

Incarnate

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the

NEOMFA Creative Writing

Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

May, 2022

Incarnate

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## ABSTRACT

“Incarnate” is a “darkened epic fantasy” about a youth who survives incredible odds and harrowing experiences that seek to harden him as a person. It is a coming-of-age story and plays to the fictional tradition of the hero’s journey both literally and metaphorically. Throughout its narrative, the novel explores and criticizes the fate and responsibilities of the typical “chosen one” archetype and examines the protagonist’s understanding of justice and morality while battling between self-preservation and self-sacrifice as an evil force threatens the world.

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## Kingdom of Costone

### Costone Village

Deep in the muck of a trampled village, a stone's throw from the high, fortress walls of a great keep, lived a quiet boy late in his tenth year. With no home to speak of and no family to care for him, Brendon lived alone in the muddy streets of his village begging and stealing to survive. As far back as he could remember, his life had been under a heavy cloud much like the rest of the mirelands on which the castle of Costone was founded. Life had been dreary, caught in an a seemingly perpetual overcast. The lives of each and every villager was hard, filled with work and misfortune, but it had been Brendan who struggled worst of all.

Costone had once been considered the crown jewel of all the Myrian people—that is people who lived in the mire—it had been the seat of power among the millions Myrians living on the continent who called it home, and the first true kingdom from a bygone age of tumult and subjugation, a shining example of the best men had to offer the

world. But unlike the tales told by traveling bards, Brendan, despite his young age knew nothing bright ever shone in the village of Costone.

Brendan's days were long. Each morning, he spent his time scurrying through the street and alleyways like a mangey alley cat, pilfering through unwanted garbage for something to eat; usually consisting of offal scraps and rotten vegetables. And when it rained—and it rained often—Brendan crept into the horse stables and slept on piles of hay laden with horse ticks and fleas and all manner of pests. And routinely, at dawn, the stable hands would scare him away with their pitchforks hurling insults and threats sometimes to gut him and other times to turn him over to the city guard.

The rest of his time would be spent running petty errands and the odd chore or two for an occasional brick of stale bread. Other times, if he were lucky, he would help some of the women with their laundry and in exchange, they would send him away with scraps of clothing and sometimes a free bath from time to time when his odor had been particularly pungent. The clothes themselves were no more than a combination of thinning napery and loose undergarments which thanks to the harsh lye used to wash them, were unbearably itchy. But Brendan learned to keep his complaints to himself once he had been flogged by one of the nastier laundresses, a mean old crone, who would often chastise the others for showing him charity. “He isn't clean” she would say all the time. So, Brendan made sure to scrub extra hard next time.

Most villagers knew of him as he was usually found by himself fighting off imaginary ghouls and monsters, but no one paid him much mind else they would need to examine their own morality and kindness, something they were not want to do. Brendan

mostly kept to himself, partially because he never wanted to be a burden but mostly because nobody ever wanted to play with him. The other children in the village were told to keep him at a distance else his “filth” would rub off on them. Solitude was something he had learned early in life. Growing up as an orphan, seldom few strangers showed him kindness but to say that the villagers would ever accept him would be nothing short of wishful thinking. At best, they tolerated his presence and though he often sought more, as any child would, he learned how to cope.

Though he could barely remember a time before his parents died, Brendan had always lived in the village. And as such, he considered himself Myrian until one day he had been chased through the alleys and cornered by a group of nasty kids who senselessly beat on him. Pushed and shoved into the mud, punched and kicked all over until all he could sense was pain. He cried and begged them to stop, they relished in their assault spitting and relieving themselves on him instead which had left his fresh wounds stinking and stinging.

Eventually, he had even learned to cope with this. What hurt him most, even after all the kicks, when he would plead for some passerby to help, he would look into their eyes as they walked past, pretending like nothing was the matter. It had been so frequent, that Brendan’s muscles would tense up when he walked past certain corners anticipating his beatdown. The children would chase through the alleys as if playing some twisted game of chase all the while launching insults at him such as “*shit-skin*” until they finally caught him and beat him bloody. “*Dirty, Mongrel, Outsider, Halfbreed.*” Those were some of the nicer words that he remembered. It had happened so often, that Brendan had to learn how to move in stealth. He got so good at sneaking past the group of boys that he

could get close enough to hear them snorting to each other about how much fun they were going to have beating once they found him. He even overheard one boy mention that he wanted to see how it felt to gouge Brendan's eyes out. Luckily for Brendan that never happened. After he had perfected his sneaking, those boys never caught him again. And it was this skill that would always earn him his next meal.

But while it's easy to remark on Brendan's plight, it wasn't all bad for him in the village. While most had treated him like a dog, not all the villagers were keen on mistreating him. Some of the older folk had good hearts or at least must have felt sorry for him because on his very next birthday, they all pitched in and cleaned up one of the abandoned homes on the outskirts from which a swathe had seen a freak fire from a stray bolt of lightning. But they repaired and changed the lumber and made it strong against the worst of the elements. It was his own place to stay. No longer would he need to sleep in the flea-ridden stables. And in a rather unceremonious yet thoughtful gesture, they even scrounged up enough to make him a shabby birthday cake. And it was one of the best birthday's he had ever had.



## Brendan's Cottage

Five years later...Brendan woke in the empty house. Sunrays bored through the gaps of the sagging, mold-stained ceiling casting a band of harsh light that stung his eyes.

Outside, the aroma of bread and bloodwurst tip-toed through the crooked slats of his meager cottage and up his small, wide nose. Brendan rolled over and quickly clothed himself in a pair of hand-me-down clothes which consisted of a moth-eaten pair of dark grey trousers and a threadbare plain-white shirt he had worn for two straight weeks. On a small wooden table near a stone-cold hearth, a week's old Shepherd's pie squirmed with the life. It was enough to destroy what appetite the smell of fresh bread was able to muster after a long night struggling to sleep in the cold. Brendan's day would be too busy, so he decided that he would break his fast later and get it started.

In the last few years, he had spent most of his waking time in and around the alleys of the village sometimes finding himself sneaking around on the hill, inside the imposing walls of Costone Keep where he'd do unsavory jobs for all manner of shady

individuals. Surviving in the mucky alleyways of Costone Village taught him skills that made him desirable to certain a certain class of the...desperate persuasion. But the same skills that made him popular in Costone's developing underworld of smugglers, forgers, extortioners, and thieves got him into plenty of trouble. It was only sheer luck and wit that he had remained out of the dungeons all these years.

Brendan was an adept prowler and looter but not by choice. He'd run into people while occupying the alleys on gloomy nights. Usually, it was jealous folk that would ask him to steal family heirlooms to which they felt better entitled. And occasionally, he would meet a competitive merchant asking him to steal a myriad of different things from their competition. Sometimes he would even be hired to steal secrets by way of eavesdropping. Those jobs were harder than simple thievery because often Brendan didn't know which piece of information was valuable and which were only rumors or small talk. But usually, things that had been considered untouchable, were nothing more than child's play to Brendan, almost literally though he was in his adolescence. Doing these sorts of jobs nearly always earned him some small token or recompense with which he could trade for something useful.

Brendan knelt near the foot of his cot and pulled out a small wooden chest from underneath. Inside were many of his treasures: baubles and keepsakes some precious some valuable some both...most of which not so much. Though there was one which held more of a sentimental value to him than the others. It was a small jade medallion the face of which a carved portrait of a woman. He had it for as long as he could remember, a gift from his father. Beyond that, Brendan felt deeply that there was something familiar about the woman though he could never manage why. Regardless,

every day he would take the medallion with him for luck. Rifling through his chest today, he would need something special, something with more monetary value, something more suited for bribery. That's when his eyes found a dull, golden sparkle and he grabbed a chunk of pyrite he had pickpocketed himself. He thought it had been gold and swiped it from a merchant only to find out later that it wasn't the precious as he had thought. He praised himself for keeping it as he knew he would be able to find a purpose for it. After gathering his purse and a short-hooded cape, he slipped on his ragged calfskin boots and tore off outside in such a hurry that he had forgotten to tie them almost leaping out of them in his haste.

It was an unusually bright day in Costone. Most of the year, it was wet and miserable. The intense sunlight was a veiled blessing in late Autumn. The apricity of the sun's warmth was one of his favorite sensations. He stood still for a minute or two basking in the heat. His golden-brown skin soaked up the sun eagerly. Any sunshine was rare, rarer still during the harvest season, and absolutely unheard of in winter. So, Brendan made sure to enjoy it when he could. His eyes took a few seconds longer to adjust but once he had opened them, he watched the farmers along the busy village roads coming back from a long, hard day in their fields while bakers, butchers, weavers, and masons, done earning their wages, trickled all the way from Costone Keep, the very place Brendan was headed.

Looking among all the villagers he passed, Brendan had been made keenly aware that he was unwanted. Homogenous was how one would describe the village of Costone. Everyone looked the same and wore near identical dress of the same four colors between tunic and cape. Among the poor, working villagers there was no need for extravagance.

Unlike the denizens of Costone Keep, clothing had not been for fashion but for practical use. What good would silk do a sheep herder during winter as he chased his flock in a foot of snow? But what the villagers lacked in fancy dress, they more than made up for it in attitude often looking down their nose at him, scoffing when he walked near, or pretending that he didn't exist at all.

Brendan noticed a familiar woman walking home with her daughter at her heel, a little blond girl he recognized with whom he would often make funny faces. The girl always tried to copy him. Each face becoming more extreme and hilarious. He remembered her name was Edith, but he called her Edi for short. She told him her name one day when he helped her find her cat who had been chasing mice out their home. Edi was one of the seldom few that stuck out of the crowd of upturned faces and sneering looks. She hadn't cared that he was different looking, hadn't noticed that his hair and skin weren't like the rest of them. He had to make friends with Edi before she had learned to hate him like everyone else.

