely get them killed in the process. Picking up the pace, they slipped from the working crowd leaving the night shift and into the morning shift of farm workers, peddlers and hawkers, all coming to the city to sell their wares.

"Ah, there it is," said Anorac. "Play along now, my dear, and we may still have a chance to get out of this alive."

Pushing the door open to a back alley inn they were greeted by a thick wall of smoke. Several groups of men at a number of tables spread around the room, glared at them before returning to their games. Kaori approached the barkeeper, and positioned her body to block anyone from attempting to determine what they were talking about. "I am in a very foul mood, tired, sore, and need a room with a bath. See to my needs and you will be rewarded handsomely, cross me and you will be the first to die," she said slipping a gold sovereign across the table. The inn keeper picked up the coin, examined it carefully behind the bar, and discreetly moved it to his mouth where he bit into it, checking for softness.

"How do you know I won't just turn you over to this pack of thieves for their enjoyment? You

won't be able to kill all of us before one gets to you.”

“True, but the House Zordan would be well represented here; the dead that would be found would be many; and yours would be the first. That coin you just bit into is covered with a rare poison that only I can provide the antidote for. Its death is painful and extremely ugly. Only that barmaid over there can approach; I will kill anyone else that does, and then sit back and watch you die. Do we understand each other?”

Visibly shaken, he replied, “I have one room I keep for discreet meetings of a local Lord. It is at the end of the left hallway, second floor. Third and fifth floorboards squeak; the only place it can be heard is inside the room. I will have the maid bring up some hot food and drink. Bath can be drawn from the pipes found above the large tub. The Lord is away and won't be back until late tomorrow. Do try to keep things reasonably tidy,” he said, slipping her a key.

“I will leave unannounced; your payment and the antidote will be on the table in the room. Wait until just before the turning of the sixth hour before coming anywhere near that room. Do you understand me? Good,” Turning she pushed Anorac towards the stairs.

Halfway across the room a drunken gamer reached out to grab her. She nimbly danced around him and slapped his hand away growling, "Don't touch; it ain't fer sale."

Anorac moved to step in and she once again pushed him towards the stairs, pausing at the top to carefully check out the room. No one had slipped out of the room; the innkeeper had not betrayed them, yet. The barmaid was just beginning to climb the stairs with a platter filled with food and drink for them. Kaori and Anorac slipped down to the end of the hallway, settled into the shadows, and waited. She was almost at the top when two burly men slipped past her toward their room.

They nodded, then Kaori moved in one direction and Anorac the other. Both men lay sprawled on the floor, their throats cut from ear to ear. Kaori had caught the platter before it had hit the floor and Anorac had clamped his hand over the barmaid's mouth, pushing her against the wall. Roughly they manhandled her into the room, then gagged and blindfolded her, before tying her up. They shed their clothes as the bath water filled the tub. Wedges were jammed under the doors, the windows secured, and walls checked for hidden entrances or spyholes. Satisfied that all was secure for now, Kaori quickly slipped into the bath and scrubbed the vermin from her skin, and hair. Anorac emptied a sack of powder into the water and mixed it thoroughly. The poison in the powder would be sufficient to kill even the hardiest eggs. The tub was filled once again, and she washed away the entire residue. Stepping from the tub she quickly dried off and dressed.

“Nice work,” she said as she entered the other room, dropping the clothes she had been wearing into the fire. “Your turn, and make it quick; we have about an hour before they try and barge in here again.”

The barmaid had been stripped, her clothing cut away and tossed off to the side. Her hands and feet had been secured to the four bedposts in such a way that she was spread-eagle. Anorac had been busy removing the hair from her nether regions, careful not to cut or nick the young woman. Kaori picked up the dagger and completed the work before rubbing some expensive oil into the skin. Despite her fear, the barmaid began to react to the attention. Smiling to herself she leaned over and said, “Not this time, my pet; maybe if we are ever back this way, but then again you would never know we were here until you found yourself like this, and I am not so sure you would like that. Your clothes have been burned; I have taken some of your hair and will use it to keep track of you. My partner is actually a very powerful wizard and he can kill you from a great distance. Do you understand?”

Shaking her head the young woman began to shiver. Not sure if it was from fear or the cold,

Kaori carelessly threw a blanket over her. Searching the room she found pen, ink, and paper. An evil thought came to mind; one that just might buy them some time.

Sitting at the table she began to write in big flowing strokes, like those a wizard would be expected to make.

“Sirs;

It seems you have caught me at a disadvantage. The young woman I travel with is my bodyguard. Yes MY bodyguard - although her body is probably worth guarding more than mine - but I digress.

You have attempted to catch us unaware of your intentions and have paid the price for your indiscretions. Any further attempts will result in this place being burned to the ground, with all of you dying extremely painful deaths. Any attempts to determine who we are, or where we are going will result in your deaths - Guild borders or not.

I am a traveler; I have no Guild, therefore I am not bound by your useless agreements, and yes I will kill you - don't let this animal look confuse you.

THIS BARMAID IS NOT TO BE TOUCHED OR HARMED BY ANYONE UNLESS SHE ASKS YOU TO. SHE IS UNDER MY PROTECTION.

One final piece of business: The barmaid has been provided with the necessary instructions that dumb ox of an innkeeper needs. Follow them explicitly, or be prepared to die.

Until we meet again.

Signed Flaunterloy of Jifenstien

PS I would burn this note if I were you - it is covered in poison.

Carefully Kaori spread blotting sand on the ink. Anorac had just entered the room when she handed it to him, smiling. With a wink she put her finger to her lips and shook her head.

He settled into a chair, pulling on his boots while he read the note. Once dressed, he retrieved some of the young lady's hair from between her legs. Carefully he mixed it with sweet - smelling oil and placed it in a shallow dish. Approaching the fire he retrieved a brand and lit the mixture, quickly blowing out the flame until it smoldered, giving off a thick a plume of smoke that rose through the air, moving as hidden air currents entered and exited the room.

“My dear, do you smell that?” he asked.

The young woman vigorously nodded her head.

“You are now mine; I can touch you from anywhere in this world, kill you if I want to. Do you understand me?”

Tears were rolling down her cheeks as she nodded.

“You will be safe, no one will harm you. From this point on you get to choose who your lovers will be, who you will bed. I predict that you will be one of the most sought after women in this city. But choose wisely. You have a number of tasks at hand that you must perform for me. Simple tasks but they will ensure your longevity. Do you understand?”

“Good. First; I have no doubt you felt us shaving your most private areas, hm? You will keep it that way, or you will die. Same with your underarms. Second; I have a message for the innkeeper that you must convey to him. He hasn't been very nice to you.”

Anorac quickly outlined his instructions for the barkeeper, pausing to make sure she understood everything he said. He set before her three containers of powder. “These, my dear, are the powders; make sure he understands the need to follow my instructions carefully.

“Do you understand, or do I need to repeat them? Good. You are an intelligent young woman; I like that. One last instruction for you: You will find, on deposit in the local bank, a modest sum of money that will grow from time to time. If you are careful it will take care of your needs for a long time. It is under the name Dr. Fairlea. I have provided you with a letter for him. It will be delivered to you as well as a letter for the hotel in precisely one hour. He will take care of your needs, financially. Don't be fooled - he is not a Doctor, nor is he a nobleman.”

Kaori entered the room, a beautiful dress hanging over her arm. "I found this in an alcove. I think it will fit, but it might be a little small. Let me help her dress and get ready for our guests, and then we can be off.”

“No trouble from you - I would just as quickly slice you like I did the men than have any trouble.”

With a little tugging here, and some pushing there, they managed to get her into the dress. The dress actually looked quite good on her, complimenting her in all the right places. Sitting her down in a chair facing the door they loosely tied her in place. “ I am a Majik User; do not be fooled by these clothes. Can you count? You do know your numbers, don't you? Good; when we leave count to one hundred slowly, then remove these ropes, your gag, and blindfold and start screaming for help.”

Kaori and Anorac slipped out the outer door of the inn and quietly travelled across the city into the Nobility section where they quickly located the portal. As they slipped into the portal room, the new guard left. They removed their work clothes, slipped into street clothes, and quickly selected a portal location that they knew operated all the time. Stepping into the portal they were gone before the guard could return. Once they reached their destination they used the portal several times again, until they had laid a confusing pattern of jumps across the realm.

"That should take any trackers months to work out," said Kaori. "We have made enough jumps that our path has crossed itself several times, and will confuse them.

Stretching out on the bed of their new rooms in the city of Fruchita, they relaxed for the first time in weeks. The trip had been harrowing, dangerous, and at times funny. They had heard of the innkeepers' encounter with the local guardsman; knowing full well that he would never make it to the last fountain. His skin had turned purple and would have to wear off. The young bar maiden was now quite happily setup in one of the finest hotels in the country. She had suitors wooing her from all over the country and had been reported to have started a new fad that the women were flocking too in huge numbers and which the men found intriguing and invigorating.

Smiling at his bride they snuggled into each other's arms, enjoyed the warm sun shining the open window, and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 10

The dawn of a new day peaked across the horizon and as the sky brightened they felt the drop in temperature as a new season was fast approaching. Summer was giving way to a bouquet of new sounds and colours as creatures, both two and four-legged, hurried to finish harvesting. Farmers had begun the hard work of preparing their harvest for storage; butchering their livestock; laying in feed for the ones they would keep to start the process over with in the spring. Huge silos were filled; grains turned into flour; smoke houses filled with roasts, fowl, and fish.

Kaori and Anorac witnessed the preparations on a daily basis as they moved from village to village plying their trade as travelling minstrels. Some days they would cover great distances; bypassing towns that were too poor to support their trade, or unfriendly. Their travels took them steadily west, through the mountain passes and into the valleys beyond. In some places the first snows of winter had already touched the surroundings, and passes would soon to be unusable - stopping all forms of trade and travel until the spring thaw reached the summits.

"Anorac, did you remember to clean your boots last night?" asked Kaori.

"I forget one night and you are on my case every day," he grumbled.

Smiling, "How far do you think we need to go before we can eat?"

"Not sure," he sighed. "Hopefully not as far as yesterday. We still have a few pieces of hardtack."

"Not unless I get really desperate. That bread is called hardtack for a reason. I am soon going to need a hammer to break it apart."

"Maybe tonight we can get a meal; there must be an inn somewhere that we can ply our trade in," said Anorac hopefully. "This ground is starting to get hard, and without your warm body to keep me going I am not sure what I would do."

Each morning as the sun rose they would be up, dressed, and ready to travel, never spending more than an evening in any one place. First meal eaten, they would clean up the room or campsite they spent the night in, removing all traces of who they were, before cautiously moving out to greet the morning. As they walked along the trail, they were greeted by the call of the grouse and elk as they drummed and bugled. Moose could be heard snorting off in the distance, as well as the angry call of a large predator that had missed yet another meal. When they could they hitched rides from farmers, tradesmen, and other wagons, trading hours of songs for their passage. They were simply a couple of Bards travelling throughout the land, learning new songs, sharing old ones, careful never to become too popular or noticed.

Fruchita was now several days behind them; the Dwarven City a week's walk; faster by wagon, even faster yet by horse. They could have used the portal system, but erring on the side of caution, had decided to walk.

The gently rolling hills gave way to steep cliffs, and the broad road they travelled narrowed, showing signs of great craftsmanship as they marveled at the skill required to cut it out of the mountainside. Large chunks of the mountainside had been removed, to reveal the black granite bedrock, which the road had been carefully built on. Huge sheds covered the roadway in dangerous spots, and signs of rocks and devastated countryside below were evident everywhere. Way stations had been cut into the mountainside; each identified by large signs where guests were encouraged to stop, actually expected to stop and rest.

They watched as the traffic was coordinated by a troop of Dwarves that worked with military precision. Wagons were being weighed on an ingenious scale, as the numbers compared to manifest's that each driver carried as numbers were called back and forth. Every pound of cargo was accounted for.

They stood in line, waiting for their papers to be checked, rechecked, and hopefully approved again for the umpteenth time. Everybody that crossed the passes using their tunnels did so according to a precise schedule. Several travelers had been pulled from the line, their travel orders loudly revoked for unknown infractions. It was obvious that this was Dwarven country.

Anorac heard snippets of low conversation from those around them and did not like what he heard. "We need to be extra careful," he whispered to Kaori. "Apparently the Dwarves don't like our kind, and if we break any of their rules we will find ourselves turned away, or worse, imprisoned."

"Not a way I would like to spend our years together; locked in some dungeon, or worse, dead," said Kaori.

Anorac and Kaori were stopped at several of these waypoints. The questions were always the same; questions about their business in the Dwarven City, and beyond, with reminders they would be watched to make sure that they only plied their musical skills, nothing more. They were constantly being reminded that not many surface people could endure a few months in the mines, never mind a full year, which was the starting price for indiscretions. Bribery, while rampant in many of the coastal cities, did not work here and was treated as not only an insult to the individual, but to their honour as well.

They hoped to reach their destination by mid afternoon, and settled in, relaxing and enjoying the solitude of the ride in the back of a farmers' wagon. No one walked into the city. Traffic was so heavy that too many people had died, or interrupted the schedule. Wagons that had room were filled with 'extras' that, for a small fee could ride into town. When there were insufficient wagons, a taxi was brought out, and people were ferried back and forth, for a fee, allowing the guards to better control movement in and out of the city.

The deeper they travelled into the mountain, the darker it got; lights winked off and on as wagons lumbered by, lighting the way before them. Holes had been cut into the ceilings and walls to allow the movement of fresh air, while vents were cut in the floor to direct the movement of any water that invaded the tunnel system. Occasionally they would see movement off to the edge of the light. The wagon they were riding in was filled with corn, freshly picked a few days prior, and being brought to market by the farmer's oldest son, Tom. They had arranged passage with Tom just after he had left the farm, glad for the company, appreciative of the extra silver he would earn. They taught Tom several new songs, learned some of the local colourful, and not so colourful - songs that were commonly sung. One particular piece had intrigued Anorac and he had been working hard to convert it to so he could play it on one of his mountain flutes. The deep sound of the flute had resonated off the walls of the passes, creating a moving impression on his fellow travelers as he played.

"Tom, what do we keep seeing on the edge of the light? I thought these passages were clear," asked Anorac.

"Cleared yes, but not clear. Watch," he said as he grabbed a large ear of corn and heaved it off the wall, ahead and to the right of them.

There was a mad flurry of sound as several bodies converged on the ear of corn. Rat-like creatures attacked the corn, ripping to shreds anything that got in their way.

"They are all through the tunnels. Locals call them ratuslians, me I just call them pests and vermin. Apparently they are an integral part of the system in here. They keep the floors clean, the

spiders and bats to a minimum; cleaning up spills and whatever they find. I once heard they devoured a hapless traveler that strayed away from the wagon he was on,” he said, shuddering at the thought.

“Why don’t they just clean them out, be done with them?”

“It is easier, and cheaper, to let them do the work. They only live for six months before they die off, to feed the next generation. They don’t like light so avoid any area that is lit up. The wizards found here have placed a spell net around the place, to encourage them to stay away. Apparently they are the only ones that can see the net, or are affected by it. It keeps everything in balance, or so they claim. Me, I am just grateful nothing like this comes near me da’s farm, or we would be out of house, home, and farm.”

“How far to the city?” asked Kaori?

“See those markers, below the lights? Top number is distance from the next stop point; the one in brackets the distance from the city; bottom number the distance to the last stop point, and in brackets the distance to the outside world. Makes it easier to remember. We will stop for the night at a checkpoint which is roughly half the distance to the city. Tomorrow night we will stop two hours' ride from the city.

“The morning of our ride into the city we will be up and gone before the sun rises outside so I can set up shop. With any luck I can be back on the road and on my way home with our supplies for the winter before nightfall. They don’t let us travel at night - something to do with safety; I heard there are critters that roam these tunnels at night that not even the Dwarves will tackle. But who am I to argue.” Tom hummed to himself, letting the huge draft animal plod along its path, making sure to keep the wheels of the wagon in the well worn-ruts on the floor.

Anorac and Kaori pulled their musical instruments out and began their daily ritual of cleaning them. Carefully removing all the moisture, they applied special oil; the excess gently removed with a soft cloth. The mountain flutes were wiped down with special care; a draw string with cleaning cloth attached was pulled through the center before they were reassembled. The openings were carefully packed with a cloth specially designed for the job, which prevented any excess moisture from settling inside and thus changing the sound of the flute. At the last waypoint they had been warned not to play their instruments while travelling. No reason had been given for the warning, but the consequences had been enough to make them heed it.