Brendan stuck out his tongue and crossed his eyes as Edi toddled, falling behind her mother. She smiled and copied his goofy expression giggling the whole time. Brendan made a few more funny faces before landing on a beastly scowl. Unphased, Edi mimicked his monster impression perfectly, but in her cuteness just couldn't manage the ferocity.

“Good night, Edi.” He said, smiling and waving at the girl.

Her mother noticed who had been speaking to her daughter and pulled Edi close then picked up her pace, adopting a painfully awkward gait even though she looked worn

from a hard day's work. She even shot her own funny faces toward Brendan, but hers weren't the playful sort. Brendan's smile quickly faded and he pulled up his hood. From now on, he resolved that he would keep his eyes on the road, and his kindness to himself.

Costone Keep was often referred to as Costone Proper by the villagers. It had been built hundreds of years ago at the top of a great hill overlooking the Myrian wetlands. Under the setting Autumn sun, its western escarpment was home to a small swath of blazing red and gold trees, that stretched down the hill and cut through the village toward more woodland. The keep itself was dense and populous and surrounded by a high curtain wall that crowned the massive hilltop. And its zenith, stood the Ivory Palace ensconced from prying eyes. It was the home of the king and housed the throne to the entire Myrian kingdom.

The palace slowly disappeared behind the walls as Brendan ascended higher toward the keep, but still peeking out from the palace was a shining spire standing proudly over the rest of the structures in Costone. Reflecting the sun's soft orange light perched a giant gold statue of a raven. From a distance, you wouldn't be able to tell that it was a raven without knowing it was already there. Some people from the neighboring villages and kingdoms made pilgrimages just to lay their eyes on the golden raven. Other than being made of gold, Brendan couldn't figure out why it was such a spectacle. Especially since the raven could hardly ever shine in the mire with the clouds always holding the sun hostage. Besides, looking at it gave a peculiar sense of unease. It made him nauseous if he stared at it too long as if the spire had consciously warded him away.

Brendan was nearing the upper village, which was just a stone's throw from the curtain walls, when he came to a crossroad. The main road that he was on ran North to South. A second road cut through East to West which formed a highway about a mile outside the village. At the crossroads, was a post with many signs giving the general direction of nearby cities. The ones pointing West, read *Reywhich*, *Redale*, and *Feyclif*. The signs pointing East, read *Arshill*, *Beobluff*, and *Weghmoor*. Only one sign pointed South and it read *Sebury*. Travelers came from far and wide across the Myrian kingdom, sometimes beyond. He'd sometimes speak to these travelers and hear their strange accents. Most of all, he enjoyed their eccentric dress compared to what he had been used to. He always imagined visiting these places himself one day, but as luck would have it, Brendan had never left Costone. Much like a wagon with a lame wheel, he was hopelessly stuck in the mud. But Costone wasn't a terrible place to be stuck, he often convinced himself. It had still been the epicenter of the Myrian kingdoms and a popular hub for trade. And where there was trade, there was opportunity for Brendan to earn some coin.

Stealing from naïve foreigners made for easy marks but it never amounted to much when he tried to hawk it. Either no one would buy it from him for fear of reprisal or they shunned him from their business because of who he was. Unfortunate for him, because if he ever had any hope making a purse large enough to leave Costone and travel abroad, his best chance would be stealing for a wealthy lord or lady. An opportunity that didn't come often—at least not for an *outsider* like him and even if an opportunity like that ever revealed itself, the odds that it would turn sour were tenfold.

Brendan kept straight and landed in the middle of the upper village bazaar; a pale imitation of the annual Autumn bazaar that was held in Costone proper. The village bazaar filled the road to bursting and lined the highway running East to West with all manner of travelers in tow. The hagglers were still haggling late into the afternoon, trying to make a few coppers from people coming and going. Most of them bargained outdoors from crude market stalls with drab canopies and makeshift tents made from their personal drab linen. Some of the locals bartered out of their homes which were all made from the same cheap wattle and daub. All the houses looked like one another, bland with painted timber framing. And if Brendan had walked through the side alleys, he would have seen much the same.

Finally, Brendan had made it just outside the keep where he spotted three guards playing doorman against the bulging crowd just under a large portcullis with sharp ends like a trident. A queue had formed, and the guards looked flustered and overwhelmed. The line was long and filled with traders some of which were escorting carts full of exotic things. Some carted strange food that didn't look like food at all. Others carried stacks of crates holding various silks and rare fabrics. The rest ran the gamut of jewelry and ore. Brendan saw the opportunity to make his move and dug out the chunk of fake gold and rolled it deftly between his fingers while deciding which guard to bribe.

One guard, a short, fat one, was busy checking permits, sweating profusely under mail and a thick brigandine. He saw beads of sweat rolling down the guard's forehead from his padded coif. Brendan walked up to the guard, bypassing the queue entirely much to their distaste and outrage.

“You there, hold!” the guard held out his hand. “What’s your business, street rat?”

“Commerce.” Brendan quickly replied, ignoring the jibe.

The guard inspected him for a second, noticing his shabby clothes not worth a dirty copper. “You’re here for... *what?*” the guard mocked, “Piss off.”

“But I’m here to trade.” Brendan said, tossing up the shiny gold lump and catching it between his thumb and finger.

The guard didn’t believe him but asked anyway, “What do you want for it?”

“A pass.”

The guard looked around for a moment before walking up to Brendan. With one arm loosely resting on the pommel of his sword, he snatched the rock out of Brendan's hand with the other and shoved it somewhere inside his armor then escorted Brendan straight through the gates into the keep.

## Autumn Bazaar



The difference in atmosphere between Costone's village and the keep was night and day. Where the village had been an otherwise drab, colorless place, where most of the people droned from work to their homes like the undead, inside the keep was saturated with color and the people were lively and fulfilled. Very seldom did Brendan ever find himself in the keep. After all without a day pass or a special royal permit, only the occasional festivals or parades hosted by the king were open to the nobles and peasants alike, but those were far and few between. Being in Costone proper, especially during the day, was as rare.

The *true* bazaar took on whole new life on the hill. There were legitimate handcrafted stalls with various vibrant sailcloth and banners waving proudly. Reds and blues flapped nonchalantly in the wind while yellows and greens danced with golds and violets. Oranges and greens battled for dominance against the contrasting blacks and whites. Here, merchants distinguished themselves from the lower bazaar of oil peddlers and bauble hawkers. It was a real who's who of Costone and it was where Brendan wanted to be.

Swaths of foreign traders were able to find more business in Costone than in their own lands the most noticeable of which were the Rhylanders. While they looked just like humans, they were notably larger and more muscular. Rumors were that they had giant blood coursing through their veins, but Brendan wouldn't know the first about what a giant looked like. They wore decorative mantles draped over embroidered silk tunics with ornate leather bands and bangles wrapped around their massive necks and forearms. Brendan may not have trusted that they had been giants, but he knew that Rhylanders

lived in the far north, in the highland permafrosts where the wind could kill a man in matter of minutes so perhaps, they weren't completely human after all.

The Rhylanders imported all kinds of treasures crafted or found in their frozen mountain valleys. Thanks to their stone-cold demeanor Brendan thought that the Rhylanders were also carved from the glaciers themselves. They were a cold people with a steely gaze that always seemed to follow him like a statue which made him very uncomfortable. Despite their extravagant clothing, Brendan knew that he never wanted to run into one in a dark alley. He imagined that if one of them were to get their hands around someone, they'd likely be crushed and turned into gravel. Curious, Brendan recalled that he had only ever seen a Rhylander men. Perhaps it was why when they traveled, they were so rigid, he thought. Maybe it was because they were too far away from their women. The thought made him chuckle.

Brendan walked by the giant merchants, inconspicuously thinking about what a Rhylander woman looked like, often his mind would place a long luxurious beard on their chiseled female jawline which made them almost indistinguishable from the men. Laughing to himself, he looked at a few and wondered if they were in fact women. This seemed to help him around his unease.

Soon, he found himself near another small troop of foreigners. This time, it was a group of nomads who called themselves "Sahkii." All of them were human, at least he thought, and they were the most exotic group there. It was as if they were from the hidden lands across the sea. They weren't selling anything, not like the rest of the foreigners; instead of selling wares, what they sold were beliefs and tried to recruit new

members for their tribe. The only thing Brendan knew about the monks were the rumors that claimed they were mystical practitioners of some sort of spiritual form of hand-to-hand combat. Brendan saw them as no better than the frauds in the village bazaar selling fakes and knockoffs, only he felt that what the Sahkii sold was even more of a rip-off.

Further past the foreign merchants was an armorer's forge. Hammering away on a piece of freshly heated steel, was a large blacksmith who could have easily been mistaken for one of the Rhylanders, but his hair was too dark. He was burly and built like an oxman. The sign that swung above him said *Hammer & Hand*. The sound of the armorer's pounding distracted Brendan momentarily and lulled him into a trance as the strikes of the hammer synced to the beat of his chest. Brendan snapped out of it when he had accidentally bumped into a Sahkii woman demonstrating some form of mediation who was very polite and apologetic in her confusion. Her ignorance immediately recognizable for that simple fact. No one else would have apologized even if they ran him down with a cart. Was it any wonder why he preferred this bazaar?

Brendan weaved in and out of the crowds of people and spotted a pile of bleeding plums lying in a crate that made his mouth tingle and water. Their flesh may have looked like a terrible bruise, dark red and purple, but they tasted divine. He swiped one when the merchant wasn't looking but couldn't shake the funny feeling that someone had noticed and was watching him. Brendan peeked around and caught the eye of the ox-like armorer who was staring straight at him, eyes hot as coals.

“Who is that?” He whispered to a random local.

A young woman leaned into his ear and told him that she didn't know, but that the forge had been built a little over two years ago which was about how long it had been since Brendan had been inside the keep for last year's bazaar, he fell ill and was bedridden for weeks. Another stranger piped up, saying that the smithy used to be the guard barracks. Whoever he was, he made Brendan uncomfortable. He bit into the plum and savored all its saccharine juices while making his way to the art district to meet the next finicky fool who sought to buy his skills. After this job, he should have enough to leave Costone. He set his sights on it and prepared to haggle as if his life depended on it. One way or another, he was determined to get out of the mirelands.

Closer to the top of the hill, nearing the Ivory Palace, the upper crust of Costone grew even more luxurious. Brendan could often tell the nobles women apart from the artisan merchants by the length of their gowns which dragged behind them safe from the muck on cobblestone streets. Pampered folk like that would never find themselves down in the village unless they were kidnapped.

The buildings too were in vastly better shape as most were made of stone and spacious enough for four families by Brendan's estimation. Lining the streets were numerous beds of flowers and well-trimmed shrubbery and on every corner, there were ornate streetlamps that kept the squares well-lit. There were grand statues flanking stone steps and large fountains trickling fresh water in every square that was purer than what most of the villagers drank. And simple things like benches and spiral handrails showed an affluence that seemed fantasy as they too were better maintained than all the homes in Costone village. Just how much gold did these people have, he wondered. Surely, they could part with a small fortune and never be any wiser.

The higher Brendan climbed, the more opulent it all had been. The nobles here didn't even look like they were Myrian at all. Most of Costone, as he knew it, was drab, poor, and stricken with disease. Even compared to the people living in the lower keep, these people were queer. Dressed in fine clothes like crushed velvet doublets, silken samite, and gold brocade, when they walked, they seemed to glow. They wore expensive jewelry draped off their necks, ears, and hats. They strutted about in rare dyes and funny salon hairdos. It was like he had discovered another world entirely or some lost civilization hidden within the thick walls of Costone's keep where they were safe and sheltered from the rest of the world.

To Brendan's surprise, there was yet another wall separating even the Costone nobles from the grounds of the Ivory Palace. He shuttered to think just how much more ludicrous the people inside would be. Over that wall was where the infamous spire sat with its golden raven perched at the very top whose details—oddly enough—became less raven-like the closer he got. What priceless marvels were trapped in there, he chanted to himself almost like a mantra.

Brendan had to ascend the hill then backtrack downward to the Northside of the hill nearing the lower gardens where his contact would be waiting near a stone plaza marked by a marble statue of a rose. While it was further down the hill than he had been with all the opulent trimmings, it was no less lavish than the rest of the upper keep, only there was topiary everywhere he looked. "*Betwixt the bespoke boscape.*" Was what the message said, an official-looking letter given to him last night from a stranger concealing his face under the hood of a heavy cloak. "*Bewilder a beldam and burgle away my*

*bequest.*” The words were so odd that it probably would’ve have been more difficult to forget them.

A curious man skulked around the corner out from the shadows. Brendan could tell he was one of the nobles. He was dressed in a black velvet doublet equipped with an absurd half cape which flounced just above a pair of matching padded chausses. He looked nervous under his chaperone but determined to speak to Brendan looking around to make sure their conversation wasn’t spied on.

“B-be you...the b-burglar?” The man’s voice stuttered resoundingly.

“Shh.” Brendan quieted the noble, “keep your voice down, sir. I am who you want.”

“Y-your age b-belies you’re b-burgeoning.”

Brendan asked himself if this man was serious. He was obviously unaware how this sort of thing usually worked. “Do you mean to hire me or not?” He asked.

“...uh-of course,” The noblemen tried to look casual but only appeared more frightened and conspicuous. Lucky for Brendan no one seemed to care or take notice. “I must b-burden you, b-badger, b-bully, or b-blackmail, bring back my forebearer’s b-brooch.” He tripped over every other word.

Brendan started to think that he was being tricked, but still couldn’t tell what the man was saying to him. Guardsmen would likely make their patrol and stumble on them any second, so he asked the man to hurry. While he landed himself a day pass from the guard, guests weren’t allowed outside the main square of the bazaar, though many would

sneak through and none would be the wiser, still, this was one place he didn't want to be caught.

“A b-blazing bauble of purple bonded in b-black silver.” He sputtered, “*The violet flame.*” The last part he said in a conspicuous whisper.

“Where might I find it?”

“B-beatrix. Between her b-belongings and b-bibelot.”

Brendan knew of Beatrix and the apothecary where she lived. It was ancient. Some even said it had been there before the Myrian kingdom was founded, when Costone was just a simple hill surrounded by a swamp. Of course, Brendan didn't know the truth of it, but he did know that Beatrix was rumored to be an augur. He remembered her all too well. Curious, Brendan thought, what would that old woman need with such a necklace?

“I know the place.” Brendan said. “Exactly how much is this necklace worth to you?”

“You b-bargain?” The man started to sweat nervously.

“I want five-hundred silver pieces for the job. No more, no less.” Brendan felt keen to haggle because of the glaringly obvious value of the item which is exactly what he wanted. With that amount he would be more than equipped to leave, to buy supplies, and find a horse then leave Costone and its people for good. A little tickle on the back of his neck made the hairs stand on end just thinking about the prospect of it, travelling the world happy and free.

“Very well. I bend to your bid.” They looked each other in the eye and shook hands. The man agreed to Brendan’s terms and Brendan agreed with the timeline: He was to steal the necklace within a week’s time. On the surface, it sounded like the easiest job he has had in years. That night, Brendan decided that it would be his last.



## Iron Square

Brendan was hired to complete a simple robbery, to sneak into Beatrix's apothecary to steal back a family heirloom from the old crone who lived there. He knew Beatrix by reputation only. She was a foul, old woman whom Brendan avoided like a plague. One time, he remembered running into her as a child, a terrifying ordeal. And he hadn't quite healed from that experience. Depending on who you asked, Beatrix was a soothsayer. To some, she was a witch who spat omens and foresaw ill-begotten fates for those willing and unwilling to hear such claims. But Brendan knew she was just an old woman struck with senile delusions as the village's most eccentric druggist.

It was already late into the twilight hours. The sky had turned to lurid shades like the color of the bleeding plum he digested earlier. As the light faded and the shadows grew and deepened, Brendan made his way back toward the village to plan out his last ever job. The bazaar went on through the late evening and made a perfect cover for him to stake out the apothecary. For the next couple days, he would survey the streets and alleys near his mark, carefully drawing out foot traffic, pinpointing which vagrant slept where and when and who among the peddlers could be cheaply bribed. All these details had to be planned out so that his movements would go unnoticed and that his theft would be as smooth as possible. Brendan made a mental note of what he could do before dark and went home to his cottage on the village outskirts.

The next day, Brendan snuck out early before most of the villagers woke up to patrol the streets surrounding the apothecary. The weather in Costone was back to its usual bleakness, wet and sunless.

Brendan walked the long way around the square where Beatrix's shoppe was settled before making his way through one of the adjacent alleys. Several of the bazaar tarpaulins that lined the back streets had been taken down and used as blankets by the cheap-jacks overnight. Only a few were already awake and haggling, and none of which would be suspicious of Brendan though he avoided them, nonetheless. It wouldn't be possible to break into the old apothecary quietly if some pilfer begged at him with "*You sir, breaking into that house, please buy my fake gemstone.*" Worse, they may even try ratting to a guardsman for a meager reward.

The apothecary was placed at the Northern corner of Iron Square which was at the dead center of the village. There were no candles or lanterns lit inside the crooked clinic, which stood twisted and deformed and sandwiched between two new century shoppes. From Brendan's vantage, everything inside was as dark as the morass of the filth-littered street softly squelching beneath his leather shoes as he walked past. Once the coast was predictably clear, he swiftly dashed across the street to the crone's house and hid beneath one of its small oriel windows protruding from a part of its side not hidden by the neighboring buildings. It was that window which would be his preferred entry point as it was near enough to the alley yet hidden from view of wanderers on the street so that he could quickly make his escape into the shadows. He was offered a hefty silver purse for the job by a scared, nobleman with a coward's eyes that were as dull as they were sunken. Brendan didn't ask many questions for fear of scaring off the nobleman losing this opportunity of such a lucrative and simple task.

Brendan pulled himself up toward the beveled glass window and peeked inside. As far as he could tell, the place was filled to the brim with piles of loose parchments and garbage. Bookshelves and counters sagged from strain of the piles of old, dusty books, foggy jars, and various stuffed creatures littering every surface. Brendan saw no sign of Beatrix.

Suddenly, Brendan felt the air shift and thought that he was being watched again and looked down the leftmost alley where he eventually noticed the huge blacksmith from Costone proper, the one with the giant shoulders and the burning glare. As soon as Brendan recognized him, the smith chanced to look down the alley and met Brendan's gaze. Brendan calmly pulled over his hood and walked away from the apothecary and

down the alley as if nothing conspicuous was afoot. But the bulky smith pardoned himself from the villagers and followed tailed him through the streets.

Brendan rounded a corner when a large, booming voice called his name. “Brendon!?” The voice somehow bigger than the man itself.