Their work completed, all too soon, they searched for something to do to occupy them as they waited for the checkpoint to arrive so they could climb off the wagon and stretch. Sleep was not an option; staying on top of the huge pile of corn took all their concentration, as the wagon bumped down the road.

“Tom, how does your corn stay fresh for so long? Most corn would be old, tough, and dried out by now.”

“Me da says the wizards here developed this corn to feed their people. Just no one here could get it to grow underground. Me da says a small group of farmers approached the wizards and a deal was struck. We would grow their corn in our fields, if they would in return guarantee us a fair price and some supplies each season. We harvest the corn tree times a year; bring it to market, returning home with more seed, and supplies. If we move away, we agree not to take any seed with us and the wizards will buy our lands from us, selling it to the next farmer in the cycle. When me da passes the farm on to me, I need to make the same agreement or lose my access to the city. Once, and only once, did we try making it on our own - never again. Me sister and youngest broder died from hunger. Never again!”

“What about a wife for you then? Are you married?” asked Kaori.

“No ma’am. Da’s making arrangements for me to travel to another farming colony, on the other side of the mountain next spring to find a wife. Says I will need to find a strong, sturdy woman, capable of working in the fields with me and bearing good healthy children. What he told me to look for is good teeth, strong muscles, good bone structures, a glint in her eye, and someone not afraid to get her hands dirty. Much like you, ma’am. Are you available? You’d make me a fine wife; a little skinny but we could fix that.”

Laughing, she said, “Tom I am honoured you would want me for your wife, but alas, you came along too late. This is my husband, whom I love dearly.”

“We could fix that; one good smack on his noggin with my bailey wick and ye would be free.”

“No Tom, I’m afraid it wouldn’t work out. And if you need to smack someone, as you put it, to get a wife, do you really want to get her that way? Time for courting may be short, but would you want a wife that anyone that could smack you on the head could come and take?”

“Um, I guess you be right. Smacking not a good thing,” he said returning his eyes ahead.

“The checkpoint and inn is straight ahead, three lamps away,” he announced.

They arrived at the inn as the last meal was being set out. Tom found a berth for his draft animals and a place to store his corn where it would be safe for the night, and then joined them in the inn for a meal and to relax. The dining area was filled to capacity with people busy collecting supplies for the winter. The conversation and much of the talk they could hear centered on the hardships of the winter. Strangers like Kaori and Anorac were questioned about where they had travelled from, and where they were going to. Eventually the crowd convinced them to play for them. The innkeeper nodded approval. His smile said he was as eager as his patrons for some good music.

Kaori opened with a ballad about a maiden's lost love and her journey to find him, only to join him in death, eternally together. They followed this up with a round of boisterous drinking songs; some from the area, some from their own homeland. They ended the evening with Anorac playing his mountain flute, accompanied by Kaori as she sang softly of lost love, adventures, and brave souls fighting for what they believed in. The last few songs were just the mountain flute. As the last note filtered out of the flute across the room, not a sound could be heard. Everyone sat in their seats, their drinks long forgotten, lost in the sea of music that had washed over them. Tears poured down the cheeks of several patrons as they were swept away in song.

As Kaori and Anorac packed their instruments, the patrons slipped away, saying little as they left. The innkeeper approached, discreetly coughed, seeking their attention. “Your music was beautiful. I have never heard anything like it before. Your flute spoke to my heart in ways ...” He paused for a moment before continuing, “I have a room for you. It is not the King's palace but it is dry, warm, and bug free. Someone will call you in the morning so you can be ready to leave with Tom when he departs. Your performance was simply amazing. You will always be welcome here any time you are travelling.” Placing the key on the table he slipped away, leaving them alone once again.

Carefully they gathered their belongings and went in search of their room. They said little as they walked along the corridor, seeing large dormitory-type rooms at regular intervals. Each room held thirty beds and was not segregated, but each bed area had privacy by a curtain. Their room was the last one at the end of the hallway. Compared to the dormitory it was extravagant; fit for a king. There was hot and cold running water, a tub, and a separate sitting area. The bedroom held a large bed with what looked like a down-filled mattress, placed on top of a stuffed straw box. Quickly securing the door, they placed their belongings on the table, lay down on the bed, and slipped into a deep sleep.

A loud banging noise was heard at the door. Anorac arose to find he was still dressed. “Who

could that be, we just got in here,” he grumbled.

He yanked the door open; ready to tell off whomever it was that had disturbed his sleep. Tom looked apologetic and anxious standing there. “We have no more than the turning of the hourglass to be ready and back on the road. If you want first meal, you had better hurry. As Tom shuffled down the hall Anorac tried to collect his thoughts.

He returned to the bed and shook Kaori “Come on sleepy head; time to get up. First meal has been served and we have to eat and join Tom or risk being left behind.”

“What do you mean, get up? Go away - I just laid down; let me sleep.”

“From what Tom said, we have been asleep for eight hours; we must have been really tired - it seems like my head just hit the pillow and we are back at it again.”

Kaori dragged herself out of the bed, stretched her aching muscles, and looked at him. “Tonight I sleep on the floor; these beds are just too comfortable.”

“It wasn’t the bed, it was my music. Something flowed out of me last night, intertwined with the music of the flute, and affected all of us. I must be more careful until we can find someone who can explain it.”

Picking up their bags they joined the rest of the guests for a meager first meal of cold fruit, bread, cheese, and a few pieces of meat. They washed it down with a tankard of warm apple cider. The cook offered them food for the road. Anorac and Kaori selected the dried foods; some bread and cheese, staying away from the overly fresh-fruits. They carefully added some apple cider to an empty water skin, pushing the stopper in firmly.

When they went to leave they found someone had already paid the bill. They pressured the owner to reveal their hidden patron, but he politely refused, saying it was not an uncommon occurrence here. Unless the patron wanted to approach them and identify himself, they would have to be satisfied with the knowledge that their performance the night before had been deeply appreciated.

Tom patiently waited for them in a long line of wagons. Climbing up onto the corn, they shifted a few ears to find a comfortable place to sit, knowing it was going to be a long day with only two brief stops to water the animals along the way. This day seemed to stretch on forever. As they fought the boredom and struggled to stay awake and on top of the wagon they found themselves drifting off in a doze, only to wake up startled and unsure of their surroundings. Eventually they made it to the last checkpoint; only the city lay ahead; and their travel permits were checked once again.

"The festival has started in the city and we want no trouble." said a guard.

"Trouble? - Give 'em a break, Girges. We ain't seen trouble in centuries," replied his partner.

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The inn was larger than any they had come across. It was evident that over the years it had grown with the addition of stables, money changers, and food vendors. Everything a traveler would want or need as they entered or left the city.

Tom approached them. "I have been given the choice to wait until morning, or go in early. If I go early, I can leave early, or maybe see some of the sights this time. If you want to stay here, I understand," he said.

“No Tom we will go with you. We need to seek passage out on the other side of the city. We still have a long way to go, and need to cover as much ground as we can before the snow gets any deeper. Hopefully we can be back into the valleys before the passes are blocked.” Anorac said.

“Besides, another night of music like last night and I may not get up and leave with you

tomorrow,” said Kaori. “We still need to find the GuildMaster and check in with him as well before doing anything else.”

“Okay, we leave in half the turning of the hourglass then. Make sure you grab some food, and use the facilities. We will not be making any stops this time. Meet you at the wagon.”

The next few hours passed very quickly. The trip into the city with Tom ended just inside the main gates, in the trade district. They said their farewells, wishing Tom luck in his sales, and a safe trip home. Kaori rushed up, and on impulse wrapped her arms around him, giving him a big kiss on the cheek. Whispering, she said, “Don’t lose faith Tom, there is someone out there for you. Whoever it is will be one very lucky woman. You are a fine catch!”

Blushing, he squeezed her a little tighter before releasing her. Smiling, he said, “Of course they will. I’m not so sure I want to spend another winter alone, that’s all. But if I have to wait until the spring, I will.”

Quietly they slipped into the crowd and worked their way toward the center of the city, searching for the Bard’s Guild. It would be impolite, outright dangerous, not to report in to the Guild Master. Territories were guarded very carefully, with only a handful of cities being considered neutral.

As they moved through the crowd of travelers they watched as people’s pockets were picked; occasionally one of the travelers would catch the would be thief. A struggle would occur as they attempted to hold the unlucky one until the local constabulary could arrive. Most of the thieves were young boys and girls, who squirmed like eels caught on a dull hook, eventually breaking free and melting into the crowds.

Grabbing one rather adept young lady, Kaori whispered in her ear, “The Bard’s Guild location, or I will hand you over to that gentleman before you can dispose of his wallet.”

Pointing over the heads of the travelers to a building set just off the main square, she said, “Over there, The Golden Goose. Guild Master’s name is Hogsbreath. Don’t diss his name or you will pay the price, visiting Bard or no.” Squirming, she managed to slip free, and melted into the crowd.

“Remind me to make sure we haven’t had anything liberated,” said Anorac laughing as they walked through the main door of the inn. Set off to one side was a large table with a stone bench cut out of the wall. Chairs had been placed along both ends; the free side kept clear. A huge fire pit was set in the middle of the room, as much a divider as a source of heat. Tables were spread throughout with an assortment of chairs and benches placed at irregular intervals. Lighting was provided by crystals mounted high enough on the wall to prevent anyone from knocking them over, either to hide themselves, or during a fight. At the bar were several burly men, their armour giving away their positions as men at arms.

Seated to one side, alone at a table, with a huge mug of a hot beverage, was an enormous woman. If she had stood up she would have towered over most of the men in the room. She was dressed in mail that showed signs of repair where it had been cut; her scars attesting to the price they had cost her. Her shoulders were protected by a multi-spined layer of what looked like Dragon scales. Her forearms and hands were encased in mithril mail, the toughest metal known to man. Her chest was protected by more mithril mail, which shone dully in the light. Across the front of it was a tabard with a full frontal view of the head and shoulders of a red Dragon. Across her back was a pair of huge axes; the handles rising above her shoulders, their blades evident at her side. Hanging from her belt were smaller axes, complete with a bastard sword. Her back was covered with a rich flowing cloak that they almost missed, so close was its colouring to the surroundings. Set on the table next to her left hand was a helm, crafted to resemble the head of a Dragon. She was a menacing

looking creature; one that meant business and was not to be trifled with.

Compared to this fierce warrior they found a delicate-looking Bard seated off in the corner, working on what sounded like a new song. She twanged and banged, shaking her head in frustration as she tried to string the notes together that she had been scribbling on the paper, in a workable combination. Anorac approached her, “Apprentice, where can I find your Master?”

She jumped at being spoken to. “My Master,” she sputtered. “What makes you think I have a Master; and if I did, how would I know where he or she is?”

“You are a Bard in training, or at least hoping someday to become one. Any more impertinence and I will guarantee you it will never happen. Now off with you, and fetch your Master before I beat some manners into that thick skull.”

She dropped her instrument and skittered away from Anorac, a quick retort choking in her throat, when Kaori just appeared next to her, whispering, “Mind your ears little, one, or that Master will have them for his belt. Understand?”

Anorac settled onto the bench behind the table. He had a good command of the room, and very little would or could escape his attention. Glancing down at the work the young apprentice was trying to complete, he smiled when he realized the mistake she had been making. Carefully he lifted the quill, crossed out her error, and made a few corrections to the work. At the end he added a series of notes that ended the composition with a flare; a little something to reward her for her efforts.

A large man stood in the doorway at the far side of the room. He paused to speak to a few patrons as he crossed the room, acknowledging the warrior woman seated by herself, before approaching them. “My apprentice claims you want to cut her ears off for your belt. What is the meaning of this, coming into my establishment and threatening my patrons?” he demanded.

“We are traveling Bards seeking an audience with the Guild Master. If you are him then we seek a few minutes of your time, in a quiet and private room. If you are not him, then be a good lad and fetch him for us,” replied Anorac. “It has been a long journey.”

“How dare you,” he challenged, rising to his full height. Before he could say anything else, the point of Anorac’s sword was pressed firmly under his chin, drawing a small bead of blood. The warrior woman’s reaction was swift, threatening, and dangerous. She was across the table and the room and stood next to Anorac, sword drawn and the tip slipped into position under his arm before either of them could react.

“You are a stranger here; by your dress and accent I am not sure from where, so I will let you live, this time. No one draws a weapon within this city unless they want to die. My sisters and I guarantee it. Put your sword back in its scabbard, and sit down. Next time I will kill you before you can take your next breath.”

Slowly Anorac replaced his sword, slipping the knot over the pommel so he didn’t ‘accidentally’ draw it, before settling back into the chair.

“Hogsbreath, one of these days that charade of yours will get you killed,” she said, returning to her seat.

“Master Hogsbreath, we are travelling Bards. We have letters for you, and something to discuss that must be done in private” said Anorac.

“Why would I want to grant you a private audience? You just tried to kill me.”

Taking a chance, Anorac said, “Your brother, Hogsbor, sends his greetings.” He had noted the family resemblance as soon as the man walked across the floor.

“Brother! I don’t have a brother,” he sputtered, clearly shaken by the greeting. “But out of courtesy to our Lord I will grant your audience; but your weapons stay out here.”

“I am afraid that is not possible. This sword goes where I go, I entrust it to no one.”

“Then there is no audience.”

“What if your friend here would agree to stand as your guard? She has displayed more than enough prowess to stop anything I could have dreamed up. Bind her word to her honour and you will be safe. What say you, maiden - do you agree?”

“Aye I agree, but understand this, Bard: any threats from either of you, physical or otherwise, and both of you will be dead before the first hits the floor. Got it?”

They all nodded their heads in agreement. Hogsbreath led them across the room and up a set of stairs. At the top stood a massive door, its hinges set deep within the walls. He placed his hands at different intervals before the door swung open. They entered into a private study area.

Pointing to a couple of chairs next to the hearth, he settled into a lone chair facing them. Before them was a small decanter with an amber liquid in it, and several glasses encircling the bottle.

“What is it that is so damn important you need a private meeting with me; and how the hell do you know Hogsbor? He is supposed to be banished, dead to the world. Only a handful knows he is still alive.”

“First; accept my apologies for the play-acting out there, and,” Anorac said, looking at the maiden warrior, “thank you for your discretion.” Handing Hogsbreath a letter, he said, “This will explain most of what is going on; if you agree to the terms in that letter then I have two more for you.”

They patiently waited for him to read the letter. After he had read it for what seemed like the fourth time, he said, “Alright I agree.”

Anorac handed him the second letter, which he read just as carefully before looking up. “Are you sure this is what you want; what you need? Not only is it dangerous, but I cannot guarantee your safety outside the boundaries of this city.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Then I agree to the request of this letter, and its bindings.”

Anorac handed him the last letter. “Before you open it you must see something. Once you have seen it then you must decide if you still want to open the letter. But understand this; you will have a very short time to decide.”

Turning to the warrior maiden, he said, “I must draw my sword; I need to remove the coverings on the pommel and allow Hogsbreath to view it.”

She nodded and Anorac removed his sword from its scabbard, before working at removing the cover for the pommel. Laying the sword down on the table, he backed away. “This sword is attuned to me; picking it up will kill you, or drive you insane. You may look, but do not touch it. If you are truly the GuildMaster of this city, you will recognize it.”

The Guild Master gasped “Could it be? Has it finally surfaced? Lad, where did you steal this sword from?”

“From nowhere; it has chosen me. Read the last letter and you will understand. Quickly now, you have already sealed your own fate and have less than five minutes to read the letter. Your non-existent brother put something very nasty on that letter. He said you would miss it when I handed you the letters, and he was right. Claims to have done it to you repeatedly when you were growing up. That last letter is attuned to you; only your touch will reveal its contents.”

Hogsbreath quickly picked it up, and broke the wax seal. It was as Anorac had stated: Hogsbor, forever the trickster, had coated the letter in a mild solution that had already begun to dissolve the words he had so carefully written.

Brother:

Remember the time when we used to do this; how your hands would turn purple, or red, or you would scratch for days? This is much more serious. You will need to use our family remedy for the purple skin and the itch combined with your Guild remedy for a bite by one of those damn tunnel rats. You will need to do it within one half the turning of the hour glass from the time you break the seal. Hopefully you have not forgotten our childhood code or this is a wasted letter.

We are in need of your help. Anorac has become a Guild Master - your equal - in three and a half short years. He is on a mission that will hopefully change mankind, and restore the balance between good and evil. He must reach the Lady of the Lake as quickly and as inconspicuously as possible. I cannot explain more, and will hopefully live to someday reveal to you how vital your role is in all this.