Brendan didn’t know how the man knew his name and picked up his pace, darting sharply around corners and trekking through small garden plots of saturated with humus. After Brendan felt that he lost the man, he turned around one last corner and ran into a thick wall of flesh nearly falling backward onto the ground. As he looked up, the fat of the man’s cheeks covered his eyes as he smiled.

“As I live and breathe...I can’t believe my own eyes. Yet here you are right in front of me. Very much alive and well.” The smith stood over him, his presence intimidating.

“You must have me confused. I don’t think we know each other, so I think I’ll be on my way.” Brendan answered.

“Aye, well... you might not know me, but I know you.”

“As I’ve said, we’ve never met, mister.”

“Not that you’d remember, ha!” he quipped, “Hell, you were only a little tike, maybe two or three years past your birth. But I’ll never forget those eyes. I wasn’t sure it was you when I seen you swipe that plum the other day, but when you turned around and I seen those eyes, those sharp golden eyes, I knew it had to be you. I never seen eyes like yours before or since.”

“Just who are you?” Brendan’s tone grew indignant despite his curiosity.

The smith stretched his large face into a massive grin, his eyes nearly shut completely.

“Why, I’m your uncle.” He said, “Name’s Robern.”

Brendan though he heard him say *uncle*. But that wasn’t possible. He didn’t have an uncle. His family had been gone for the last eleven years. Admittedly, he only remembered parts of his childhood and pieces of what his parents looked like. But in none of his memories were there any uncles named Rob. Clearly, this man was confused or mistaken, erring Brendan’s identity for someone else.

“You can call me Rob.” The smith cheesed.

“I’m sorry, but you’re mistaken. I don’t have an uncle.” Brendan walked off.

“Brendan. Wait!” Rob begged, “They died about ten, eleven years ago, your parents. My brother, Marcus, and his wife Kristen.

Those were their names alright. Brendan was stunned. He didn’t know what to think. Maybe it was a lucky guess? No, he must have said out loud how long ago they died. Or did he? Suddenly, he couldn’t remember what he said only a moment ago. The smith’s words confused his thoughts and disarmed his rough exterior façade. Maybe the smith did know his parents, but it didn’t mean they were related. Brendan decided to lean into the smith’s claims with questions of his own.

“If you are my uncle, how come you never tried to find me? How come I don’t remember you?” Brendan started to get louder. Though, he couldn’t recall when his voice

raised. “And you’ve just been here...in Costone...hammering away all this time not ten minutes away? Why?” Brendan demanded, doubting that Rob’s words had any truth to them.

“Sshh! Settle your voice.” Rob looked around to see if anyone had heard Brendan’s outburst. “It’s complicated.”

“Complicated? If you were truly my uncle, you wouldn’t have hidden yourself *up there* while I struggled to survive all by myself in the mud. Getting pumpled by the street kids and treated like an unwanted pest by everyone, being made to beg for scraps or barter for right to exist.”

“Brendan. I assure you; we’re family. There were reasons beyond what you may think that prevented you from knowing me. But we can discuss everything over a hot meal. Wadd’ya say? I’m just so glad to see you. Come, and I’ll explain everything, please?” For such a big man, Rob sure had the temperament of a lost pup. But he also seemed to have the ignorance that Brendan would just roll over and accept the revelation after the years of abandonment. Even if he were telling the truth, what good would it do now?

“No. I don’t think so, *uncle*.” He said that last part with venom, “We aren’t family. My family died a long time ago.” Rob was struck speechless. Brendan abruptly concluded their conversation and walked off, blending into the thickening crowd of morning. Whoever that man was, he wasn’t family. Family wouldn’t have let him sleep in the cold. Family wouldn’t have let him starve. Family wouldn’t have let him feel so alone and unloved. “*We’re Family.*” He says. *What piece of shit.*

A couple of days pass as Brendan planned his job meticulously and tried not to think about the smith and his wild claims. Uncle or not, he wouldn't care. Brendan didn't want him; he didn't need him. Soon, he'd be fat sack of silvers richer and gone from Costone forever.

Brendan left his cottage late into the evening wearing the darkest clothing he possessed. As the villagers were ending their day, Brendan was just starting his. On his way to the village, he spotted little Edi and her mother walking home. He couldn't help but extend a smile to the little girl who smiled back with a twinkle in her eye before her mother pulled her away as expected. Brendan hurried toward the Iron Square ready to finish the job and to be out of this shitty place, away from its shitty people.

A few moments later, after dodging and distracting some loiterers in the alley, Brendan was at the apothecary at last. He peaked through the window once more. There were still no candles or lanterns lit inside, just the glow of the moonlight casting a silver sheen inside. He attempted to open the window, but it appeared to be stuck shut. *Sard!* He thought. His main entry had failed. Brendan rummaged around his pockets and pulled out a set of lockpicks and moved toward the front door.

After a few tense seconds, Brendan felt a satisfying click inside the lock which always sent a warm wave down up his spine. There was no better feeling. With the lock easily defeated, Brendan slowly snuck into the place careful to not make a sound.

Carefully, he shut the door behind him and twisted the knob. It made a slight rusty squeak. The inside was worse than it appeared from the outside. The apothecary was

indeed very old and dusty. The smell was loathly. The kind of smell that usually accompanied someone who hadn't bathed in a year. Brendan knew anything in that place could have easily given off such a stench, so he tried his best to ignore it. Brendan didn't know where to find the necklace, especially in a horde such as this. Even the ceilings joists were littered with cobwebs and hanging herbs which startled him at first glance because they resembled slumbering bats. Brendan moved toward the back and kept his head on a swivel, making sure not to accidentally bump into something. There were far too many glass jars perched precariously on the edges of their shelves. If just one should fall, he would have to make a quick escape.

Deeper into the estate, Brendan found that the old woman kept rare stock. A larcener's picnic. Items that would fetch a high price from the right buyer. Among these valuables, he spotted a sack of powdered wood-splitter horn—a very rare substance from a very rarely spotted creature. He finally noticed that the jars spread about contained fangs, various teeth, claws, and some other organs. On the walls were exotic hides and strange furs stretched out like a macabre tapestry. There was even a shelf filled with priceless vials with tiny labels that contained hydrae ink, wyvern venom, a clutch of dried manta eggs, and even Arachne silk. All these things were impressive to Brendan who thought about pocketing a few of them but was after the main prize, the violet flame.

Just as he was nearing the threshold of the rear room, he jumped out of his skin when he saw what looked like a mummified doll folded over, slouching in a chair. The doll was creepy and looked handmade. It sat in the chair very awkwardly, hunched over as if it was ready to fall any second. Its head also bent, but its neck was twisted toward the moonlight. Brendan didn't care to admire the craftsmanship. Someone took the time



to mold paper to a skeletal frame, and that was enough art for him. Brendan noticed one of its eyes were closed but the other was open, glossy, and as blue as budding cornflower.

The back room looked like a study. There was a large bookshelf pregnant with fat tomes and grimoires. One book, in particular, was obviously on display in an alter. It was large, leather-bound, and hand-stitched with metal angles lining its spine. The cover showed odd concentric symbols and read: *Abalan Mül Æthera*. It looked ancient. Brendan felt compelled to open it and flip through its frayed pages, which felt soft yet somehow crunchy. The words were blurry, unintelligible, and foreign to him. There were diagrams and strange sigils and pictures he could not comprehend scrawled over the original text. One of them drew his eye. It was a simple design that looked like a wheel with arrows jutting out in all directions or perhaps a star or sun. Something about it looked ominous, sinister. Brendan tilted his head to try and make sense of it then remembered why he was there.

Above the mysterious tome, on the top shelf, as if he could somehow hear it, there was an old wooden frame which displayed a strange necklace. A black brooch made of black silver with a fervent, purple gemstone. It had to be the violet flame, he thought. Brendan was too short to reach it, so he grabbed a nearby step ladder and slid it toward the bookshelf. But before he could take it, he heard a ruckus in the main room. Unfazed, he ripped the necklace off the frame and snuck back into the main room. But something was off. The weird doll was gone, and its chair was rocking back and forth as if the doll came alive and got up.

The air inside suddenly felt hoary, and Brendan froze. The realization had hit him like a hammer. That was no doll, it was the old crone who lived there—It was Beatrix! Brendan's hands began to sweat, and his stomach lurched into this throat. Brendan darted back through the horde as quickly as he could. He was progressively frightened every second he lingered inside and felt like something was always just behind him, ready to reach out and grab hold of him. He had been so shocked that on his way back to the door, he knocked several jars off their edges, and they crashed to the floor and shattered the quiet.

Brendan hastily opened the door and launched himself outside, nearly falling face first into the muddy street. Waiting for him outside were four palace guards and a strange man in a long, black gabardine. He was frail-looking, old with platinum-blond hair, yet he had a remarkably distinguished posture. He held his gaunt features high and looked down his nose at Brendan with potent purple eyes—something he was used to.

Out of breath, Brendan stood in the middle of Iron Square, caught red-handed with the violet flame clutched in his hand.

## Ivory Palace

Brendan nodded off as he sat in the corner of the dungeon. His hands were free, but his ankles were shackled to the floor by a thick, chain. He would have been asleep already had it not been for the smell of raw sewage keeping him awake. The dungeon was directly under the Ivory Spire, way down into the depths of upper Costone's ancient sewage system. It was probably the reason why upper Costone was so clean, he pieced together. Their waste was sent underground with the rodents, lizard, and roaches. It certainly made for quite the effective dungeon because no one who found himself here would ever want to come back. The smell was deterrent alone let alone the taste it left in your mouth.