Whatever you can do would be appreciated. Lord Kooramish sends his greetings. Ask the bearer to leave one of his mountain flutes. You can claim it as his gift as a visiting Bard to a great and noble GuildMaster. But DO NOT tell anyone where he is going, or how he is getting there. Before he leaves he must visit with the Council of Seven. They must be forewarned and allowed to prepare, just in case he needs to return to them.

How I wish I could have delivered this in person. My heart breaks at not being able to see you; to embrace you. May our god keep you safe; may your bed always be warm; your mug never empty; and a song always on your lips.

*Your ever faithful-brother,
Hogsbor.*

Swallowing hard, Hogsbreath set the letter down and moved to a locked cabinet on the other side of the room. Producing a tiny key from the folds of his robe he quickly began pulling out powders, liquids, and crystals, which he mixed together to create a vile-smelling paste. Shoving both hands into the mixture, he smeared the paste onto both hands, making sure to cover every piece of flesh. He turned and looked at Anorac, "Bring a full bucket of water here. The bucket is by the portal; you can draw water from the spigot over there. Hurry now; I don't have much time."

Anorac leapt to do what he had been asked, sensing an urgency that stopped him from asking the questions that had been bursting to get out. Fetching the bucket, he approached the spigot and asked, "Hot or cold?"

"Lukewarm, like a baby's bathwater."

"Huh?"

"Mix the water; stick your elbow in it, if it is too hot for your elbow then it is too hot for a baby," said Kaori, laughing. Pushing him out of the way she drew the water, checking to make sure it was the right temperature, before placing the pail in front of Hogsbreath, who plunged his hands into the water and gently shook them. "Don't touch them," he said. "The mixture must come off on its own. Quickly now; there is a small vial on the table behind me, purple in colour. You must add three drops to this when I tell you."

Kaori retrieved the bottle and waited, poised over the bucket for Hogsbreath's instructions. He grimaced in pain as he nodded his head and groaned, "Now, quickly."

The pair stood there waiting expectantly, as the clouded water turned first red, then blue, and finally purple. Hogsbreath's knees had just begun to buckle from the pain as the solution turned purple. He waited a minute or two before removing them from the solution. "Lad, you must be on a

mission of great importance for my brother to do that to me. When we were kids this was done to an enemy of ours; only the antidote had been misapplied and his hands shriveled up into useless claws. He swore vengeance on not only us but our whole clan. Hogsbor was sent over the great pond, to ensure our clan wouldn't die out. His separation almost killed us both. You see, we are more than just brothers - we are twins."

Hogsbreath dried his hands on a clean towel, then reaching over he drew the bucket, and the sludge that remained in it, and placed it safely off to the side, the towel draped over top of it. "This I will tend to when we are done."

"Why would your brother do that to you?" asked Anorac.

Hogsbreath chuckled "It wasn't meant for me directly, but for anyone but me. He knew I could make the antidote. Without it," he said holding out his hands, "an impostor would have been found out quickly."

"I wish we had time to talk - I would love to hear about my brother - but that will have to wait for another time. I will do as he asks, but I am not sure how to convince the Council of Seven to grant you an audience. But we will figure that out. You are a GuildMaster at your age? Incredible; that hasn't happened in five centuries; not since the time that sword you carry was first found. He also mentioned a mountain flute. Do you know anything about that?"

"He suggested I bring a number of these as they would help with our cover and be gifts along the way. If he has mentioned one in the letter, then he had a specific reason for it. What exactly did he say?"

"I cannot tell you. One of the traps of our code is we could never reveal the specific contents of the note, and I don't have the time to work a possible answer for you that would meet the requirements."

Anorac set his pack down, and from his demon-hide bag he removed a larger bag, two arm lengths long, made of soft, supple leather. He loosened the top string and reached inside the bag, feeling around for one specific flute. It took a few minutes but he finally settled on the one he was looking for. As he withdrew it, it began to hum of its own accord. Setting the bag between his knees, he laid the flute in his lap before retying the slip knot and returning it to the demon-bag and his pack.

He spoke finally to the Guild Master. "It would be a great honour to my family, my Guild, and our craft if you would accept this flute as a token of our deepest admiration and respect." Stepping forward, he bent down on one knee and reached forward with the flute.

Hogsbreath, probably for the first time in his life, had nothing to say. He hesitated before he reached out for the flute. It resumed humming as his hands clasped the deep ebony wood. "Where did you learn how to craft these? It is thought to be a lost art."

"That, sir I cannot answer; but, like the sword, the ability is mine to use and to share with others. Please play it for us; I have never heard its voice, and like the other flutes I have, it has been crying out to be heard."

Hogsbreath examined the mountain flute from all angles. The wood glistened in the firelight, almost as if alive. The barrel was as thick as his wrists, yet his small hands fit quite easily around it. The holes running down the front fit his hands perfectly; each crafted to follow the contours of his fingertips. The mouth piece was sloped and gentle. The sound board, made from the brightest ivory, was tightly secured with a leather thong. Hogsbreath stared at the craftsmanship; there were no chisel marks, no boring marks; everything had been worked smooth, and polished to perfection.

He raised the mouthpiece and gently blew into it. The deep resonating sound filled the room, reaching deep into everyone's soul, stirring up longings. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he began to

play. The flute's music changed as the harrowing haunting music filling the room, touching each person differently.

“How could he have known? How could Hogsbor have known? This is a gift beyond anything I have ever received or given. You will have your audience with the Council of Seven. Do you have one of these flutes that you play? Good; then as a visiting GuildMaster, you will play for the council at their next meeting. They meet the night after tomorrow. Until then we will find you a place to rest, where you be safe from prying eyes and questions. Clothing will be provided for you, and a guide so you may explore our fine city, if you so wish.”

Chapter 11

At first they enjoyed the peace, the quiet, and the chance to relax, but by the evening of the second night the constant reminder of the tons of rock over their heads began to take its toll. They were getting antsy for the outdoors; the fresh air, green grass, and the stars. They had repaired all their gear, sharpened their weapons, and cleaned and oiled their armour. The wait had become more than a lesson in patience; it was becoming intolerable. Several times they had tried to approach Hogsbreath but couldn't find him. Day turned into night, and night turned into day with little or no evidence that time had actually passed.

As they were beginning to snap at each other, the invitation to present themselves to the Council of Seven finally arrived. It was to be a formal meeting, and very private. Someone had managed to convince the Council that announcing their presence in this fine city would be a big mistake. What they didn't know was that the Council had, in their wisdom, invited several of the High Majik Users to attend their meeting.

Anorac and Kaori approached the door to the Council chamber. Kaori stood weaponless at Anorac's side. Anorac had his sword strapped to his back and his best mountain flute in his right hand.

"That is one huge door; it's thickness must be at least an arm's length." Laughing nervously Anorac added, "What are they expecting? An invasion by Dragons? The gems and gold in that door would be enough to pay for any attack on this chamber."

"You will wait here until summoned," their guide said before he slipped away. "The Council is aware of your presence."

They stood and waited, unable to talk, worried that even whispers would thunder down the hallway, shattering the silence. The door slowly swung open. They expected to see an army of huge servants pulling it open, and were surprised to see a lonely Dwarf, ancient in age, hunched over and moving slowly. "These doors are amazing, aren't they?" he said. "Visitors here for the first time are surprised at how easily they move. But don't be fooled - they will withstand even the most determined attack, majik or otherwise."

The old Dwarf stepped nimbly and they had to hurry to keep up. He turned a few corners before entering a huge hall. Arrayed in a circle and set on raised dais were seven evenly-spaced high-back chairs, each adorned with a crest depicting a clan. Some chairs were plain while others were ornate in design, but all were cut from one piece of stone that was not native to this continent. Seated in the chairs were Dwarves of varying ages. One chair, set at the apex of an intricate design carved in the stone floor was slightly higher than the others. It was from that position they were addressed.

"I am Medorgo, of the City of Dwarves," came a booming voice. "High Representative of this Council. Enter the circle so we may consider your request and presence here."

Moving slowly they entered the circle, glancing about the room. A large number of warrior maidens, well armed, guarded the council members. In front of them, strategically placed to allow free attack across the circle, were several men and women of varying heights. All were dressed in long, flowing robes, each holding a staff.

"Majik Users!" whispered Kaori, instantly on the defensive.

"We come in peace! What is the meaning of this welcome?" demanded Anorac.

"Do as you were told, or die before you can turn! You are the one who has dared to enter this

Council room, to violate the sanctity of our presence armed.”

“If you know that I am armed then you will know what the nature of this sword is that I bear. You will also know that I could not leave it behind. I beg your indulgence and the opportunity to explain, High Councilor Medorgo,” he said, slipping to one knee.

“Be warned: any threat will be dealt with severely and quickly.”

“Lord, may I withdraw my sword and remove the wraps from the pommel?”

A collective gasp could be heard moving around the circle.

“Our Guardians are the only ones allowed to carry weapons in this place. No one but them has dared to brandish a weapon in this place in centuries.”

“Outrageous, preposterous.”

Rising, High Councilor Medorgo raised his hand and rapped his staff seven times on the floor. “Enough!” He spoke to each in turn, reassuring them that their support and objections were noted.

Finally he addressed the Captain of the Warrior Maidens. “Your lifelong duty has been greatly appreciated, if not taken for granted from time to time. This is the one time I am going to invoke the High Councilor’s privilege. You are to do nothing unless we are threatened directly by either this young man or his friend.” He waited for her nod to make sure she understood his instructions.

Addressing the Majik Users he said, “Nothing from you either, except for protective spheres until we are sure of his intentions. If there is any threat you may annihilate them.”

“Proceed with caution, young man: you have heard my warnings, do not think they will be taken lightly. Your very life will depend on your ability to heed them.”

Nodding, Anorac turned and handed his flute to Kaori before reaching behind him and carefully removing the sword from its scabbard. Placing the blade under his arm he carefully began removing the wrap from the pommel, effectively hiding the etched runes on its blade. Once the pommel was clear he grasped the blade and raised the sword over his head for all to see. Slowly he turned, moving around the ring, allowing each in turn to get a good look at the blade he grasped. Gasps of shock were heard: some recoiled as far back into their seats as they could get: others stared at the blade with open lust. When he had completed the journey he replaced the sword back in its scabbard, breaking the attention of those in the room.

“This sword is attuned to me; it chose me; why, I don’t know, but it did. Anyone who touches it for whatever purpose will find the results extremely painful.

“I seek your help, but I am not sure in what form that help will be. You need to decide right now. Will you be bound by the sword, held by its majik?”

He reached for his Mountain flute. Carefully he raised it to his lips and began to play. The music wove through the room, touching each of them in a different way. An image of painted scenes from the past where epic battles had been fought; scenes from today of battles that were being fought; and scenes of the future that kept changing as they were yet to be decided, danced in front of them.

“What is your choice? Do we leave here with your support, or do we leave here never to return?”

“I will pledge my support,” said Medorgo.

Each Councilor in turn echoed their support, followed by the Majik Users. All, that is, with the exception of one councilor and one Majik User. A portal suddenly appeared and the pair stepped through it, quickly followed by a number of arrows and two warrior maidens who were screaming blood-curling oaths about denial and betrayal. Drops of blood could be seen on the floor leading into the portal before it slammed shut.

“Quickly, assemble the Council of Majik Users; we must send a representative to appeal to

Gruaghlothor. Without his help we are doomed.”

“Who and what is a Gruaghlothor?” asked Anorac.

“Gruaghlothor is the supreme ruler of all the ferrous Dragons; we have a quasi peace established with him.”

“Our ancient texts warned us this day would come; that our craftsmen would be called upon once again to create a blade, much like the one you hold, only different. This one must harness the power of fire - the fire from the center of our world. Without Gruaghlothor we will never be able to establish the majik, and heat, we need to forge the blade. Only he holds the secrets to the binding of the metals we will need to use. You will need to craft five blades, all identical. One will be infused with the majik of fire; the others with water, earth - or life - , death, and finally, time.

“Hurry now; everyone knows their jobs. We are wasting time and will need to move deep into the city, well beyond any areas where we can be found. Once we arrive there, no one may leave until we are finished with the blade and it has joined with the Eye of Zul. If anyone has any objections or misgivings speak now; this is more important than any one of us alone.”

Murmurs of agreement could be heard throughout the hall, until one quiet voice made itself heard through the din. “We must let our friends know about what is going on!”

“No one else in the city is to know what we are about to do, who knows where their spies are!” replied another council member.

“Not those friends, but our friends the Giants, the Elves, Gnomes and Humans. You can be assured that if this is happening here, steps are being taken now to prevent them from helping. We all hold a fragment of the ancient text of Thule. It is time those seals were broken and the text examined; but we must all do it. Events have been put in motion that dictate we examine them. They alone hold the secret of what we must do. They alone predicted this moment in time.”

“Where is our keeper of lore?”

“He was the one that jumped through the portal!” exclaimed someone in the crowd.

“Now what? We are doomed. If we cannot read the text then we cannot follow the instructions; we are doomed!” cried one Councilor.

One young man was forcibly pushed into the centre of the room and encouraged to speak. “Your Lordship, if you would permit me. I am young, nowhere near as experienced as my worthy Masters are, but I have been studying the text’s instructions, much to Zappor’s dismay. I had suspected he was not being honest and would betray us, so I moved the parchment to a safer location; one he would never expect; one he would never dare assault. Even the gods are impotent there.”

“Where is this place, boy? Speak now, so we may retrieve the parchment, break the seals, and study it.”

“I will not reveal its location until a group of seven is selected to receive it. The ancient text stated they must be pure of heart; not tempted by greed or power. They must be Masters in their own right, and well respected. Identify and assemble the seven and then we will retrieve the parchment!”

Before they could grab him and drag him from the room and force him to reveal the parchment’s location he yelled, “I, Howref, Assistant to the Keeper of our Lore, declare and claim the ancient right of protection of the Valkerie. I claim ‘soyezpreparus’.”

Quickly a ring of steel formed around him; Valkerie of all sizes brandishing swords, pikes, and axes, surrounded him, keeping all at bay.

“How dare you, you impertinent little worm!” screamed a Councilor. “Seize him, seize the traitor, NOW!”

“Move one step closer, Councilor, and you will die,” replied the Captain. “His claim of

‘soyezpreparus’ overrides anything you could say or do. Time will be his judgment, not you.”

“Select your seven, and do it now, before we lose any more precious time. Councilor, you have just removed yourself from that very short list. Isolate him and escort him to a safe place; any resistance is to be met with deadly force,” said Anorac.

The remaining Majik Users quickly conferred with the councilors before presenting a list of nine Majik Users. “We know you asked for seven, but if two are judged to be unworthy we felt we needed to be prepared, and not waste anymore time. How do you determine to judge these men and women?” asked their spokesman.

“The text is very explicit; I am not to judge them, in fact no Dwarf alive is to be their judge. Neither will anyone living or dead be their judge. The Eye of Zul will be their judge. Anorac, you and Kaori need to step inside the ring. Draw the sword and remove all protective coverings. Each one will step forward, when their name is called; if they accepted the sword will glow bright white. If they are rejected the sword will pulse a deep red. Pray with all your heart that we can find seven who cause the sword to glow.”

One by one their names were called and they stepped forward until the list had been exhausted. Four had passed, the rest had failed. At a loss on how to proceed, Howref shrugged his shoulders in defeat.

“We are doomed; it will take the power of seven to manipulate the spells required to form the blade. It doesn’t matter now whether we have Gruaghlothor’s help or not.”

“Did your ancient text say seven Majik Users, or seven people? Every one that has not been named, or rejected step forward; Councilors, Majik Users, and Valkerie,” said Anorac. “Maybe we are missing something very simple, yet complicated.”

“My Master always insisted that it said seven Majik Users. Even if we didn’t agree on it, I accepted his point of view; after all, he was my Master, teacher and mentor; I was the student,” said Howref.

One by one the remaining Majik Users stepped forward, but none were accepted. The councilors stepped forward, one at a time, and to everyone’s surprise an ancient Dwarf, one soon expected to retire, was accepted. As Anorac stepped around the circle the blade turned white; it glowed with an intensity never seen before as he passed a warrior maid.

“What is your name, warrior?” asked Medorgo.

“My name is not important, my Lord, only that I serve. What is your command?” she replied.

“The sword has chosen you; you are the sixth person to aid in forging the blade. What is your name?”