Footsteps echoed throughout the sewer and Brendan pressed his back to the wall, struggling to his feet. A lone guard fumbled with his keys, swung open the cage, and stepped aside. Brendan watched as the same cloaked man, who was waiting for him outside the apothecary, appear out of darkness and stepped into his cell.

“Who are you?” Brendan asked.

“That...is not important” He replied. He lifted the hood of his cloak and pull it back, revealing himself. It was the man with silver hair, combed tightly and swept back. Brendan recognized his sharp cheekbones, his hawkish nose, his purple eyes, and acute glare.

“You’ve got the brooch back, what—”

“I’ve been watching you for some time.” The man interrupted. His voice was cold, sonorous. He spoke with his hands behind back and didn’t move. “I know not where you came from,” he continued. “But your presence has been...*noted*.”

“What? How long have—”

“*Where* do you come from?” He interrupted again.

“What...the village? I come from the village, I live a cottage just outside—”

“That is a *lie*.” The man’s calm turned savage. “You bare a resemblance, but you are not one of us, are you, boy?”

“What are you talking about? I’m from here. I grew up on the streets in the village. Ask any of the villagers, they’ll know of me.” Brendan did not know what he meant. Did he mean to say that he wasn’t human? Of course, he knew that he wasn’t fully Myrian. The Myrian people had pale skin and Brendan’s has always been tanned. They all had thin greasy hair where his had been kinky and spiraled. But before that, the mistreatment he received had taught him that years ago, but there was something more hidden under the man’s tone as if to say that he wasn’t even a person. And that made Brendan’s blood boil.

The man neared Brendan and took his chin in his cold, papery hands. He pinched Brendan's jaw as firm as a vice and examined him thoroughly, moving his face side to side. He stared harshly into his eyes, looking for something. Brendan's eyes were bright amber, which was also uncommon.

"You have the eyes." The man spoke to himself quietly.

"What?"

"Who were your parents?" The man demanded, "Answer me!"

"They—they were Myrian. My f-father's name was Marcus, he was a mason. And my mother, her name was Kristen. They both died when I was three—"

"Enough!" He spat. He accused Brendan with only his eyes then turned on his heels and left a tad bit ornerier than when he came.

Brendan spent what felt like two days and nights in the dungeon with only a sparsest of water brought to him every half-day. It didn't trouble Brendan that he was caught. It felt like a trap from the onset. Nor did it bother him that this man saw him as an intruder. Hell, most people saw him the same way. No, what struck him most were the questions he was being asked. The man wanted to know where Brendan came from, asked about his parentage. But he had been born in Costone. He's never been anywhere else. And he was starting to think that he never would.

Brendan sat chained in the dark toiling with those questions trying to image a life outside Costone and pondering how he came to the village. For days, he speculated every possible answer, but he kept coming up short. If he wasn't born in Costone, then he must

have move there as an infant. Still, he remembered his parents' faces: pale with blue and brown eyes, straight greasy hair.

The next day, Brendan woke to the sound of clanking. This time, the gaunt figure wasn't with the turnkey, but two royal guards in his stead. These men were different than the regular guard that protected the keep. For one, these guards wore finer armor: black mail with single golden ravens emblazoned on their silk purple surcoats, over leather gambesons. They looked well-trained and highly disciplined; both had a thousand-yard stare that promised complete and total apathy. That promise was fulfilled when they unchained Brendan and escorted him roughly through the fetid sewer and up the long spiral stairs of the spire.

He felt the air of a large door swung open and felt the cool relief of shadow once again upon his eyes before he was let go and pushed forward. When he opened his eyes, he was in front of a sizable crowd of nobles and looking directly at King Richart, himself, sitting on his large baroque throne who looked at him with a slight shocked and curious face.

Brendan forgot himself, and he humbly knelt before the king in all his royal authority. The simple gesture was painful from spending days chained inside the dungeon and he winced as he paid his respects.

King Richart III was younger than he had pictured. He only appeared to be in his twentieth year. He had a smooth, triangular jaw and a thin wispy layer of facial hair growing from his chin. He demeanor wasn't as regal as Brendan thought a king should be, except for his regalia which included a large, silver crown and a fur-lined ermine

cape. The king, although powerful and stringent, seemed to have a kind soul somewhere underneath his stony veneer. As Brendan looked at Richart, his eyes still adjusting from the blinding light, he noticed what could only be described as sympathy behind the King's expression. He hoped whatever may come of this trial, that the king would show mercy.

The crowd of nobles were gasping and murmuring amongst themselves. Their voices grew louder and more raucous until the king finally spoke: "I've been told you were caught stealing a precious heirloom."

"Yes, your grace." Brendan answered.

"You admit to the theft, then?" The king asked, surprised.

"Yes, your majesty. I admit to the theft." A guffaw overtook the room before the king pressed for silence. "But I didn't steal it for myself. I was hired by that nobleman, there." Shock filled the room as Brendan accused the man with the hawkish nose and white hair.

The nobleman calmly walked out of the crowd wearing the fine tailor-made gabardine that gamboled close to the ground as he slinked up to the King's throne to whisper in his ear.

"This is my royal advisor, Bertom Rane." The king sat proud. "His family has served the Richart's and Albrie's for millennia." The look that washed over the king's face was quizzical, nonplussed. Bertom, on the contrary, looked unphased by the allegation. Snickers and laughs soon permeated the palace hall. It all seemed a joke to them.

His fate, this trial all just a funny scene to them. Something to break their boredom. He was entertainment. And he left lower than low.

“Your grace. Might I tell you my side of things?”

The king only nodded and slunk back into his great chair.

“I was approached by a stranger, telling me that his patron desired to meet me in the plaza of the lower gardens. There, a nobleman with a stutter, told me he wanted to hire me for a job. He spoke strangely. Brendan saw that his words were affecting the King’s sensibilities. He continued, “as he spoke to me, it seemed as though he was looking over his shoulder the entire time, as if someone else was watching. So, after I left the nobleman, I waited behind a nearby shoppe to see if my suspicions were right. And I was.” Brendan saw the puzzled looks on the crowd’s faces. “Someone else had been there. He stepped out, half in the shadows, half in the light and stood with his hands behind his back. The nobleman told the man that I had taken the job then the cloaked one spun around and left without muttering a word. The way he walked was unmistakable. Then, not a mere moment after I had taken the brooch from the apothecary, was that man beside you, waiting for me with a whole host of guards. I believe it was a trap, your grace.”

“A trap!?” The king repeated. “Why on earth would Bertom seek to trap you? Who are you to him?”

“I don’t know. But while in the dungeon, he appeared to me again and interrogated me on my origins, about my family.”



Bertom bent the King's ear again. Both were gesturing back and forth, arguing until the king had enough and shooed him away with a gesture of his hand.

“It matters not why or for what reason you were hired. As morally unburdened as you thought you may have been in your crime, it is not at question here. I have been informed that this...*brooch* was the rightful property of madame Beatrix, great aunt of my grandfather.” Brendan just heard confirmation from the King's own mouth that it was a trap, only he didn't seem to listen to what he was saying. “However, you have been found guilty of the crime of thievery.” The king had charged him with the crime anyway. Brendan thought that Bertom must have twisted his ear for whatever malicious reasons he had to dislike him. “Who can speak to your defense?” the King asked. “Who will speak to this boy's character?”

Brendan knew this was merely a display, an act. No one would vouch for him. Every one of them kept woefully silent, airing themselves with their purpled fans.

“If there is no one who would attest to your character then...in the name of the crown for which was bestowed unto me by my father, King Albrei and his king father, and his king father before him, I sentence you—”

“I'll vouch for him!” A voice boomed. Brendan recognized it immediately.

“Good Sir Jorde? Is that you?” The king asked, smiling at the filthy giant of a man. The crowd looked completely gob smacked.

“He is no longer a knight, sire.” A detail Bertom added completely unprompted.

“How do you know this boy, Robern?” The King asked, ignoring his advisor.

“This boy, Brendan, he was Marcus’s child. So, you see, he is my nephew.”

“Could it be? I didn’t know you had family, Sir Jorde.”

“Indeed. My duties to the crown have taken me across your great kingdom and to other lands. I had always served well and was always loyal. But my loyalty came at great cost. My duties prevented me from being there for Brendan as a child.” Rob looked at Brendan with a deep sadness. Brendan met his eyes and saw a bear of a man reduced to tears. “About ten years ago, our skirmish in Reywhich had ended, I came back to Costone to news that Marcus and his wife, Kristen were dead. They told me it had been plague. And worse, there was no sign of young Brendan. I was led to believe that he had died too.”

Brendan began to choke-up as he listened to Rob’s confession. Everyone in the court, including King Richart were hanging on Rob’s every word. “It was only the other day when I recognized him. The last time I had seen him he was just a babe, but I knew it was him.” The King was moved and so was Brendan. He even regretted his earlier dismissal of Rob. Brendan felt ashamed and full of joy and sadness all at once. “Oh, noble King Richart,” Rob continued. “Please release Brendan into my custody so that I can take care of my orphaned nephew. I fear the only reason why he turned to thievery was because he had no other choice. Let me be that other choice. Let him be of use to the crown. I’ll apprentice him at my forge. If it pleases you of course, your grace.”

The king was pleased it seemed. Bertom, the knave that he was tried to bend Richart’s ear again, but the King waved him off again and agreed to Rob’s terms. And just like that, Brendan’s nightmare was over.

The guards removed the gyves and set him free. He turned to the King and bowed once more, thankful for his mercy. Rob, still sobbing, cracked a smile and opened his arms. Brendan so thankful, so ashamed of himself, rushed over to embrace his savior. Both hugged each other fiercely. Fifteen years' worth of hugs in a single moment.