“It can’t be true - it must have meant for someone else. I am a warrior, not a Majik User. I have sworn, unto my death to protect you and the council. Do not play tricks with me,” she said.

“It is true, you have been selected” said Anorac. “What is your name?”

“My name is Lokitrek; I will serve this council, and the Dwarves with my dying breath if I must.” She knelt on one knee before Anorac as he held the Sword of Zul above her head.

“But we are one short; the ancient text claims we must have seven. Who is the seventh?” cried a voice from the crowd.

“Your seventh is Howref,” said Anorac as the sword passed in front of him, glowing intensely.

“No, it can’t be. I am just the keeper of our lore; I don’t have any majikal abilities,” he protested.

“Let it be as you have stated the ancient text demands. Seven have been chosen. Seven shall prepare the blade. Lokitrek has made a vow unto death to protect her dwarven people and do her part.

What say the other six?” demanded a councilor.

One by one they settled on bent knee and made the same covenant.

“Where is the ancient text? We must begin the process,” said one of the chosen Majik Users.

“Clear the room, except for the Chancellor, the seven, the guards, and our two guests” said Howref.

Once all had left but the seven, the doors were sealed and glyphs were established. Howref said, “Chancellor, would you be so kind as to step away from your seat please?”

“Step away from my seat? What is the meaning of this?” he said.

“Watch.”

Howref approached the seat and quickly began to disassemble it. First the cushion was removed and tossed on the floor. Then the arm rests were popped off and set on the cushion to protect them. Finally the supports for the backrest were removed and the backrest itself was moved to the cushion. “Your dagger please,” Howref said to a guard.

Slipping the dagger into the back, Howref quickly twisted it. Two pieces popped free as the backrest separated. Sitting between the two pieces were several sheets of parchment, carefully encased in a clear material to protect them. Howref removed the package and turned to face the Chancellor.

“These are the ancient texts which were removed and hidden to protect them from my Master.”

“How did you know he would betray us?”

“I didn’t, but the text said someone would. I couldn’t wait until I could prove it one way or the other. I needed to act quickly. I knew that I would never betray our people. Our lore is to be cherished, protected, preserved for future generations, not manipulated and abused for personal gain.”

“It is unfortunate for your Master, and our people, that you were not made the Master of our lore; a mistake that almost cost us dearly. How much had your Master been able to decipher?”

“Not enough to know the steps needed to solve the riddle. When I deciphered the text warning of betrayal, it was very explicit on what to do. I removed several key pieces of the text before he could start working on them. Pieces that would lead you down the right trail, and not many of the dead-end routes already written into the text.”

“Chancellor, you need to open the portal to the room Fire's Breath before we can do anything else, but you cannot come with us. The text says only the seven chosen to forge the blade, the seven to guard it, and our two guests. Your role is equally vital. You must convince our friends, the Giants, the Elves, the Gnomes and the Humans to break their seals and begin their work following the guidelines they have. I can only pray that the Majik Users that went ahead of us have managed to convince Gruaghlothor to help us.”

The Chancellor stepped forward. Removing his scepter from its fixture at the side of his chair he strode to the centre of the room, stopping in a large ring. He faced north and rapped his scepter seven times on the floor before moving to face east, then south, and finally west, repeating his motions.

*“Fire's breath, fire's breath
I call upon you as my ancient
Right decrees.
Open now, and receive
Dranconius firus
Dranconius receptus!
Open now I command you!”*

The floor in front of him disappeared as stairs materialized, leading deep into the heart of the mountain.

“Quickly now, these steps will lead you to Fire's Breath; from there you are on your own,” the Chancellor said. “Take this; you will need it to open the door you will find at the end of the last passageway.” He separated the scepter from the shaft it was mounted on. “May Cimion go with you, or we are all doomed.”

Scepter in hand, Howref lead the way Anorac, Kaori, the chosen seven, and their guard down the stairs. As the last one cleared the stairs below the floor, it suddenly closed as quickly as it had opened, and they were encased in darkness so thick they couldn't see each other.

A Majik User muttered a quick spell, and a low-level light appeared then vanished. Anorac held up his sword and the glow emanating from the blade illuminated a few feet in front of them, but not enough to travel safely down the passageway.

“Does the parchment say anything about this?” grumbled a Majik User.

“Yes, it does. Anorac, hold your sword up again so I can read it.” Howref lifted the page, and began to read, referring to a second page for clarification. “Yes, here it is. Lightus significantus.”

The passageway lit up as light popped from lanterns mounted along the wall as they jogged down the passageway at a steep downward angle. They couldn't tell how much time had passed or how deep they had traveled or how deep they needed to go.

Their narrow hallway gave way to a wider corridor and eventually ended at a huge doorway. Nothing in their arsenal of spells could have breached it. Brute strength would have been a complete waste of time, as well as either Kaori or Anorac's deft fingers.

“The Chancellor said we needed the scepter to open this door. Look for a keyway, an opening, anything that would open this thing,” said Howref.

“Nothing. We have been over this damn door a dozen times and there is nothing that would even resemble a keyway. What are we missing?”

“What does the text say?”

“Just that the scepter would lead us to the doorway and through it. There is nothing in this text referring to the Chancellor being one of the chosen either. I am at a loss. Any suggestions?”

Lokitrek said excitedly, “You said the scepter is the way, that it would lead us to the doorway and through it? Then let it lead us. Put it in front of you and step into the door. Maybe it is built to respond to the scepter. If we all link together, grasping the shoulder of the one in front, then we are joined as one. Lead on Howref; let us step through this doorway as if it were a portal.”

“Why not; it can't hurt, let's try it,” said Anorac.

Reaching out, he grasped Howref's shoulder; Kaori grasped his, and so on down the line until they were all linked.

Howref stepped forward, expecting to crash into the door. He showed surprise when he felt nothing, and stepped through into a huge room on the other side. What stood before him, almost scared him to death. A huge cobalt-coloured Dragon was waiting for him, ancient in appearance, battle worn, with a number of large scars.

“What do we have here? Not enough for a meal, but maybe enough for my children to play with,” mused the Dragon.

The seven guards quickly spread out in front of the group, drawing their weapons, assuming a battle stance.

A deep rumble could be heard coming from the Dragon - was it laughter, or an overactive

stomach that was just begging to be fed, they wondered.

“Little fools, do you think you could harm me?” it bellowed. “Gruaghlothor is a fool to have listened to your pleas’ for help. He is waiting for you at the end of that corridor,” it said, pointing across the room at a large opening. “Maybe when he is done I can feed you to my children. They would enjoy the entertainment, and I need a distraction for them. Now go quickly before I forget why I am here.”

They rushed across the room into a huge cavern.

Gruaghlothor stood in the center of the cavern and turned his massive bulk to face them. “I received your request. Why should I help you and not just not eat you now?”

Howref, stepping forward, began explaining about the ancient text, its meaning, and the threat they faced. Sensing that Gruaghlothor was becoming bored, Anorac placed his hand on Howref’s shoulder and pulled him back. Drawing his sword he stepped forward.

“Gruaghlothor, do you recognize this blade?” Stepping towards the great Dragon Anorac held the blade high above his head. “Do you remember it and the chaos that enveloped not only your world but ours? You helped create it, mould it, imbue its special powers, hoping to stop the madness that was destroying not only my kind, but yours as well. You believed it would be enough; that never again would a truce need to be brokered between your great race and ours.

“You were all wrong! The gods have been messing with us. I would not be surprised to hear that they have already enslaved some of your kind. Especially if it was a goddess named Dorganna. We need your help once again, to fashion several blades that can be imbued with majik that will stop her for good. Without it, both races are doomed to a millennium of servitude, and slavery. We are ready to die to prevent that from happening. The question is; will you help us fight her forces, or just wait for the inevitable? As mighty as you are you will not be able to defeat her.”

“What do you need?” he asked a sound erupted from his throat that could only have been a sigh of relief.

“We need to craft five blades. One is to be imbued with the dwarven majik, their knowledge of the earth, and sealed by the fire of Dragons. The other four will be dispersed; one to the Elves, one to the Gnomes, one to the Giants and finally one to the Humans. Each has a role to play if we are to succeed. None of us will succeed without your help.”

“Let it be done. We will begin.”

Howref stepped forward. “We have need of seven pounds each of dark iron, cobalt, adamantine, iron, tungsten and seven huge rubies, amethysts and the purest dark jade per blade. Normally we could harvest these materials on our own, but they need to be the purest quality known and we do not have sufficient time to assemble them.”

“They will come at a price, a very heavy price, but it will be done,” Gruaghlothor said.

“We will need to refine each of these metals together, with the fire from your Dragons, seven times; each time adding another pound of metal and one of the gemstones, until the final product can be worked into a blade. The combined breath from an iron, chromium, cobalt, tungsten, and nickel Dragon, plus yours, will be required to temper the blade as our Majik Users invoke the spells necessary. The last step will require you to carve the runes of the ancient Dragons on the blade. Once cooled, it will be joined to the Eye of Zul. Each extra blade must be moved to our compatriots while hot, to allow for their majik to be added to their blades. They are already making the necessary arrangements to have them enchanted. Can you do all of that?”

“For a price we can.”

“What is that price?”

“The people of the Dwarven City above us will leave their city and agree to be our servants for a period of one thousand years; tending to our needs, never to return to this city again. The lore required to find this place will be destroyed.”

“I don’t have the authority to agree to that,” sputtered Howref.

“You carry the scepter of power, do you not? That gives you the authority to do it. Do you agree to my terms?”

“I must confer with my friends first. This is not something I can do on my own.”

“You have until the sand runs out of the hourglass to decide. I will fulfill your requests while we are waiting.”

Turning Gruaghlothor lumbered out of the cavern chuckling to himself, “I finally have the upper hand on those pesky gnats!”

Howref quickly checked through the text, looking for any clues on how to get around, or out of, this predicament. "I can't condemn our people to one thousand years of slavery and servitude. They would be better off dead. We are a proud race, and they would never willingly agree. The ensuing riots and rebellion that would follow this decree alone would destroy whatever they wanted to accomplish."

“What does the text say?” asked the councilor. “Is there a way out of this? There has to be. I don’t want to be remembered in our lore as the one that condemned us to extinction, because extinct we will become, if we serve those wretched beasts for a thousand years.”

“There is a passage about using the blades for personal gain that we might be able to exploit,” Howref said. “They will be ineffective if corrupted through manipulation. Perhaps they would settle to an agreement to abandon the city, to destroying the lore associated with this room. But that would mean we would have to stay here until we die to fulfill that part of the bargain. I for one would be willing to do that, if it meant our people would be free.”

Anorac spoke up, “Let me deal with Gruaghlothor; you need to prepare the forges, and begin the process of refining the metal. The longer we wait the greater the chance for failure. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” they replied in unison.

At the appointed time Gruaghlothor returned. “The supplies you requested have been assembled and are waiting for you at the great forge. The plugs have been removed and you may draw the flame you need from the very bowels of the earth. But before you start, what is your decision?”

Anorac stepped forward and drew his sword. “Everyone that has become involved in this has agreed to one simple vow. Before we go any further, Gruaghlothor, do you make the same vow? If so, swear it in the presence of this very blade which you helped craft.”

“I do,” replied Gruaghlothor.

“You do what?” asked Anorac.

“I, Gruaghlothor, Lord of all Dragons, pledge my vow, as well as all Dragonkin, to the bearer of the Eye of Zul.”

Anorac drew himself up to his full height, “Here are the terms for your help. The Dwarven people will leave the Dwarven City above. When we are finished, the seven who have crafted the blade agree to remain behind until they die natural deaths, to conceal the Dragons' part in this adventure. As long as the crafted blades are not used for anyone’s gain, this will be honoured. The moment they are betrayed this agreement becomes useless. The vow you made includes your dying breath. There will be no slavery or servitude. The Dwarven people are unaware of what is going on.”

“Tricked! You tricked me, little one. You will pay dearly for that!” roared Gruaghlothor his hot, fiery breath torching the ceiling above.

“Tricked? You tricked yourself by your own hand. Go against these conditions and you will die. Did you forget who you made this vow to, or before whom it was freely given? The gods themselves are witnesses and will administer the punishment if you break it. It was you who insisted that any vows be made in front of or on behalf of the sword.”

Gruaghlothor snorted his disgust. “Let us begin the work. Once again I have been outmaneuvered by a gnat! Are you sure there is no Dragon blood in your lineage, boy? I wouldn’t be surprised if there was.”

They had to run at full speed just to keep up to the huge Dragon as he lumbered through the cavern. Gruaghlothor stopped before a great forge. Neatly assembled next to the melting pot were the materials they needed; the metal, in one pound bars, was stacked separately.

Howref began to read off the instructions. “First, we need to purify the pots, we will need five of them.”

Assembling the pots, they moved them towards the flowing molten rock. The heat was so intense only the Majik Users with fire shields could get close to them, and then for a limited amount of time. Huge hourglasses had been set off to one side, clearly visible by all, to allow for easy monitoring of the time left. Once purified, they turned to Howref and waited.

“Add to each pot one pound of dark iron, and turn the hourglass. At the end of the hour draw off the impurities that have risen to the surface.”

“Repeat this process, adding the cobalt, adamantine, and tungsten. Ensure that each metal is added so as not to spill any of the molten metal. Iron, chromium, tungsten and nickel Dragons must sustain their heat for at least fifteen minutes and the impurities will be drawn off. This process must be done seven times. When the seventh firing is completed, the molten mixture will be poured into the sand moulds of the Sword of Zul. Once cooled, they are to be hammered into shape. Before completely cooled the Dragons must once again heat the blades, the Majik Users will then cast their spells.

"The final step will involve Gruaghlothor joining his Dragons as they reheat the blade. He will then inscribe the runes of his ancient race on the exposed side of the blade. It will be allowed to cool, and then it will be tempered - this time only the fire from Gruaghlothor will be used - and then allowed to join with the Eye of Zul.

"If we are successful, the two blades will immediately join. If not, then we are doomed. We have a lot of work to do, let us begin."

Over the next several hours the work proceeded with little problem. Occasionally a Majik User fainted from the intense heat but was quickly revived by his comrades. When four of the five blanks were completed, Dragons were selected for their loyalty to Gruaghlothor, their speed and the knowledge of their destinations and dispatched with the blades.

The majik imbued to the blade, sealed by Dragon fire then etched by Gruaghlothor signaled the completion of the first blade. Cautiously they removed the extremely hot blade from the mold and set it aside to cool.

“It is time for the final test,” announced Howref. “Anorac, would you join the blades.”

Not a sound could be heard as everyone waited on the outcome of several hours of grueling work.

Anorac’s sword did little as he approached the blade. It didn’t sing, change colour, or vibrate. He stood there disappointed, crushed. Was all their hard work for nothing? Had he put his life on hold, been thrust into this as someone’s cruel joke played out?

Disappointment showed on his face. His shoulders sagged in defeat. “Damn sword,” he

muttered slamming it down on the mold next to the blade. Something happened when the blades touched. The blade they created moved to fuse itself to his sword. The Dragon-etched runes transferred from that blade to his blade; they became one with each other. He stood in shock, not sure whether to pick up the new sword or leave it.

Kaori stepped next to him. "Pick it up. You are the only one who can."

Carefully he reached for the Eye of Zul, expecting debilitating pain, not believing for a second that this was the sword he had been carrying around for so long. Fire wicked from the blade, yet there was no heat; it's menacing threat enough to keep others at bay. As he touched it, it sang to him, filled him with power. It felt different, as power radiated through it into his very soul. It spoke of great abilities, but also dire warnings about misuse.

Anorac smiled, saying, "It worked, it actually worked, but it is unbalanced, as if it is missing something. What does the ancient text say, Howref?"

Quickly he read through the pages, looking for a reference to the other blades, but found none. "Nothing, it says nothing."

"Gruaghlothor, I am need of a Dragon to carry my beloved and me to the location of each blade. We must assemble this sword as fast as possible. There is something ominous in the air, we may already be too late."

"Humans riding on our backs? Never! It is a sacrilege, they will revolt!" he bellowed.

"Do you want to be remembered as the leader who did everything he could to fight this darkness, or the one that through his inaction allowed it to destroy our world?" Anorac shouted.

"These people have risked their lives to craft the blades and create the first of five. They must now tell their people they will need to leave the only home they have known for hundreds of years, just to honour an agreement made with you. Regardless of what you do or say, they will do the honourable thing and continue to follow that agreement."

"Come, Kaori, we must make our own way to the blades." Turning to the group remaining behind he asked, "Any last words for your brethren before I leave?"

Quickly, words of love and duty were passed on to them. With promises to personally deliver them, they prepared to leave back the way they had come in.

"Where do you think you are going?" bellowed Gruaghlothor. "Our agreement required you to all stay behind."

"Our agreement, as you so sweetly put it, was for the Dwarves, and the seven who were required to craft the sword, to stay behind. Last time I checked, I was a Human and Kaori was half Human half Night Elf. At least they are honourable enough to live by their agreement, unlike you!"

Sputtering, Gruaghlothor tried to make excuses for his failure not to get the agreement he wanted. "All right, they can leave, but I have my own conditions that must be met. I will fly the two of you to your destinations. The Dwarves must agree to vacate the city, and to never again trespass on Dragon territory. They must also provide a guard, in the event that the sword ever separates, protecting it from those who would use it for their own gain. That blade will be returned to their council room, where a council of seven will sit every month, even in death, to judge those that seek it. How they will accomplish that is up to them. But it will include all but one of them. The warrior maiden will be bound to protect the blade if it is needed once again. Do you agree?"

Each of them said, "I agree."

Howref spoke up, saying, "How do we fill the last spot in the Council of Seven? We only make up six."

"The true owner of that scepter will make up your seventh member. He alone has the power to

open the doorway to our realm; we would have that doorway sealed forever.”

“On behalf of the Dwarven people, let it be done,” said Howref.

“Good, now return the way you came here. You two little people follow me to the large cavern.” Gruaghlothor turned as if he had just dismissed them and lumbered off. Howref and the remaining members smashed the molds and dumped them into the molten rock. The pots went next, along with the last of the pages of the ancient text. The fire quickly consumed them. As they left the room, Dragons added their fire breath to the molten rock, finishing off the work already started and sealing the opening once again.

“I hope they appreciate what we have done and agreed to,” Howref said.

Chapter 12

Gruaghlothor dipped his wing and encouraged them to climb on board. "Settle in as best you can and hang on," he said.

"Settle in? Yeah, right; your scales are so damn large and wide that they are uncomfortable at best," said Anorac. "We need to hold onto your spines. Just don't make any sudden turns or dives or you'll lose us."

"Really now, why would I do that?" He looked back at them with a mischievous look.

Even with a great leap, his wings strained to lift the huge body off the floor of the cavern. A loud roar preceded them as he flew towards the surface. Exploding from the cavern opening, they sailed off into the night sky. Anorac and Kaori were oblivious to what was around as they hung on to the spines. Nothing challenged their flight as he turned north towards the huge cold empire of the Frost Giants.

"How long before we are in the land of the Giants?" said Anorac.

"You mean the land of Frozinga, don't you? He is the ruling monarch there, not the Giants. He tolerates them, and they leave him and his kind alone. Many a battle had been waged before an uneasy peace was reached. Hopefully this will not spark another war between the Giants and the Dragons, or worse, between the Dragonkin of this realm. That would be a nasty battle and you would be forced to choose a side."

"Can you give us any insight into what we should expect? All this is new to us; we do not have a road map to follow; there are no guidelines, instructions, only this incessant need created by the sword," Anorac said.

Over the next few hours Gruaghlothor enlightened them with the lore of not only his realm, but of all the Dragons. They learned of great battles between the Dragonkin, as one faction after the next attempted to reign supreme over the others. Factions within factions rose to power and were overthrown, only to be replaced by something or someone that was worse. Their bloody history was so interwoven with Humans that sometimes they couldn't be separated. Man had attempted a number of times to subjugate them, and on occasion succeeded for a short period of time. Some Dragons took it as an insult, a very dangerous insult, if a Human asked to be carried somewhere on their back. The memories of their control were still too vivid and strong in their minds - and a Dragon had a long memory; they lived for centuries.

Man had hunted them as sport and had even created Dragon hunters of Knights, Rangers and Majik Users who roamed, killing them in the name of protecting the Humans in the area; but it was really just an excuse to pillage their vast treasures.

"We Dragons have become very leery of anything that Humans have asked of us. We have our honour, and we keep it. Your kind will twist it, even break it, whenever it suits their needs," said Gruaghlothor.

The moon had just reached its zenith when Gruaghlothor interrupted his lore. "Dead ahead: the kingdom of Frozinga and the land of the Giants. Their keep is located on the second highest peak, over there to the east. Frozinga's keep is on the tallest mountain to be found here. It is the one off to the west. The distance between them guarantees some of the peace. I hope you know what you are doing."

"So do I; so do I." Anorac said.

Gruaghlothor trumpeted a call that reverberated off of the mountains and echoed back and forth across the valleys. Mountains seemed to shake as he waited for a response.

“Did you just challenge Frozinga?” Kaori said.

“I announced our presence; being the ruler of my own realm I do not need to ask for permission to enter this domain. I am recognized as the defacto leader amongst all our clans - somewhat reluctantly, mind you. I am announcing my presence to all that are here, warning of dire consequences if challenged. This way she cannot claim that I had snuck up on her - as if I would ever need to do that.”

A mighty roar was returned from the highest mountain peak that shook Anorac and Kaori to their very core. A dark cloud could be seen moving towards them at a high rate of speed, threatening to swallow them up. As it approached it slowed until they could visibly see that it was a Dragon; a huge Dragon that caused the air around it to crackle and moan as it approached.

“Gruaghlothor, what do you want, invading my realm like this? You know the protocol!” bellowed Frozinga.

“Enough!” bellowed Gruaghlothor. “I am here on a mission that will affect us all, the little people, and especially the Dragonkin of all our realms. Listen to what these little people have to say, and then judge for yourself.”

“Why should I listen to these little people; they bring nothing but trouble to my domain. The Giants are at peace with us; we are safe from anything that would threaten us.”

“Wrong, you pompous fool! Listen to them!”

Anorac recited the events that had brought them into her realm, before explaining the need to create the Blade of Catastrophoonus using her majik, as well as the majik of the Giants, to balance the blade of molten fire.

“What about this Blade of Arcanity; how do you plan on achieving that?”

“At this very moment in time the Gnomes are working with a Dracolich to create their blade. The Elves are almost finished theirs. Each have already received the blank in which to imbue their majik, just as the Giants have. We must believe they will succeed; failure is not an option. If Dorganna succeeds this time, all will be lost, Dragonkin and little people alike will be subjugated for a millennium of millennia. I will never live to see the end of it, but your children will. Can you ignore this, knowing what you could condemn them to?”

“What must we do?” she asked.

“Gruaghlothor, maybe you should explain it; she might accept it better from you than us.”

“Not on your life,” he rumbled. “Your show, your deal; you explain it.”

“The blade requires your breath, your spells, a drop of your blood; as well as your ancient runes inscribed on it before it cools. Once completed, it will be joined to the Sword of Zul, where it will take its rightful place opposite the Blade of Molten Fire.”

“A drop of my blood? That is sacrilege!” she bellowed. The air around her crackled with lightning, the ground below exploded destroying trees, animals, and anything else caught in its path. “Never will I agree to that.”

Holding onto a spine, the air whipping past him, he drew the Sword of Zul and held it before him. It glowed, an eerie light in the darkness drawing everyone’s attention. “Frozinga, you swore an oath to this Sword when it was made; you joined with others to ensure that it would succeed. Are you now going to break that oath? Are you going to mar the honour of your clan forever with the decision?”

“The gods bore witness to your oath, and they remember the day it was made as if it was yesterday, especially Dorganna. She is counting on you to break it. You can return to your icy keep,

safe for now, but be ready to slaughter all your clan before she arrives with her minions, if you have time. Gruaghlothor, take us to the Giants; we are done here.”

To make sure Frozinga understood, he bellowed, “Take us to the Giants; you are bound by your word!”

Slowly Gruaghlothor turned his massive body and flew toward the Giants' keep, where the Giants waited, their blade ready for the final steps.

Gruaghlothor's huge body hung in the air just above the small group that had assembled to meet them. They waited patiently for the huge Dragon to set down and allow Anorac and Kaori to join them. Slowly he settled, folding his huge wings along the sides of his body, before settling lower to allow them to slide off his back.

“I just don't know, Gruaghlothor, if we can use another drop of your blood. It may work, but then again it could jeopardize the whole thing, upset the balance we need to maintain,” said Anorac.

“Greetings, brothers and sisters,” said Anorac. “We hope all is well with our friends the Giants. We bring greetings from your brethren of the mountains, the Dwarven people. May your pots always be full, may your houses always be filled with the laughter of children, and may you never know the coldness and loneliness of being separated from each other.

“We have come seeking your help, wisdom, and knowledge in the creation of a blade we need. By now you should have received a blank made from a very strange metal, with a request that you unseal the ancient text you have protected for these last centuries. It is with sadness that I must now ask you to honour the oath your people took years ago. Dorganna's minions have once again started to tip the balance in their favour, in hopes of bringing their mistress closer to her goal. We have been called to stop it, or to die trying. Without your help we are doomed.

A wizened old giantess stood before the assembled group and addressed them. “We are a proud race. When the call for help came we argued over our involvement, remembering past injustices levied by the races. Brothers and sisters, I remember the day the Sword of Zul was crafted. Our fathers and mothers gathered on that day and celebrated its creation, putting an end to the long war of the races. For centuries we have lived in peace. Your arguments hold some validity, but none of you were alive when these atrocities were committed. You have chosen to forget the vengeance we extracted for them; it was not pretty, and something I am not proud of, but it is part of our heritage so we must live with it.” She took a deep breath and leaned heavily on her walking stick.

“But those days are gone. We have enjoyed peace; how quickly we forget what the days of war were actually like. We must rally to this call. If our help is needed then we must do what we can to ensure this peace. We share this realm with the Dragons, ruled by Frozinga, and there is peace there, even if it is precarious at its best. Without this blade, Evil will descend on our realm once again and I do not want to live to see it return. If your answer is no, then draw your sword and end my life now. Let my blood be the first of much to be spilled. I cannot bear to live through that again.” The stunned group sat quietly as she hobbled out of the room. The only noise that was heard was the scraping of her feet and the thumping of her stick as she leaned heavily on it for support.

“What must we do?” asked an elderly Majik User.

As Anorac spoke he heard the rustling of huge wings settling onto the platform behind him.

“Are you ready to honour that oath? Will you stand with us and help us seal the gap that is building, once again?”

“I am Aloysha, leader of this enclave, and I speak for the entire Giant race when I say, we stand with you. Tell us what we need to do.”

“Where is your ancient text? It contains the instructions and spells that are needed, the

procedures and order it which they are to be cast, when and where to apply the Dragon's blood, and which spells they will need to cast before sealing it with their breath."

"Alas, my little friend, we have the text but no one here can read it."

"Are you sure? It is written in your native tongue that I cannot speak."

"Aloysha, there is one who can speak the ancient tongue but her eyesight is failing badly. If we could describe the text to her maybe she could decipher it," a Majik User said.

"No! She is not to be trusted!" he shouted.

"Wait, if she swears an oath of allegiance to the Sword of Zul, she will not be able to lie. It will be an oath to the gods, an oath that carries dire consequences if broken. At least let us try, or we have come all this way for nothing. We will need to return to our homelands and wait for the inevitable to come, and come it will, destroying everything in its path."

Aloysha turned and growled, "Bring Kaida here before this young man so that he may judge and see what we already know."

An awkward silence filled the air as they waited for Kaida's arrival. Silence filled the room; no one dared talk as they watched the inner turmoil Aloysha was going through attempt to tear him apart.

"Something isn't right," whispered Kaori, who had slipped her hand into his and gently squeezed it. *There is something going on. We need to know about it before any of them cast their spells or all could be lost. I must find a way to tell Anorac to be careful.* When he turned to face her she first smiled, then frowned and nodded her head in Aloysha's direction. The sudden change in her facial expression caused him to look where she was gazing and what he saw startled him. Without realizing it, he had dropped his free hand on the pommel of his sword. What was revealed was a shadow circling around Aloysha, whispering in his ear, pricking him with a trident, tugging at him to move away, but to his credit he never budged. Releasing Kaori's hand he stepped forward; the shadow cringed and moved to the other side, keeping Aloysha between them.

"Aloysha, are there any records of the last time this sword was used to seal the gap? When it was made, who took part in its creation, or how it was crafted?" he asked.

"No, at least none that I am aware of. One of our most esteemed Elders was speaking to the assembled group when you arrived, maybe she remembers. She was a little girl in this very enclave when peace was declared and the sword was crafted. Maybe she would have the information you seek." He pointed at a guard. "Ask Elder Bergthora to join us. Be gentle about it, but impress on her that we seek her help."

"Yes m'Lord."

A shrill voice broke the silence. "Aloysha, this had better be important, I had just settled into bed when this oaf dragged me from it."

"You, my dear lady, must be Kaida; my name is Anorac. Do you recognize this?" He pulled the Eye of Zul from its scabbard.

"Where did you get that sword? Who did you steal it from? It has been buried for centuries!" she cried.

"Do you remember the oath that was made the night this sword was crafted, or were you even alive at that point in time?"

"The oath that was given by the Giants? I was alive when that was offered and accepted by the first bearer of that sword, and I have prayed that I would be long dead before the weapon ever surfaced again."

"The gods are playing a cruel trick on you then. The sword called for its brother blades. Do you

know the oath that your people made? Have you ever found it in your readings of the ancient texts? Remember, this sword will tell me if you are lying.”

“Aye, I remember the oath. I thought at the time I had heard it that they were fools to have made it, but through the years I have come to realize that it was the smartest thing they could have done.”

“Are you willing to accept that oath again? To honour your ancestors' decision?”

“Why are you asking? Ah you need old Kaida's help now; things have changed, and that one wouldn't ask.” she said, pointing at Aloysha. “Too proud maybe, or maybe he is hearing more than one voice again and wants to keep it quiet.”

“Silence, you old hag, or I will forget you are part of our enclave and cut you down like the old dog you are,” Aloysha bellowed.

“Enough of this crap. I am not a diplomat and I am tired of trying to be something I am not. Aloysha, Kaida is going to recite that oath, to the best of her memory, and I will ask you one simple question; Will you honour that oath, or turn your back on it? The realm needs your answer now, not in six hours, or six days, or six years.” Anorac's anger rose to the surface; he worked hard at keeping his rage in check.

Kaida carefully closed her eyes and reached deep into her memory. Slowly she began to recite the oath; the oath they had made not only to the people of this realm, but to the gods. “That is all I can remember.”

“That is all there was, my dear” said Elder Berghora. “You did an amazing job remembering that much.”

“Aloysha, yes or no? Decide now.”

“I can't.” He crumpled to the floor. Three quick strides brought Anorac to Aloysha's side. Before the guards could react he swung the sword at what looked like his back. A collective gasp could be heard as the air filled with bright light, then a crumpled pool of shadow lay on the floor behind Aloysha. “How long has it - ?”

“Too long. Only Kaida sensed it was there, and every time I tried to talk to her it seized control and stopped me,” gasped Aloysha. “Our time is short; Dorganna has managed to steal the extra blank, and is even now working majik through her worshipers to create a blade that will allow her to travel through time. She must be stopped, before it is too late.” Grasping his throat Aloysha crumpled to the floor where he stopped breathing.

Elder Berghora screamed, “Before she can stop us we must finish crafting this blade. Kaida, do you have the ancient texts?”

Shaking her head, she pointed at Aloysha. “He had them?”

“Do you know where he kept them?”

“Y- yes.” she stammered. “But I am not going to retrieve them. They are in a flat pouch strapped across his back, next to his skin.”

No one would approach the body, let alone help Anorac roll the huge giant over. “Move out of the way, little one,” Gruaghlothor grunted. A mighty claw swept down and casually rolled the body over before deftly slicing through the outer clothing, revealing the skin's cover.

“Nicely done, remind me to never let you get that close to me,” he said chuckling.

“Hmrmph,” was all he heard, as a small puff of smoke escaped from the massive nose.

Seizing the soft leather case he slit the cords binding it to the body and carried it to a table, where he emptied the contents and spread them out. “You heard him; we are running out of time. Kaida, can you decipher what needs to be done?”

Berghora and Kaida approached the table and conferred over what was written. Kaida spoke

up, “Seven people, all Giants, must be called forth to participate in this. Four must be Majik Users, one must be an elder, one must be a warrior, and the last - no it can't be,” she gasped, “is me.”

“Does it say how they are to be selected?” asked Anorac.

“No, but it says the Chosen One, the sword bearer, would know.”