## Hammer & Hand

It had been four years since he was released to his uncle, his forge was just up the road. Brendan made his way there from a long day of choring, fixing up the cottage he used to live in for years. He had learned from Rob that a few of the cottages were burned down to stop the plague that killed his parents. None of the others told him but Rob did. Rob told him everything.

Brendan made it back in time for curfew and snuck around the back unseen where Rob was hammering a freshly heated iron rod on his anvil. The repetitive pounding masked Brendan's nimble footsteps as he crept behind his uncle. He waited for Rob's downswing before grabbing at his ribs. Rob nearly smashed his hand into oblivion.

"Damn it Bren! How many times have I told you not to do that?"

"Sorry, Uncle Rob. You need to be more aware of your surroundings." Brendan laughed.

“Not when I’m hammering, I can’t. Besides, no one could have heard you coming, you fleet-footed sneakthief,” he joked.

Rob was getting fat in his old age. He’d never been fit since Brendan had known him, but he grew about two inches in width with each passing year. Though, he was still just as strong, arguably even stronger.

“I don’t do that sort of work anymore, Uncle. Remember? *You* saved me from that life.”

“Aye, I remember.” Rob placed the salamander into an ice bath. It sizzled and steamed. “Fat lot a good it’s done me, ha!” Rob feigned an attack.

“Are you finished soon? I’d like to practice tonight.” Brendan asked.

“Practice? Is that what you call it? I’d call it more of a thorough ass-handing given how you swing that sword so ineptly.”

“Is that so, Uncle?” Brendan caught on to the joke. “How I see it, it’s more like you’re afraid that a whelp like me almost got you last time. I’m only getting better. One day, I’ll beat you. I think you’re afraid that’ll be today.”

“Oh-ho. Is that right, now? Okay, ‘whelp,’ help me pound this out this last ingot and we’ll see how tough you are.” With large forceps, Rob grabbed a fervent ingot from the forge and placed it on the anvil.

Brendan grabbed a hammer and pounded the glowing rectangle into shape. The synchronistic rhythm of metal on metal put Brendan in a trance. There was nothing but the red-hot steel and blazing sparks erupting from the ingot the harder he struck. Between

Rob's own strikes, he'd come down with all his strength. Brendan hammered the ingot harder each time.

Both beat the steel flat in a matter of few minutes. Done, Rob carried the rod to be quenched. Columns of steam plumed from the cold bath with a violent hiss. Once the chilled rod turned dark grey, Rob nestled it back into the burning coal of his kiln, where it stayed.

“After you, whelp.”

Brendan laughed.

They went behind Rob's armory to a small, fenced-in plot of land where he and his uncle would practice swords. Four years of hard training had permanently worn the ground to a round patch of sand. Brendan went to grab his practice sword. The edge was dulled for safety, and the grip had been replaced several times over. Brendan prepared himself and met Rob outside.

“Are you ready, boy? You look nervous.”

“Just nervous that I'll maim you, Uncle.”

He felt every muscle jolt into action. Brendan launched into a flurry, unleashing a combination of attacks. He felt the breeze on his face and through his hair. The sword was a feather in his hands. Side-stepping stabs, arching cross-slashes, low sweeps, rising cuts, backward thrusts. He felt his body move as if it were possessed, controlled by years of drilling. Lately, combat had been his preferred state. Still, with all his training, Rob parried each blow—but just barely.

“Ho-ho, you’re becoming sharper by the day.” Rob countered with his own attacks: reverse-gripped pommel strikes, circling slices, whirling pivots followed by a few close shaves.

Brendon dodged them all.

“And you’re losing your edge, old man.”

Back and forth, Brendan and Robbern assailed one another with sharp jibes and dull steel. Brendan was sweating profusely and breathing heavily. Rob was much the same. None showed any signs of retiring, however, and they went on for another hour. By the end of their session, both were hunched over, trying to catch their breath.

“I almost...had you...Uncle.” Brendan wheezed.

Rob wheezed harder, red in the face. “Bullocks.” He finally caught his breathe enough to muster.

They jested back and forth during and after every bout. They recovered themselves and filled a couple of metal draughts with ice water and chugged eagerly. Brendan had never been so thirsty.

“You’re improving, Bren. You almost hit me this time.” Even though Brendan joked about nearly getting Rob, yet in all the years of sparring he’d never so much as been able to land a single blow on his uncle.

“I’ll get you one day, I swear it.”

“Make sure to listen to me and perhaps you will—Only I’m afraid that say will only come when I’m five years buried.” He laughed. Brendan tackled him; Rob wrestled him into a loving embrace. Brendan loved Rob like a father. He tried to learn every lesson he could from him. How to be a man, how to forge steel, how to fight, how to survive. But there was still much to learn from him.

The next day, Brendan woke up and prepared for another day of hard work. He put on his clothes and poached an egg to break his fast. Rob was waiting for him in his workshop.

“Morning, uncle.”

“Morning to you, Bren.” Rob turned around suddenly as if spooked. He was doing a poor job of hiding a box behind his back. Brendan saw it almost immediately.

“What’s that, uncle?”

Rob’s face blushed. He was sweating. It was a bit early to be sweating, Brendan thought.

“Happy birthday, Bren.”

*Happy Birthday.* Those words took him by surprise. He had forgotten today was his birthday, his nineteenth in fact.

Rob was hiding a long pine box he had set on the workbench. Brendan went to examine the box. Brendan’s eyes sparkled as he lifted the pine cover away. It was a pristine, newly forged sword! It was beautifully crafted Bastard. Its hilt was wrapped in supple black



leather and longer than normal swords. He wrapped his hand around the hilt and lifted it out of the box.

“It’s heavy.” He said, twirling the blade with both hands, taking it all in.

“And sharp.”

Brendan had never held a sword so heavy. And despite him growing a decent amount of mass over the last couple of years, it was still an adjustment from his usual practice sword which had been a solid piece of oak.

“You’ll need to be careful, Bren.” Rob cautioned. “Also, see the crossguard? I’m no whitesmith, but I etched the engravings myself with wyvern acid. It’s the only thing that can eat through dwarven steel.”

“Dwarven steel!?” He blurted, “how did you get it? I heard the realm had all been pilfered.”

“‘Twas only a scantling, but I shaped it, folded it, spread it out. It’s thin. Razor-sharp but solid dwarven steel. There’s nothing stronger.” He concluded proudly.

Brendan finally noticed the etchings. Indeed, the crossguard had strange runic symbols on it. They looked primal, like they had been scratched into the steel by a ferocious beast; Brendan thought they were beautiful; savage, chaotic and somehow perfectly aligned.

“What do they say?” he asked.

“It’s dwarven. I think it means swift. Or buttocks...probably swift. No, I’m sure of it. It means swift.” Rob smiled.

“Swift.” He repeated the word to himself. “Thank you, Uncle Rob.”

“Your very welcome, son.” It was the first time he ever called him son.

Brendan was so excited; he barely noticed that Rob called him *son*. He took Swift in his hands and was headed to the lower village.

“Don’t forget the scabbard...”

“Oh, right.” He quickly grabbed the scabbard which was wrapped with the same supple leather as the hilt and ran off again.

“And the baldric, you dunce.” Rob chuckled. His fat cheeks puffing as he smiled.

After sheathing Swift carefully in its scabbard and slinging the baldric across his shoulder, Brendan made his way down to the lower bazaar. His short, braided ponytail bobbed back and forth as he scampered down the road past the keep’s portcullis toward the village.

Lower Bazaar

Costone had changed in the four years he had lived with his uncle Rob. Surprisingly, Costone and its rival kingdom, Reywhich, had made peace after generations of conflict. The first peace accord in three-hundred years, according to Rob. It was such an important achievement that the princess was offered to young King Richart in marriage, cementing the relationship between the two independent kingdoms. Lady Elise was as striking as she was enigmatic. She had oracular features: slender, with an innocent face and electric blue eyes that carried wisdom beyond her years.

On the day of her arrival, Brendan remembered being awestruck by her gorgeous, oceanic hair which moved like midnight waves wadding the shore. And when she arrived, she had been escorted by a small army. A personal retinue dressed in fine blue velvet. They were all bearing the wyvern insignia of Reywhich. Her stagecoach was magnificent as well. Its panels were the same dark blue as her convoy and featured silver crouching wyverns. And as an added display of wealth and power, pulling the yokes weren't the normal horses, but instead, to the terror of the noble and villagers, two juvenile wyverns in the flesh. Each about as large as an auroch with shimmering scales that caught and transformed the light in a burst of different colors all of which resembled a starry sky. Brendan had never seen anything so ceremoniously extravagant or majestic his entire life. It was something he wouldn't soon forget. They made the hairs on his arm prick up.

But as he made his way down to the lower bazaar, he was reminded of another one of the changes that came to Costone. Non-humans were no longer permitted in the keep. Dwarves and Rhylanders were prohibited by royal decree, a sudden and unwarranted change, which forced them to conduct all their business down in the village,

in the lower bazaar. An unofficially, that edict seemed to have affected anyone not considered “Myrian.”

One thing that didn’t change was the mud. If there was anything at all in Costone a person could count on, it would always be the mud. Brendan could also count on people looking at him, turning their heads when he’d catch them staring and whispering to one another. It was something he thought he was used too. After all, he had dealt with it for years. But it still hurt all the same, still prodded at his ego, his sense of self-worth.