“Assemble everyone that is called for, and do it quickly. We will begin the search.” Anorac tested the Giants present with his sword, looking for its reaction. He found four Majik Users, and Kaida's participation was confirmed. The warrior took longer, but one was eventually found to fulfill the role. The most difficult one to find was the Elder. As he questioned them the sword showed none of them had a pure heart.

“We are doomed. There is not one Elder who fits the requirements. Now what; is there anything in the text about that?” asked Kaori.

“We have not asked Elder Bergthora.”

“But I am not a true Elder; it is a title to honour my age.”

Anorac approached her. “Elder Bergthora, will you honour the oath given by your ancestors so long ago?”

“Yes, but I have always honoured it. I made that oath as a young maiden of eight years. Nothing has changed for me.”

The sword glowed brightly for the last time. Turning, he looked at Frozinga, “Do you make the same oath as these humble servants have, fully comprehending the impact of that oath?”

“I do,” came her reply.

Kaida read off the instructions. One by one the group joined in and the spells were cast. Gruaghlothor gently heated the blade until it glowed bright white. Frozinga added her drop of blood to the blade then carved the ancient runes of her Dragonkin into it blade before searing it with her own breath. As the blade cooled from the intense cold, Anorac moved the partially complete sword of Zul close to it. It snapped up from the table and attached itself to the blade, the runes mixing and joining with those already present, to create a new sword, one that was now balanced.

“We must fly now, as quickly as possible to the land of the Elves. If they are ready we will soon be off to the land of Gnomes; then the battle will begin.” Anorac said.

Chapter 13

Bundled against the cold, they still shivered most of the way across the top of their world and south towards the warmer climates. It was early dawn as they approached the city of the Elves, located deep within a forest of huge trees.

Once again, Gruaghlothor bellowed his greeting as they approached the city. From the ground rose a massive winged serpent, brown in colour, looking nothing like their host.

“This is Li Lung,” he said. “Treat him with respect and try not to breach any of their protocols. I really don’t want to fight him. It took me months to recover after the last fight, and we still argue over who got the better of whom.”

“Welcome, Gruaghlothor, to my humble realm. Come for another beating, have you? I would be more than happy to oblige.”

“You crusty old bag of bones. Next time I will roast your damn hide instead of going easy on you!”

“Not in your lifetime. I see you have become fat and lazy, and - What is this??? You have resorted to flying little people on your back? Have they subjugated you?” As he mumbled.

“Easy, friend. I invited them to fly with me. They are here in peace and seek not only your help, but the Elves’ as well. Listen to what they have to say, then decide if you want them fried, fricasseed, or if you will help them. Not much meat on them though, you might need a few Giants to make up the difference.”

“Speak, but do not waste my time” said Li Lung with obvious distaste.

Anorac explained their mission. “We seek both your help and the Elves. Your majiks will offset the Gnomes’ work with the netherworld and allow the sword to be balanced once again. This time when we close the gap, it will stay closed.”

“So you say, so you say. But time will tell in that matter. We will join the Elves, they have been waiting for you. They, at least, have no doubts, while I am not convinced of everything you claim. We will fly to Open Rock, by the edge of the mountain. It is a sacred place for the Elves; tread carefully.”

Gruaghlothor set his huge bulk down just off the edge of the opening, trees could be heard snapping as his tail settled to the ground. He was their guest, but by the comments they overheard it was evident that the damage he had done did not go unnoticed nor was it appreciated.

An Elf stepped forward, dressed in earth greens that would have allowed him to disappear in the trees with ease. “We will do our part, if Master Li lung will do his. We have studied the ancient texts and are prepared to work our majik into this blade. But we are not sure how something that is dead and cold like that metal will receive what we have to offer.”

Anorac drew the sword. A collective gasp was heard from the assembled group as warriors stepped between him and the group. “If you have studied the ancient text you would be aware of what it is I must do. The sword is part of it.”

He tested the assembled group and one by one they were either accepted or rejected. “Only these seven, Kaori and I, and our two Dragon friends can stay behind; the rest of you must leave quickly.”

The Elves filled away, squeezing by Gruaghlothor’s massive bulk, and melted into the forest. Looking at Gruaghlothor Anorac said, “We must begin; heat the blade please.”

His flame engulfed the blank they had so closely guarded. It began to glow red, then white hot.

"Now the spells that were listed in your ancient texts: cast them onto the blade."

One by one their spells were layered on top of the last one, encasing the complete blade. Master Li Lung stepped forward without any more protests and added his blood, drew the ancient runes of his clan on the blade, and then began to weave his own spells to augment and complement the existing ones. As Gruaghlothor stopped his flame breath and stepped back, the blade cooled.

"Heat can bring life," Anorac said. "There are seeds that will not germinate until a fire has roasted their outer casings and released their seeds onto the ground. This metal is alive; look at the runes as they swim across the blade; see how Master Li Lung's blood swirls along them; it will continue to do that even after it has completely cooled."

Stepping forward, he moved the Eye of Zul closer to the Blade of Li Lung. It turned and aligned itself with his sword and snapped into place, folding itself around the Blade of Binding, the Blade of Catastrophoonus, and the Blade of Fire. Gasps of surprise could be heard as they expected Anorac to drop it in pain. He carefully slipped it back into the scabbard before addressing the Elves.

"What has happened here will never be forgotten. Your sacrifice will be remembered. Do not discuss the spells you have cast with anyone; if you do, the oath that you have given freely will take your life just as quickly.

"We have one final stop before reaching our destination at the Lady of the Keep. The Gnomes alone have mastered the art of ascension into the netherworld. They alone are the guardians of the portal of Death, as well as the sailors that move the ships in and out of Valkerie."

Climbing onto Gruaghlothor's back, they reached out and grabbed his spines as the huge Dragon lifted off. They were not quite sure where the kingdom of the Gnomes began or ended just the general direction they must travel to find it. They prayed to Cimion that they would complete their trip safely and before they ran out of time.

They flew for hours, Gruaghlothor's massive body settling into a steady rhythm that began to show signs of tiring as he struggled to stay aloft, but still had not been able to locate them.

"The sword will guide you; use the sword." The thought filled his mind. Waking up, half out of a stupor, he looked at Kaori. "Did you say something?"

She shook her head. "I am sore, tired, and hungry, and no offense to our buddy here, but would really like something solid under my feet for a change that wasn't moving."

"The sooner we are done with this trip of yours the better," growled the Dragon. "I am a long way from home, and need to get back there before what realm I have is divided up by those ambitious young pups I left behind."

Anorac drew his sword and tried to concentrate on the Gnomes, but his bone weary mind couldn't draw forth a picture of them. He had never seen one.

"Concentrate on the portal, the portal between this world and the netherworld. That is where you will find them," the thoughts returned

"Huh?"

"The portal - concentrate on the portal."

"I must be going crazy," he muttered. "Right, here goes." Anorac summoned a mental image of a portal, with one side in the land of the living and the other side in the land of the dead. The sword twitched and then moved, pointing to the southwest. "Head southwest, Gruaghlothor, towards that land mass. What we seek is there."

As they approached the shoreline a magnificent city came into view, carved right into the mountainside. The craftsmanship was greater than anything they had ever seen. To Kaori and Anorac the city appeared to be empty. Only the Dragon's keen eyesight picked up the tiny dots scurrying

about. With a mighty rumble, he announced himself as he settled into a long gentle glide towards the city. But nothing answered; no bugling, nothing. The dots scattered, seeking cover as his bulky frame crossed the city threshold.

“Wait!” Anorac cried. “They have never seen a Dragon before.”

Anorac called out to the people below, identifying them and explaining their purpose. Their arms moved in unison, pointing toward a deep valley away from the city, then they scurried away to hide.

Gruaghlothor rose back into the sky and glided toward the valley where they were greeted by a large party of Gnomes. He settled his massive bulk onto the valley floor, and his passengers leapt to the ground.

“We must complete your sword now. The portal has been cracked; we have convinced a Dracolich to help but he must stay beyond the portal. The cost has been immense, but well worth it. Please begin whatever you need to do, so we may complete our task.”

Anorac completed the selection ritual, selecting not seven to represent the Gnomish people, but eight. “The eighth Gnome must step through the portal and act as a liaison with the Dracolich or it will not work. Who will that be?”

One young Gnome stepped forward. “I will do it.” Before anyone could protest he stepped through the portal, stopping just on the other side.

“Gruaghlothor, flame the blade.” Immense heat covered the blade as they prepared their spells. One by one they were cast; the Dracolich cast his and added his clans runes to the blade before sealing them with his blood and breath. The blade was withdrawn and allowed to join with the Eye of Zul. It vibrated with power, hungry to be used.

“Quickly now, we must open a portal to the Lady’s Keep, she is waiting for you.” A Gnomish Majik User was already casting the spell as another shepherded them to the portal. “They have become desperate, the battle has become intense; she fears you are already too late. Unfortunately the Dragon cannot use the portal, his size alone would collapse it and trap all of you in the worlds in between, doomed to wander between realms forever. We have harvested a whale to replenish his strength; he has had a long flight and will need all of it to return.”

“Gruaghlothor, your service and duty to this realm will not be forgotten,” Anorac said. “If we succeed, ballads will be written about your bravery and unselfish help, I promise you that.”

“Off with you before I forget my word and have you for a snack. I haven’t eaten in days and would like to feed. Just don’t fail us or I will ...” was the last thing they heard as they stepped into the portal.

Anorac and Kaori reappeared deep within the Lady’s Keep, surprising a small group of Majik Users that were assembled there. He drew the his sword and asked, “Are you friend or foe? Cast a spell and you will be dead before you finish it.”

“If you are with the Lady, then we are friends.” said the tallest of them. “If you are with Dorganna then we're enemies and will die stopping you, if necessary.”

“Then friends it is. I am Anorac, this is Kaori. The Gnomes opened this portal for us.”

“I am called Jophesus. What you have in your hand, is that what I think it is? It couldn’t be, but it must be; you have deciphered the ancient texts and assembled the Eye of Zul! Tell us, it is so? Give us some hope that all is not lost.”

“It is the Eye of Zul, completely assembled.”

“You have all four blades, the sword that binds and the sword that controls? But how did you get the sword that controls away from Dorganna?”

“What is this sword that controls?” asked Kaori. “There is nothing in the ancient text foretelling of it.”

“Mistress Striekna discovered the secret to controlling time, and has cajoled an Adamantine Dragon to help them. They managed to steal the last blank, right out from under the noses of the Humans. The crafting of the blade is almost complete. They await Dorganna so the Dragon may finish its part. We have tried to penetrate their defenses but keep failing. If she succeeds all will be lost. She will be able to go back before the time of interference by the gods and the creation of the original sword and stop them. It is all over but the waiting now.”

“How can we stop her? There must be a way,” Anorac said. “We haven’t travelled to every realm in this world for nothing, I will not quit, not while I have a breath left in my body.”

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“If we can breach the shields and glyphs the Majik Users that crafted the blade are there. You might be able to talk some sense into them,” said a guard.

“Ready for the fight of your life?” he asked Kaori.

Smiling, she drew her weapons. “Where are they?”

“They are trapped behind a protective shield across the passageway, just beyond the first corner. The dampening field preventing portals is weakening; they will soon be able to port out, with the blade.”

Kaori quickly vanished. “No time for finesse,” said Anorac as he charged down the corridor, sword in hand. With a mighty slash the sword shattered the barrier. While the trapped Majik Users were busy concentrating on this new threat, Kaori slipped in unseen and worked her way carefully along the wall, searching for spells and traps that would give her away.

Anorac stood before them, tired, angry, and very sore. “Do you realize what it is you are about to hand over to that witch?” he demanded of the Majik Users.

“The sword to counter the one you hold, to return the balance to where it belongs so we may continue our work,” one of them said.

“Why is it this witch always attracts the dumb ones,” he said. “Think about what you just said. This sword is a balance between the living and the dead, between fire and water. What is that one? It manipulates time; it changes the course of history. If she uses it she will have no need for you, you will never exist. What was the reward she promised you? This Keep? The ability to continue your studies? Do you really think she will keep that promise? She will have no use for you when she accomplishes what she wants, and that is to have absolute control of not only this realm but that of the gods as well. You are nothing but a plaything for her, to be discarded when the time is ripe, for bigger and better things,” he said, slowly moving towards them.

“Give her that sword and be prepared to serve her for as long as she doesn’t bore with you. Power, the only power you will experience, is hers as she crushes you with it. Your intentions were good, but the motives that were guiding you are corrupted.”

A loud crack exploded in the room as Mistress Striekna stepped through a portal. “Have you finished the blade? Our Mistress grows impatient and you know what she is like when you keep her waiting.”

“You!” she screeched laughing. Striekna turned to face Anorac, raising her arms. “You are too late! The blade - that must be the Eye of Zul. It is beautiful; I can feel its hunger, its need. Save me the trouble of taking it from your dead hands, just give it to me now.”

“If you want it, you will have to take it. But you know that will never happen, it must choose who will wield it. I see you bear some of the scars of our last meeting.” Anorac taunted as they circled each other like two fighters.

“Enough playing. For now it does, but all that will change soon. Pick up the blade of Adamantine and let us finish the process, our Mistress awaits.”

“You heard her; pick it up, finish the job, and change the world into something even you will not recognize,” Anorac said, his gaze flicking between the Majik Users and Striekna.

“Silence, you little worm. I look forward to crushing you, over and over, never letting you die. My mistress will play with you first, but has promised you to me when she is done. What fun that will be” she cackled with a wicked laugh.

Quickly she drew a portal in the air and spoke before stepping through. “The Blade of Adamantine - Do not keep us waiting, or you will regret it.”

Five of the Majik Users stepped through the portal to begin the last ritual, taking the blade with them.

The last two Majik Users paused before stepping through the portal. “Oh my god, what have we done?” moaned one of them. “She lied to us, fed us what we wanted to hear. We have condemned this realm to her cruelty, not for a millennium of millenniums, but for eternity.”

“Tell us, how do we stop this, how do we stop her?” asked the other.

“Does the blade function properly? Does it control time?” asked Anorac.

“Not completely; to be fully functional it still requires the Dragon’s blood and runes. She has the blade and can still control small portions of time, to warp events into her choosing.”

“Then you must complete the ritual, only instead of handing it to her, use it to slip back in time. The place in time must be at a point just before the ritual, right here, and allow it to join with the Eye of Zul. Allow it to become the missing link in this sword’s power. The blade of binding will counteract the blade of control, therefore maintaining a balance. Go; if you fail, we are all doomed. The fact that you are still alive means she has not managed to alter time, yet. We will be waiting here for you.”

The remaining Majik Users stepped through the portal just as it was beginning to close.

“Why didn’t we just step through the portal and take the blade from her? It would have been so much easier,” said Kaori.

“If you had, it would never have fused to the Eye of Zul,” came the answer. As Cimion appeared in the room with them he continued, “The oath that each was asked to make? What was being done had to be of their own free will or it would not work. The blade of Adamantine must be given freely or it will corrupt the Eye of Zul, negating its purpose forever. Remember to ask them that question when they return, but I caution you not to waste too much time, because Dorganna will be hot on their heels, and one very angry goddess.”

“Can’t you stop her? You are her equal after all.”

“I play by the rules established a long time ago. When she realizes how I manipulated them she will change her target and come looking for me. But until then, remember the sword will protect you and those in your care, if you let it.”

Cimion disappeared from the room as quickly as he had entered it. “Gather the Majik Users we found in the hall and have them take the oath before the sword, or they will all die. I will wait for the return of the others.”

Kaori found the Majik Users where they had left them, exhausted and drained. “We need you for one last fight; you need to draw on your reserves, right down into your very soul. But before that you

must renew the oath of your race and the sword. Follow me to the sword bearer.”

She didn't wait to see if they understood, or would follow her, but turned and jogged back the way she had come. Slowly, in small groups of twos or threes they straggled into the room. She led them through saying the oath. One by one they stepped forward and made the pledge. The last one crumbled to the floor, his reserves gone, and sheer will power was no longer enough. Stepping forward, two Majik Users helped him to his feet as he repeated the oath.

“What about you Kaori, have you ever taken the oath?” asked a Majik User.

“I always assumed because Anorac was my husband, and after everything we had been through it would be evident that I will do whatever it takes. But no, unfortunately I have never taken it.”

Anorac gasped in surprise and held the sword in front of her "Do it now before they return, and your chances are lost. Losing you would make any victory seem hollow.”

Kaori began reciting the oath, just like she had seen the Majik Users do it. Before she could utter the last line, three Majik Users stepped into the room with a loud bang, bloodied, beaten and harried. “Striekna and Dorganna are hot on our heels; if they have figured out where we have gone we may have only a few minutes. You must fuse this blade with the Eye of Zul.”

Anorac stood before them. “Did you help craft this blade?”

“Yes damnit, you are wasting time, some of our numbers, our colleagues and friends have died not only in crafting this wretched thing, but in getting it here. Don't make their deaths be in vain.”

“I must ask these questions. Do you freely give this blade up to become a part of the Eye of Zul?”

“Yes, we do,” they said in unison.

“Then place the blade on the floor between us and back away.”

As he stepped forward, the blade began to glow then spun on its axis, orienting itself in line with the Eye of Zul. The closer he got, the brighter the two blades became until the room filled with blinding light. The blade of Adamantine quivered and shook, like it was anticipating joining the other sword.

Several things happened in the next few minutes. Kaori who had been knocked down in the confusion sat up and finished saying the oath as a Majik User screamed a warning at the sight of Striekna stepping through a second portal. She chopped the three renegade Majik Users in half. Dorganna followed close on her heels, screeching at their betrayal and promising them a cursed afterlife. As Dorganna reached for the Blade of Adamantine it shot across the room, launching itself towards the Eye of Zul. Striekna focused her attention on Kaori and began to attack, hoping to draw Anorac's attention away from his sword and the approaching blade. As Kaori uttered the last syllable she was slammed into the wall behind Anorac, groaning in pain she struggled to catch her breath and to defend herself. A couple of the Majik Users formed a physical protective barrier in front of her, raising their shield in a last ditch effort to stop the attack.

As the blades joined and formed a new sword, Dorganna screeched in rage. Her anger assaulted everyone in the room with equal vengeance. Those who had not pledged to the sword were consumed in a hatred-driven fire. Those that had were spared.

“You have it now, let's see if you can wield it, and if you know enough to use its powers. Attack them, my pets, kill them all, immortality to whoever brings me that sword and his head,” she screamed stepping back through the portal.

Striekna attacked with renewed effort, screaming out directions to the hideous beasts that poured through the portal. Anorac struggled to drive them back; he won some ground but then quickly lost it as he was engulfed in a mass of writhing bodies. They bit, scratched, and gouged every inch of

his body; intense pain filled his sense, threatening to drop him into unconsciousness.

Use the sword, let it speak through you, don't fight it.

There is that damn voice again. he thought. *Use it? How?*

Feel the sword with your hand, let your mind feel it as well, welcome it into your being, let it's majik loose, then hang on for dear life.

He struggled to shape a vision of the sword in his mind, to picture it as he had seen it just before Dorganna's attack, but the pain kept interfering with his image. One small voice kept picking away at the edge of his consciousness. He struggled to catch it, to focus on it. *Anorac, my love, we believe in you. Do it for us, find the majik.*

"For us, of course I want to do it for us, you are all I have left," he grunted.

Not just us, give our child a fighting chance.

Kaori's love filled his heart, her message burned brightly, and deep within his soul something stirred. He blocked out the pain; digging deep into his reserves he let his training take hold. He could sense the sword, feel its presence, and focused on it. A howl of rage could be heard; as it intensified the sword spoke to him, "Split me."

"Split you? But you are one?"

"No, I am now two; split me, set me free to fight for you, to do what I was created to do."

Slowly Anorac struggled to bring his two hands together on the handle of the sword. His attackers howled in rage and fought viciously to stop him. More beings surged through the portal, Striekna directed their attack, at the same time she renewed her attack on Kaori.

As Anorac's hands closed on the sword handle, time seemed to stop. He twisted the handle and was amazed when the sword came apart, in two equally balanced pieces. His attackers began to drop away from him like statues frozen in time. He approached the portal and used the blades to attack it. Attacks with his right hand sliced sections off the portal, while the slices from his left closed the damage, making the portal smaller and smaller. Time returned to normal, nothing had changed, except the portal had gotten a lot smaller, and Anorac was no longer where his attackers were. They howled in rage, and when they realized what was happening, dove for the portal.

"The portal is closing, yes!" came the triumphant cries from behind them.

Striekna screamed at them, calling down every curse she could think of upon them.

"Enough!" bellowed Anorac. "Return to your normal shape, you hideous beast."

Crying out in rage, the beautiful figure of a woman transformed into a misshapen old hag with a crooked nose, grey dirty hair that hung to her knees, hunched over and leaning on a walking stick for support. Her toothless maw glared at them as she screamed, "Vengeance shall be mine. One day you will pay for this, and pay dearly."

Anorac stepped forward and the swords attacked, slicing and dicing the old hag before them, burning each piece of her that fell free until all that was left was a pile of ash on the floor before them. "Not in this lifetime," he said. "Post a guard over these ashes; no one is to touch them, do you understand?"

"Someone take us to the Lady of the Keep, we need to help her before all is lost. This was but only one battle we have to win today. The real battle is going on topside. Dorganna does not give in so easily. The sword is meaningful to her, but the Majik Users fighting above are equally as important. We have won this battle but could also lose the war."

They charged up the stairs, through a variety of rooms. The lead Majik User bellowing, "Make way, coming through." Those fast enough managed to get out of the way without incident. Those that didn't were bowled over if necessary. They found a few pockets of resistance, where Dorganna's

Majik Users had breached their defenses, but those were dealt with swiftly and mercilessly.

"What a waste," said a Majik User. "Death over surrender. I hope Dorganna's wrath remembers their sacrifice."

"Won't happen," gasped Anorac. "She has a twisted memory and will only remember their failures."

Anorac's group finally reached the surface. The soft rolling hills surrounding the entrance to the Keep was a scene of mass confusion. The sun was setting and bright flashes could be seen as pockets of Majik Users continued to battle.

Rings of death surrounded a small group of Majik Users, as people from many different races littered the ground. For every one that lived, thousands from both sides died. An uneasy truce had been established as healers were spared, to treat the most seriously wounded from either side.

One last battle was being fought. A band of knights had gathered around a small knoll creating a ring of steel around three prominent figures; a woman and two men. The woman, identified simply as the Lady of the Keep, was directing the attack, while firing off her own spells. The other two gentlemen were working feverishly to augment her spells, to boost them and give them extra strength. In the process the enemy was being cut down like flies. But it was exacting a heavy toll. Each spell steadily weakened them of essential life force, and the enemy could sense their wavering. A portal had opened behind the attackers, as more and more Shadow Demons poured through to join the battle.

Anorac's attention was drawn to a small cadre of Dragons, their number greatly reduced; dead Dragons of every kind could be seen throughout the battle field. They fought just as hard, keeping the skies clear, incinerating any of the enemy that had dropped, and preventing their mistress from reviving them as undead.

Anorac could see Gruaghlothor high above the battle directing his army like a general. Frozinga, a Typhoon Dragon and leader of the Dragons from the frozen wasteland, directed her clan in a vicious battle, scorching the ground around the small group with frost so cold, the ground shattered when it thawed. Li Lung, a mighty Earth Dragon whose very movement across the sky caused the ground below to erupt and explode, joined by her clan, were casting their earth spells, tripping up the Demons, imprisoning them in rock cells, crushing those that ventured too close. A huge crater was beginning to form around the Humans below them.

Kaidell Snowdance screamed from the raised knoll, "Sword bearer, destroy the portal!"

"Who keeps opening them? Identify them!" shouted Anorac as he charged into the fray, one half of the Eye of Zul still clutched in each hand. He kept his arms moving. Each swing cut down defenders. Plate was useless against this sword - majik shields like water - as the blades blurred with fanatical speed. He steadily worked his way towards the portal driving a Human wedge into and through the Demons. Kaori followed in his footsteps and quickly dispatched any that were left living, clearing a path of death and destruction that prevented any chance of a reprisal attack rallying from behind. Support began to build as their efforts slowly turned the tides of the battle.

The Demons, howling in rage, pushed on with renewed effort. Their arms were cut and bleeding profusely as they dragged themselves into battle. A small group of Majik Users, gathered in a tight knot just off to the side of the portal was busy driving them into a frenzy. As each spell whipped across their backs they howled in protest, not able to turn away from their tormentors.

Stepping around bodies, Anorac approached the portal and attacked with both swords shattering the tear in the fabric of time that allowed the creatures access to this realm. As he finished, the Demons howled in rage as they no longer had an escape to the netherworld.

As the attack on the Demons intensified, the group of Majik Users devoted to Dorganna edged

their way toward an opening in the ground. A blast from the Lady of the Keep killed all but three of them as the third one slipped from sight. The remaining pockets of Demons and Majik Users were isolated and dispatched to wherever their souls would spend eternity.

"Kill them all," said Snowdance. "We can't send them back and they will only continue killing if they live, and we do not have the manpower or facilities to imprison them."

Once the Demons were destroyed Anorac slipped into the hole in the ground in pursuit of the Majik Users.

"If they stayed together they will be almost impossible to stop; if they separated, we can hunt them down one by one and kill them," said Anorac as he used all his skills, looking for signs that would indicate where they had gone.

He lost their track a number of times before picking it up again a little farther down the corridor. Their footprints twisted and turned, even doubled back from time to time as if they had missed a turn somewhere. "Where are they headed?" said Anorac. "I don't know this Keep at all, what could be down here that they are so desperately seeking?"

Stopping, he motioned one of the Majik Users forward. "Where are we in the Keep? Where could they be headed?"

"We are three levels above where Striekna was destroyed, and not far from our portal room. Both are guarded by a ring of steel as well as a small band of determined Majik Users. Nothing could get through that ring and expect to live long."

"Even if they were to arrive unannounced? Those Majik Users were formidable, their defenses hard to breach." He weighed his options. "Half of our group go to the portal room, inform the guard what is going on and stay there to augment their defenses. The other half comes with me. We are going to guard the remains of Striekna; if they succeed in gathering her ashes then Dorganna has the power to bring her back. We do not want to face her again, knowing what we know about her."

The two groups split, each heading to their assigned spots. Anorac led the portal group, who arrived first, and quickly filled in the ranks of the defense. A few cantrips had been cast at major intersections, to warn of anyone's approach; not enough majik was used to warn a Majik User of their existence, but enough to warn the caster that something approached. The leader of the knights had pointed out to them the location of good old fashion know-how: Light string had been stretched across hallways, secured to small bells that would ring if the string was touched or broken. If nothing else they were ingenious, but chances were they would only work once or twice; once set off, anyone attempting stealth would be certain to look for them.

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Kaori had carefully studied the ground, looking for signs that the three had split up. It took her awhile; amidst the multitude of tracks she found three pairs of slippered feet, each leading in a separate direction. A separate set had moved away from the group, in the opposite direction. She knew that in an open fight she would never reach the Majik User alive, let alone survive the fight, but if she could reach him stealthed that was a different matter all together. He was hers, and would die realizing that they had made a major mistake.

Slowly she followed a trail that had been cleverly hidden. The slippered feet were tiny, but the bottom of the slippers had a very distinct pattern that, once identified, would be easy to follow. They wound back and forth, through corridors and back through rooms, as if the owner was looking for something, but not quite sure where to find it.

Ahead of her she heard a voice call out a challenge. "What are you doing down here, missy?" The guard asked. "Everyone is supposed to be up top defending the Keep. Tell me, how are things going? Are we winning?"

"The Lady has sent me down to retrieve some scrolls she says she needs to seal the portal with. I am to return to her poste haste."

A woman! Didn't see that one, and that could have been a costly mistake, thought Kaori.

"I dunno," said the guard. "No one is allowed in here without the correct passes, and you ain't got them. Maybe if you were to run quickly back up and get them I could let you in."

She exclaimed in a childlike voice, "I must have dropped them in the confusion. The fighting has spread to the corridors as we route-out the traitors." Faking tears, she began to mumble under her breath, her hands hiding the movement of her lips. Her spell complete, she threw her hands out, engulfing the guard in flames and laughing wickedly as he screamed in pain. "Yeah, we are winning, sort of. Soon, very soon, we will have all we need to openly challenge everyone of you, but until that time we need to borrow a few things from your library."

The Majik User lifted her hands and Kaori heard her begin an enchant. A slight noise behind the Majik User didn't register as danger and she found herself stunned, unable to move. Kaori had materialized before her and began slicing her up, poison from her blades biting into her flesh, intense pain showing in her eyes. Kaori knew from experience that her poison had interrupted the Majik Users' spell casting every time she attempted to cast one, and her life force was quickly slipping away, with nothing she could do about it.

As the Majik User crumpled to the floor, Kaori pried her jaw open and deftly reached inside, cutting her tongue out at the base. She tossed it onto the burning guard. She watched it burn, staying until she was sure it was gone, sure that no one would ever be able to find it. Not wanting to take any chances she rolled the dead Majik User onto her back and drove her sword through her heart and out the other side. Muttering to herself, Kaori said. "With these damn things you can never be too sure. Dead isn't always dead, unless you make sure. At least if a Necromancer finds her she will be useless as a caster if they raise her from the dead."

Kaori searched the body, setting aside all that she found. She cut a large piece of cloth from the clothes of the dead body and left to find Anorac. *One down, two to go. Somehow I don't think the other two are going to be that easy, she thought. I must find a place to hide this satchel. I can't fight if burdened.* She searched until she found a small alcove, just off a main closet, and stored her prize before moving out the way she had come in. Careful to make sure the area had been swept clean of any tell tale marks, she headed to the location of the portal.

She could hear vicious fighting all around her, and decided to avoid it unless she had no other choice. She rounded a corner and found the remains of the second Majik User, cut to pieces, with arrows sticking out of the larger ones like needles in a pincushion. *So much for subtle she thought. I guess his tongue wasn't important enough to them. Well, I'm not leaving it attached. I have witnessed some really strange spells cast by very powerful Necromancers that have reassembled more than one body. Without the tongue though, that body was useless.* She tossed the tongue in the center of a brazier, and watched it sizzle like a piece of gristle before bursting into flames.

Now, to find my beloved. With any luck they have killed the last one, and we can be gone from this place. I need the open air, the mountains, if I am ever to forget the horrors I have witnessed over the last month.

Her path took her through a number of new rooms, across hallways, up stairs, and back down them. Eventually she came upon the fighting. One last group of lesser Majik Users was holed up in a

room attempting to fight off what could only be the Lady of the Keep and her party. They were losing the battle, but only by attrition. Their healer was working overtime, trying to keep the last of their leaders alive, but healing required being able to tap into the life force of the person they were healing; without that boost the healing was only superficial at best.

Kaori quickly vanished, slipping along the corridor, hugging the walls, being careful to avoid the torches and braziers that were scattered haphazardly in her way. Slipping through a break in their defenses she sidled up to Anorac.

"I am safe, my love, standing just behind you to your left. What can I do?" whispered Kaori.

"Nothing at this point. This is a fight of majik, one that is best left to them, or we could be killed by a loose bolt of energy from either side" he said.

"Their leader is almost dead; their healer cannot sustain her life force. If you do not end it now, the leader will be able to slip away, to fight another day. These Majik Users have been protected by a Necromancers spell that will reassemble their bodies and give them one more day to fight us, only this time as an undead. You do not want to face undead Majik Users, their power is formidable and they are very nasty," she said as she materialized. "If they manage to open a portal in that room they will not call forth reinforcements, but slip away. Their last two compatriots are dead."

The Lady's reserves, now almost spent, were pushed to the limit as spell after spell hammered into their enemy until their shields finally broke. Several arrows caught the lead Majik Users by surprise and they fell quickly. The enemy healer, slow at heeding their warning was forced to the wall under the sheer inertia of a volley of arrows, where she slumped to the floor. The final Majik User had begun casting her spell when an arrow caught her, driving through her eye into the wall behind her. Death was instantaneous.

"That was close," gasped the Majik User standing next to Anorac.

"Why?" asked Anorac.

"She had begun to cast wizard's fire, an all-encompassing spell that would have consumed her life force, sucking in the energy around her with it, then throwing it back out, cutting anything living to pieces within its radius and killing her in the process. Her life almost gone, the blast radius would have been sufficient to kill us all."

"It is over, finally, it is over." The Lady of the Keep faltered then slipped to the ground, leaning against the wall. She was too weak to protest as Kaori removed the tongues of each of the Majik Users, tossing them in the fire.

"Quickly, take Anorac to the breach, he must seal it before Dorganna can recover," she said.