As Brendan walked the bazaar, he looked at the board which carried missives and jobs, but lately were filled with posters of missing people. Dozens of sketches most of which were older men, but some women and children too. Their family members plastered sketches of their faces, some of which were so bad that they didn’t look human at all. But despite the skill, or the lack thereof, people were pleading for information about their whereabouts. Some two-dozen people had gone missing in the last few months to his estimate, but there was nothing that he could do to help, so he averted his gaze and instead began to eye-shop a few dwarven wares, particularly some rare-earth ore and gemstones for which he always had an unexplained affinity. Banded calcite; rhodium ore; skutterudite, which had a strong, metallic luster; several metallic crystals; and of course, Dwarven ore, which after smelting would be twice as dense as common steel but twice as hard to sinter. Of all the mineral ore, dwarven ore was the most expensive which made Rob’s gift to him a big deal. Brendan slipped a hand behind his back to make sure Swift was still there even though it was unlikely that anyone without a trained eye could tell it was Dwarven steel at all for it looked like an exact match for its common cousin.

Among the usual wares, a few unfamiliar pieces caught his eye including a silvery-grey ore that looked like a frozen lock of hair sitting haphazardly in a pile next to a few dozen rocks which looked like auroras harnessed in rock form; There were others, too, which looked like the sea itself had been glued to it, they shimmered in the light like blue diamonds. There were so many yet unknown minerals in the world that Brendan aspired to discover them all. But there was one thing he came to the lower bazaar for, and he needed to get to it.

Beatrix's decaying apothecary was just down the market, nestled on the edge of Iron Square like a wounded vulture. The last time Brendan saw the place, he had sprung a trap that led him to spend days chained up in a dungeon of sewage. He didn't have fond memories of the place or Beatrix.

Brendan looked on; an unease billowed over him, swelling up to his throat. He couldn't do it. He couldn't go back into that place, he couldn't look at her again, even if it was to tell her that he was sorry. No, today wasn't the day. Brendan backed away like a frightened dog.

"Where are you going, boy," a grating voice announced suddenly.

Brendan turned around to find Beatrix standing behind him. The old woman was shockingly nimble for her age. For Brendan not to have heard her approaching both impressed and disturbed him. It didn't matter who found who first, for there she was.

"Hello, miss Beatrix." Brendan said politely, squeezing the words around the lump in his throat.

“What are you doing skulking about like some filthy street rat? Trying to burgle me, again?”

“Uh...no, miss Beatrix. I just—”

“I know what you *just*,” she clicked. Beatrix wasn’t only the oldest person he’d ever seen, but the most vexatious as well. She smelled terrible and she had an annoying habit of clicking her tongue when she spoke as if she were always looking for a stray cat. “Follow me.” she said. And Brendan followed, dreading to step inside that place.

A powerful musk wafted toward his nose as she opened the door, molesting his senses. What could only be described as an invisible wall of conflicting aromas both fruity and spicy mixed with burnt earth and alcohol. It was difficult for Brendan to remain composed. Beatrix guided him to the room in the back of her house that Brendan had once stolen the violet flame necklace. The main room still acted as storage for various animal parts, powders, and salves. The film of dust lay undisturbed and looked to have grown thicker.

“Run!” she suggested as soon as she passed the threshold into her study.

“Didn’t you just invite me in?”

“You promised,” she clicked. Her dry, crackling voice lit aflame like dead leaves.

Brendan felt his unease churn in his gut, boiling and growing into something else. “I don’t understand,” he said.

Brendan had always been under the impression that Beatrix was a little boorish, but forthright, always speaking honestly, though often in a manner that wasn’t

immediately understood. She habitually spoke in riddles, but this wasn't that. Her meaning was plain: leave Costone.

"You are mired by death," she clicked. "I've seen it in the flocks, the entrails, and ink; I've heard it in the bones, the fire, and the oak. Death! Nothing but death!"

Beatrix was starting to anger him. Where was this coming from, he thought. He'd always had a suspicion that she wouldn't accept his apology, but she didn't seem to be interested. She hated him. Just like the others only she wasn't scared to confess it. Brendan didn't think this was still about the necklace he attempted to steal four years ago. No, she said she sees death around him—But whose?

"Leave, boy. Take a sack of clothes and flee. If you must run forever, so be it. Run, but don't look back. You must never come back!" Beatrix spoke her last words in such a fervor, she waved her hands about like a woman shooing bats from her hair, kicking him out of her home as if to fend an evil spirit from haunting her.

"What in the hell was that all about?" Brendan asked himself. Had it been just recompense for his larceny years ago or had she gone completely insane? Everyone believed she was a witch. Maybe it was true. Even though her words echoed in his mind and caused him to put a malison on the pythoness, Brendan decided not to give her words any credence and shoved the thought way down in his mind.

Since it was close, Brendan decided to visit his old cottage. As he walked, he thought about his most recent lesson from his swordplay with Rob. Aside from the usual timing and distance when fighting, Rob taught him about deception and caution. Rob had told him during their sparring that fighting fair was a quick way to get yourself killed.



And that caution—not timidity—was necessary. *“You should never underestimate your opponent,”* he would say. Brendan was working on a sure-fire strategy to deceive Rob for their next match, by hiding his swings under the mask of impatience. He knew what Rob would think. Surely, Rob would fall for it, he thought. And just when Rob was underestimating his fury, he would take the upper hand and force Rob to withdraw.

Brendan wove back through the crowds, shuffling sidewise, awkwardly brushing past clusters of traders and patrons until he made it past. Back on the path, he replayed Rob’s words as he continued. *“For those who strikes at you from above, threaten them with the point; Learn the five strokes from the right side against your opponent: Wrath stroke, crooked, thwart, squinter, and scalper.”* Brendan could see Rob in front of him as clear as day, replaying all their lessons in his mind. *“Fight with your entire body and listen to what is wrong; Strike fast and follow through, rush to, let it hit, or go by; When you are parried, tear away and strike quickly with surprise; In truth, no one can defend himself without danger.”*

Suddenly, he found himself at the edge of the village. He could see his former cottage, new wooden slates on the roof but during his trance hadn’t noticed how far he had walked and was relieved that it took no time at all.

A few miles beyond he spotted the vast, forested grove everyone called the Painted Woods. It was ancient and thought magical. It was also forbidden for anyone to trek. Uncle Rob told him once that it was believed the veil between our physical world and the ætherial plane was razor thin and that all living things residing in the forest absorbed the raw æther, resulting in a “painting” of magical energy. Brendan didn’t believe a word of it. He wasn’t

so credulous as his uncle. The Aether was magic, and magic didn't exist. The only things in this world that were real were things that Brendan could see with his eyes, hear with ears, feel with his skin.

But looking at the woods now, he saw the vibrant glow. The glittering radiance of blues and purples; reds dancing over the blanket mist of morning made him feel ill at ease. But almost as quickly as he saw them, they were replaced by worsening weather. The sky thickened as dark clouds oozed overhead. The aurora had been completely subdued. Several passersby noticed the sudden change shortly after Brendan. Soon, everyone was looked to the sky in disbelief as if some omen had made itself known. Something was odd about this sudden change. Some anticipated a squall and began to rush home to pack away their precious bought goods.

Brendan was just a few feet from his old cottage doors when he noticed movement in the nearby trees. He couldn't tell what it was very well, he could only make out a few details: Whatever it was, they were skulking, trying not to be heard. Then more details emerged as he stared. Whatever they were, they were numerous as their eyes reflected the light like other nocturnal creatures. Then, he noticed that they had been wearing armor.

A solitary, protracted blast from one of the nearby mounted guards heralded a grave, imminent threat. The guard blew his horn, he turned his horse around, and in a full gallop, raced up the hill toward the keep shouting as loudly as he could. "Gnolls!" It was a single, blood-thickening word.

Everyone shot into panic. Brendan, thinking of his uncle, sprinted through the hoof tracks of the guard back to the Hammer & Hand, mud squelching and flying with each lunge.

Pandemonium erupted in the village. People left and right fought their way through the packed crowds, mothers and fathers were sweeping their children up and racing inside their homes and toward the keep. Under the portcullis, dozens of dwarves and Rhylanders tried fighting their way inside only to be shoved out and attacked. The chaos heightened as the guards turned on everyone at the gates and ordered the portcullis to be lowered and the interior gates barred. Only a dozen lucky few were able to slip inside before the guards closed the gates for good, denying sanctuary to Brendan and the other frantic villagers.

Before long, the gnolls were upon them. Not a single guard was left on their side of the wall. There would be no protection. Brendan and the others were on their own.

Brendan had heard of gnolls but had never seen one. In fact, it was said you were more likely to get struck by lightning than to run into one of those beasts. They looked like dogs but walked like men. They rushed through the muddy streets and ransacked the food stalls first. It didn't take long for the first wave of gnolls to devour and destroy everything at the bazaar. Soon, there was no food left, so the monsters turned to anything they could sink their teeth into.

It was easy to mistake them for wild animals, but Gnolls weren't completely mindless. Although they looked savage, they wore crude armor made from metal shards and armor scraps from fallen soldiers latched together with horsehair or leather string. Some of them even carried weapons with long rusted nails hammered into them. The gnolls

communicated with each other with snaps and growls and inarticulate barks. They weren't mindless.