A tall Human stepped forward, dressed in clothes that somehow still seemed fresh, and pulled on Anorac's arm. "This way, if you please. We must hurry. Dorganna will not wait long before she assaults this place again and I am afraid we would not be able to stop her."

Through turning and twisting corridors they made their way downwards, to the very heart of the Keep. Instead of getting hotter, the ground gave off a cooling effect. He stopped at one of the doors and placed a hand on Anorac's chest. "I am Master Wizard Sardonia of Anchorthorn. I have but one small request. I am tired of all this killing. I would request that you would ask Cimion to remove any memory of where I am going from the collective minds in the Keep. I wish to be able to hide in plain sight; therefore you will need to alter my looks somehow. Do you think you can do that?" he asked.

Anorac nodded yes.

"Good. That is all I ask of you. Beyond this door is the portal. I will clear the Demons from around it, which is the easy part. You will have to seal it, and prevent it from ever being opened again. Are you ready?"

Anorac raised the blades and readied himself; the door swung open and Sardonia entered, throwing spell after spell with uncanny accuracy at the Demons collected around the portal. With howls of rage they turned to attack, only to explode as bolts of light cut into them where they stood. Anorac charged across the room until he reached the portal.

The attack began, his arms moved in a blur, slicing and attacking the portal, healing and closing it as he moved around it. Concentrating his attacks first on one area, and then shifting in what was almost a random pattern, his work constantly being interrupted as more Demons poured through the gap. One large Demon, bigger than the any of the Giants he had met, raged in anger when it couldn't enter through the portal. He attacked it from the side, ripping at it, trying to force it open. It strained, bulged, and threatened to break in several places and unknowingly helped Anorac's attack. Sensing victory was at hand Anorac renewed his attack, his attacks picking up speed until finally all that was left was a small tear.

Dorganna suddenly stood before him. "You are a much better adversary than I expected. But I will have the last laugh. You have been cursed, your offspring will always be watching over their shoulders for my minions. A day will come when they least expect it, or understand it, when I shall return to this realm and exact my vengeance. Until that day arrives, enjoy what little relief you may have; you may have won this battle, but the war is far from over." Her cackle tormented him as the portal closed, for good, he hoped.

"We are done here." He brought the two blades together and allowed them to join as one once again. "We must find the Lady of the Keep, and quickly. Dorganna spoke to me. We must find a way to protect our futures, or this will be for naught.

"Sardonia, your request will be honoured, but you are needed to discover a way to protect our futures, and the balance preserved."

Slowly they moved back to the surface, taking their dead with them. The battle had become so intense that a huge crater now stood surrounding the Keep. An unwelcome reminder as to how close they had come to losing everything.

The sky darkened as several large objects blocked out the sun. Kaidell Snowdance stepped forward, and raising his hands, he began to chant. Other Majik Users began the same chant, channeling their power through him.

An alarm rang; people responded, assembling for another fight.

Anorac, recognizing what was happening, screamed at them, "Wait! Do not attack or we will all die. They are friends!"

Stepping forward Kaidell looked Anorac straight in the eye. "You keep some strange friends, but I will trust you."

"Li Lung, what has brought you so far from your homeland?" Asked Anorac.

The air crackled loudly around Li Lung and her escort, causing the people on the ground to move about in fear. "We are here to complete our part of the oath," she said. "Gruaghlothor has explained to us what is in the ancient text, what we are bound to. We have come to honour that oath," she said as she settled next to him.

"You have a minor problem that we can fix immediately. Step away from the edges unless you want to get wet." With a mighty leap she was gracefully airborne. She could be heard speaking in an ancient language that caused the ground to shudder, causing cracks to appear in the bottom of the crater, which water poured into it. Anorac could see it would become a large lake. "Let this lake always be a reminder of what has happened here, so that both our kinds will never forget."

Anorac lead a discussion between the assembled group of Majik Users and Dragons,

concerning the fate of the sword. Dorganna's threat, or curse, carried significant weight in their discussions until a decision was reached. Only a god could grant them their desire, after all, the gods had created the sword in the first place. Finally an agreement was reached that the sword would be split. Each blade would reside with the people that created it, with the Dragons guaranteeing its ultimate protection.

"Cimion, we beseech thee, grant us an audience, hear our cry." said Anorac as he stood solemnly in one of the few buildings still standing, Cimion's Chapel. He waited patiently for his patron saint and god to answer. Morning turned into afternoon, and finally evening, which gave way to first light, and Anorac continued to wait. At the dawn of the second day he broke out his mountain flute and began to play; lost in the music, he allowed it to carry him along its notes, filling him with peace.

He played for hours before finally stopping. As he opened his eyes he was surprised to see Cimion resting lightly on the altar, a huge smile across his face. "Well done, I knew I could count on you."

"Cimion," he said dropping to his knees.

"Rise, my son, it is I who should be bowing to you. You stopped Dorganna, created an uproar in the heavens so intense it will take millennia to unravel it all. You should be safe until then."

"I have two requests, my Lord, if I may be so bold. The first is to honour Sardonia's request. He has fought bravely but tires of all this killing. As he put it 'it is time for the young'uns to step forward and us old ones to finally be put out to pasture.' Will you grant him that request?"

"The second involves the Eye of Zul and potentially threatens to upset the balance if the blades are allowed to fall into the wrong hands, especially the Blade of Adamantine. It has been proposed to separate the balanced blades, return them to their creators with a charge to protect them, even to their deaths, until called upon again. The Blade of Adamantine will stay affixed to the Eye of Zul, with its location being wiped from everyone's memory. The council has decided that it should be passed from father to son, or if no son is born, from father to daughter, skipping generations to protect its secrets. Will you grant that request?"

"Yes to both. Call Master Wizard Sardonia of Anchorthorn to join us."

Anorac dispatched a guard to find and bring Sardonia to the Chapel.

"While we wait, how do you plan on hiding the blade's presence from Dorganna and her minions?" Cimion asked Anorac.

"We have given that much thought. The council didn't want to be part of the decision-making process. They fear they could be corrupted and forced to reveal their locations. The final act of this sword, before its powers are separated, will be to slow the aging process of all who inhabit this Keep. A day will no longer be a day for the permanent inhabitants, it will become a year. This spell will only affect those who swear their loyalty to the Lady of the Keep, and ultimately the Eye of Zul. It will only affect them while they are inside the Keep. Upon leaving it they will age as normally as everyone else. Each person here will be given the option to stay or go; no one will be coerced to stay. Those who remain will develop their own form of discipline. Their purpose will be to train young minds to continue the heavy burden of maintaining the balance between good and evil. A council of three has been established to oversee the work here."

"Very good. Ah, Sardonia, come in, come in."

Sardonia entered, out of breath, and fell prostrate before the god. "Rise, my son, your wish has been granted, although I have added my own change to it. You are to become one of the council of three, albeit you will participate from a distance, and your identity will be hidden from the others.

This medallion, which must remain on your person for the aging process to be slowed, will indicate who you are to those that need to know. From this point forward you will be known simply as Taylor the tailor. Use your newfound identity wisely; it is filled with its own pitfalls.”

“Freedom, freedom at last. Thank you, Cimion, this gift I will cherish until the last of my days.”

Cimion twisted his hand and Sardonia disappeared. “You will explain to the others that he has left and his whereabouts are unknown?”

“Yes, my Lord,” replied Anorac.

“Now, for the sword. Draw it, separate the two blades, and hold one in each hand.” Holding his hands up, he backed away. “I cannot touch it, my powers would affect it, change its use, upset the balance.”

Anorac held the blades apart as Cimion wove his majik. “Open your mind; let me channel through you.”

The brief taste of Cimion's power was as revealing as it was dangerous. *I understand why he would not touch the sword*, thought Anorac.

Each blade separated from its corresponding sword. The balance was maintained as each pulled away at the precise moment its compatriot did. Lying before Anorac were four blades, each made from a dull-looking metal, scarred, chipped and scratched. “Their purpose will be hidden from all but the Chosen One that would seek them when required, and only if called by the sword.”

“Now join the two blades, and sheath the sword. That blade is awesome in its own right. Use it wisely or it will gather attention that you really do not want. Guard it with your life. If the time ever arises that is needed again, then the Chosen One will have to find it first, and then the blades needed to complete it.”

Anorac combined the blades. When he went to speak to Cimion again, he found the god had left as silently as he had entered. Anorac called to the guards, “Bring me a bolt of sturdy cloth, and four separate sacks. Be quick about it now. Also, assemble the council and our guests.”

He rested his hand on the blades. The familiar song was now gone, resting until needed again.

A discreet cough turned his attention to the door. Before him stood Kaori, the bulge of their daughter clearly showing, now that he knew what to look for. Smiling he approached her, placing his hand on her belly before kissing her.

“All is as you asked for,” she said, handing him the cloth and the sacks.

“Have we been away long enough for our pregnancy to show?” he asked wrapping, binding, and covering the blades.

“Yes my love, it has.” Slipping her arm through his, they left the chapel, and proceeded to the assembly room. The Lady of The Keep was there, as well as Kaidell Snowdance and Master Bandilor Blackfoot, Master Healer. The Dragons had been given a place of honour perched high above the assembly. The leaders of each clan had been included for this discussion. Anorac entered with Kaori, whose glowing presence filled the room with hope.

“I see you take to pregnancy well, my dear,” said the Master Healer. “It suits you.”

Smiling, she thanked him for his kind words.

Anorac approached the centre of the room, where he carefully set the four sacks on the raised dais. Facing the council he recalled everything that had brought them to this point in time. The races and Dragons had put aside their differences and worked together, their honour an example to everyone in the realm. The final battles, and Dorganna's defeat, for now. Much had been learned from the items gathered after her minions were destroyed and removed. Steps had been taken to stop any further infiltration by them.

“We now come to the present. Never in the history of our realm has such an esteemed group gathered. Representatives from each clan and race, all sitting under a common roof with one thought in mind; to stop this from happening again. We have taken steps, consulted Cimion, and he has granted two requests. The first one may cause some shock, even cries of outrage, but it has been done, and cannot be undone. Master Wizard Sardonia of Anchorthorn has been granted his freedom. His days of killing have come to an end. He is gone to parts unknown.”

He held up his hand to stop the protests. “Cimion has demanded, in exchange for his freedom, that he become part of the council of three. The other two will be The Lady of the Keep and Master Snowdance. I will speak with you afterwards about our patrons' requests. In the event that one of you should be killed, Master Blackfoot will assume their role.

“Now we come to a crossroads, so to speak. Each of you here has declared an oath on the Eye of Zul, and you have honoured it admirably. But now we come to the commitment part. Keeping your word in the heat of battle is easy; transgression reminders are all around you. But what about when peace covers the realm and the attacks become more subtle? What then?

“The Eye has been separated, each blade removed from its host, the remaining two swords fused together until needed again. The charge for protecting these blades will rest with those that gave their oath when they were created. The Dwarves will protect the Blade of Molten Fire, the Gnomes the Blade of Arcanity, the Elves the Blade of Li Lung, The Giants the Blade of Catastrophoonus. The Eye of Zul will remain with our family, to be passed on from generation to generation until needed once again. Each of these blades will be protected by not only our clans, but our esteemed friends the Dragons. And protect it you must, for as long as it takes. Dorganna lost the battle but not the war. She will be back.” Anorac paused, attempting to gauge the reaction of the assembled group.

“This Keep will become a place of learning for all who wish to study the arts of Majik and its application. No longer will our hungry minds be forced to find someone to teach them. They will be guided through their studies by a group of talented instructors who will follow the directions of the Lady of the Keep and Master Snowdance.”

Reaching for each sack with his left hand and his right hand resting on the sword, he called out not the clan, but the Dragons to fetch and hold the blades. Once the last blade had been retrieved, Anorac pulled his sword free and raised it above his head and grasped Kaori's hand; the Lady, Snowdance, and Bandilor already joined to her other one.

"Tempus fugit
Sword forgetus"

It was followed by a loud clap; he returned the Eye of Zul to its scabbard and waited for those assembled to regain consciousness. “Go in peace, my friends. Go in peace.”

They followed the Lady, Snowdance and Master Bandilor, to her private study to set out the guidelines for the Keep, its studies, and how they would handle time. Their discussions took several days before Kaori and Anorac could finally take their leave. Once gone, the spells were cast that slowed time for all that lived in the Keep.

Epilogue

They travelled for several months, not wanting to trust their unborn daughter to a portal. Word had reached Hogsbor that they were coming home, and that Kaori, heavy with child, wanted her firstborn to find life with her friends.

Anorac and Kaori, weary from their extended journey, tried to slip in quietly, but failed miserably. They were greeted by not one Hogsbor, but two of them.

"You finally made it! Welcome home," bellowed Hogsbor, his voice filled with pride and joy. "You have already met me brother, thank you for that small favour."

"Aye, thank you, it be long overdue." added Hogsbreath.

Hogsbor quickly gathered them in his huge arms and hugged them close, until Kaori groaned in pain.

Hogsbor pressed a finger to his lips hissing, "Shhh. Come with me, quickly," he said.

Slipping carefully through the shadows, Kaori tried to gracefully waddle down the hallway but failed miserably. Halfway down the first hall she screamed out in pain; her water had broken, the baby was coming. Hogsbor picked her up like a rag doll, cradling her gently in his arms. Looking at his brother, he said, "Fetch Bandilor and the midwife." Rushing down the hallway, any chances of a quiet entry were shattered as Hogsbor ordered everyone out of the way.

"Anorac, open your room door, invite us in, then stand here and wait for me brother, the healer, and the midwife."

The next few hours passed slowly for Anorac. Pushed from the room, he paced, waiting not so patiently for his daughter to make her grand entrance, and listened at the door, and paced some more. Finally, not able to take it anymore, he opened the door, saying, "Damn it, this is my wife, my daughter, and I will be here for her birth, and no one had better say a damn thing about it."

"Took you long enough," Kaori groaned between contractions. "We have been waiting for you."

With a mighty push, his daughters head crowned, then her shoulders became visible, her tiny arms, and finally her body slipped free. They quickly cleaned her up, tied off and severed the cord, before wrapping her in a warm soft blanket, and handed her to dad. Anorac stood there with this small bundle in his arms, tears flowing down his cheeks like a midsummer storm. Leaning down he brought their daughter close and said, "Mother, here is our little angel, she is as beautiful as her mother. Thank you." He tucked her gently into Kaori's protective embrace, who instinctively fed her a nipple. The child nursed as Anorac was steered from the room.

In a daze he walked across the floor and opened the door. He was greeted by a multitude of people who stepped back as he exited the room. He had never seen so many people packed into such a small area. The gathering was so large it spilled down both hallways and into the great room at the end.

"What did she have?" asked a voice in the back.

Tears rolling down his face, he said to them, "Kaori has blessed us with a daughter, a beautiful little angel, just like her mother. Her name will be Jensine, which means 'God has blessed'. May she live a long and prosperous life."

The cheers that followed his announcement filled the hall with laughter and joy, something that had been sorely lacking for many years.

"I pray peace will last," cried a voice.

Hogsbreath stepped forward and raised his hand for silence. Placing a huge hand on Anorac's shoulder, his loud voice easily carried to all that were assembled. "Cimion watch over Jensine. May she live a life filled with peace, never having to know the trials her mother and father have met. May she live out her life, enjoy old age and her grandkids, without the fear that the mere mention of the name Dorganna brings."

"Amen" could be heard echoing around the hallway.

Cimion slipped away from the edge of the assembled group unseen. "Only time will tell," he said, knowing that the inevitable would come and one day, one of them would have to face her again. But that is another story, for another time.

I hope you have enjoyed The Eye of Zul. The story was a labour of love that took 23 years to write. There are 5 more books planned for this series. The next one, Temporal Destiny, is set far off into the future. A descendant of Anorac & Kaori is set on a quest that will have her retrace their steps in an attempt to reassemble the sword. Once again Dorganna is attempting to upset the balance between good and evil. I have included the first 2 chapters as an introduction. I hope you enjoy them. Watch the book website <http://eyeofzul.com/> for updates on the release date.

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About the Author

Ken Byars retired from the Canadian Military in his 20th year of service for medical reasons. He has been married to a wonderful lady for 33 years and is proud to be the father of 2 wonderful ladies, Kimberly and Melissa.

The itch to write a book became too intense to ignore during a 6 month tour in CFS Alert in 1989 and slowly built itself into what you have just read. World building is just one of his hobbies as he creates profile stories for friends that still play D&D. He is a prolific player of World of Warcraft and a continuous reader of many fantasy books. His novels are all set in a time when majick was common, when honour meant something and your word more important than your life.