Brendan and Rob had a plan for emergencies like this, only he had imagined he would have been fleeing from invading human forces. Silently, he made his way to the sewer grate that ran beneath the hill toward the prison held underground to a hidden room only he and Rob knew about. On his way, he witnessed several people killed by gnolls. It wasn't a pretty sight. The screams alone made his stomach uneasy. As fewer and fewer people ran in the streets, the gnolls teamed up, corralling their victims into ambush. Some gnolls climbed through windows and shattered doors to get to their prey. Brendan spotted a young girl, no more than five years old, trying to find her mother. He couldn't make her out at first, but eventually recognized her as, Edi, the little blond girl whom he had known and made funny faces with. He wanted to whisk her to safety, but her cries had attracted the attention the gnolls. Brendan counted four of them and knew that he couldn't survive those odds. Still, he clenched the hilt of his sword as he fought against his frozen limbs. But he couldn't move. He desperately wanted to help, but the words kept repeating in his mind "*caution.*"

Brendan held his breath as he watched the gnolls playing with their dinner. They nipped at Edi's heels as she ran down the road, hopelessly screaming for her mother. He couldn't watch anymore. Soon, their chase ended and so did her screaming. Brendan felt his heart plummet and his breakfast climbing. Whatever shred of hope for the kindness of humanity he had left had died with Edi.

He was approaching ever closer to the sewer entrance when a large group of gnolls marched past him. They were dragging people in the mud, bloodied and limp. Taking the lead was a particularly vicious looking gnoll. It walked upright, like the other gnolls, but it was a head taller than the others, standing no less than six feet. His razor-sharp armor was too big for it and looked more cumbersome than what was practical. It also wore a deep scar that dug diagonally across his muzzle, from lip to eye.

Brendan matched their pace, following their path, making sure to keep them in his sights. He watched as they took lit torches and threw them into occupied homes. What the hell were they doing, he thought? Were they not searching for food? Why would they burn down our homes? Gnolls were scavengers. They raided for food, but now they were maliciously setting fires. The fire was so ravenous, that not even the sudden downpour could extinguish its flames.

Brendan was crossing through a neighbor's trampled garden when he saw a gnoll attempting to climb through a window. It was having trouble because of the rain, but also because it was small and emaciated. He was sneaking past it when suddenly it fell, splashing in the mud below with a smack. Brendan slowly and silently unsheathed his sword as the starving creature recovered from its fall. As Brendan expected, the gnoll turned and was made aware of his presence. The thing looked nearly starved. The gnoll had been a runt and wore no armor. He could see its ribs jutting from his rusty spotted fur. The gnoll didn't move a muscle, only stared at Brendan, sizing him up. It was wary of Brendan because he had been armed.

The snarl of the creature was intimidating despite its lanky stature. Though it was starving and weak, it still possessed fearsome claws and a set of gnarly fangs. One false move and Brendan would be mauled to death. Caution was paramount.

“Okay...” he breathed, “what are you going to do?”

The gnoll slowly circled him, Brendan’s sword kept it at a semi-comfortable distance. He waited for it to make the first move. As he expected, a quick pounce and an empty slash. The gnoll was desperate. Brendan circled opposite, keeping the gnoll at swords-length. The gnoll was favoring his leg from when it fell, and its limp was obvious in its gait. Brendan stopped and tightened his grip, relaxing his arms and slightly lowering his sword. The gnoll took the bait, confusing Brendan’s stance for weakness and leapt boldly at him. With a quick side-step and turn, he dodged the creature’s blow. For a moment, he swore it had nicked him, but when he looked down, there was only torn linen and no blood. A deep cut there would have ended the fight quickly. “*Caution,*” he kept repeating Rob’s words to himself. “*Don’t underestimate your opponent,*” he thought again and again, encircling the gnoll, keeping it at bay.

After its near miss, the creature’s desperation slid off a cliff into a rabid furor. Its forearms shook from the adrenaline pumping through its malnourished veins and it dove for Brendan once more. Again, Brendan was able to dodge. He ducked and spun underneath the beast’s swinging claws in one fluid motion and yanked Swift down in a powerful arc, cleaving deep into the gnoll’s shoulder and nearly cut the creature in half, but the blade lodged itself in the gnoll’s hip bone.

Brendan was astonished. Not only because he'd killed the creature, but it stunned him that his blade was so sharp. This was the first time Brendan was in a real fight. The first time he had swung a real sword. It was also the first time he'd ever killed a living creature and admittedly felt bad for it. It was starving and was trying to survive. He had known that feeling all too well. Had he been less skilled in thieving as a youth, would he have become like this beast? He thought. It was either him or the monster. Killing it was not something he relished, but something that had become inevitable. He knew that and tried not to dwell.

Brendan was more careful navigating the village alleyways and streets, making sure to look up every now and then to avoid any more surprises. He couldn't tell if it was the rain or Swift, but his limbs were getting heavier by the second.

## Smuggler's Passage

Once he spotted the sewer, he sprinted for the grate. Carefully, he made his way through the tunnel until he reached a small room Rob had built inside the tunnel which was normally covered with a piece of wood painted to look like part of the wall, but it had been lying on the ground in splinters. He scanned the den with Swift at the ready, but he couldn't keep his eyes focused. Adrenaline was making it harder to see the farther he stepped in. His vision blurred as he stumbled onto the carnage awaiting him in the center of the floor. There was a blood-soaked body, lying with their clothes ripped to shreds. Everything was dark red. The body was unrecognizable and torn to pieces. Brendan felt a sharp pain in his heart, and he slumped to his knees. His world crashed around him, burying him under the weight of total darkness. It couldn't be real. Rob couldn't have been killed by something as unskilled and savage as a gnoll.

Brendan soared into a rampage. He wailed at the top of his lungs before demolishing the room top to bottom: he flipped furniture he and Rob built together,



shattered clay vases they had molded, and ripped shelves from their walls. Nothing was sacred to him on his warpath. Brendan, in his blind rage, even tore all his uncle's books in half. His anger, though powerful, quickly subsided as hundreds of pages spiraled across the room. As the paper settled, one of them caught his eye. It was a page with a skeletal figure in black cowering from a paladin; the one that read *The Legend of Adelbrand and Drægan*. It had been one of the fairy tales Rob had given him on his birthday after he had begun to live with him.

Brendan knelt beside the body, regretting all the choices he had ever made. He began to regret being spared by Rob. If he hadn't been saved by his uncle, he wouldn't have needed to meet him at the safehouse. He would be safe behind the keep's thick walls. Brendan was reminded of the witch Beatrix and her parting words. "*You are mired by death.*" It was true what Beatrix said to him. His parents died when he was a small boy and now his uncle. Death was all around him. Brendan's heart plunged to a new nadir. He felt completely numb. And for the first time in his life, he wished he was dead.

Just outside, a pair of scavenging gnolls were searching for scraps when they heard Brendan's anguish. Together, they picked up the scent of stale blood inside. Both gnolls, without hesitation, crept inside the house. Brendan, so filled with grief, was oblivious to the stalkers. One of them took its chance and pounced on Brendan, pushing him out of his lethargy. As he braced against the snapping of the beast's jaws, its slaver dripped on his face. Its breath was foul.

Only seconds ago, Brendan felt that he wanted to die, but something inside him was fighting back. He could have easily let go and the nightmare would be over. All there would

be is black. Silent, peaceful blackness. Suddenly, he felt a warm spatter on his face and the gnoll felt several pounds lighter. At first, he thought he had been dead for there was no more struggle. The only thing that brought him out of it was the taste of warm blood on his tongue. He opened his eyes and saw a heavily armored knight that looked like Rob.

“Rob?” He thought he was imagining him.

“Get up, Bren. Let’s go!” It *was* him. Though, he looked different. Several years younger even. And the armor he was wearing—Spectacular, gilded armor. Black steel with gold trim from waist to face. He wore a magnificent black velvet surcoat trimmed and bordered with gold over a chain mail hauberk. In its center, was a flaming red phoenix encircled by a black ring of thorns. He stood over Brendan larger than life itself. His uncle was everything he wasn’t, he was noble, solemn, valiant.

Rob extended his hand to Brendan and hoisted him to his feet. He gave Brendan another moment to snap out of it, but Brendan couldn’t see anything past Rob’s armor. Who was this fraud wearing Rob’s face, exquisite faultless and gorgeous vambraces? There was a padded gambeson cinched underneath his hauberk. It appeared too small, but magnificently inlaid with the blazing phoenix. His head, too, was covered by a metal coif, which pushed the fat of his face prominently to the front. Rob’s weight seemed to have kept him from donning his entire bulwark for he was missing spaulders and a gorget. Nor was he wearing any tassets or greaves. Nevertheless, Brendan basked in Rob’s knightly presence.

“What’s this?” Brendan asked as Rob handed him a shield.

“What’s it look like?” He said, Brendan took the shield. It was heavy and made from oak from what he could tell. Rob had his own. “Good, you’ve still got your sword. Some kings would muster a fyrd to claim such a prize. Never lose it, Bren.” Rob added.

Brendan nodded his head. He understood. Swift was an extension of his body; an added limb and he should take care of it as such. But there was so much running through his head right now that he couldn’t process what was happening. He couldn’t move.

“Listen,” Rob said, placing his hand firmly on Brendan’s shoulder. Emotions swelled inside Brendan from the touch.

“I thought you were dead...you were dead—” Brendan said shakily, holding back the tears.

“It’s me. I’m here. You must get through this but get through it quickly. They’ll be more of those monsters swarming us at any moment.” Rob lifted Brendan’s chin so he could see his face. Rob seemed to have known what Brendan had just went through.

“I’m sorry about what you’ve just been through, but we need to flee as fast as we can. If we hurry, we might escape notice.” Rob warned.

## Bronze Road

The air was filled with the harrowing scents of cinder. Several fires rages and cracked, sending black smoke high into the air. The insatiable blaze fed hungrily on the village. The old wood was appetizer for the flames. The rain still poured from a blackened sky, but the fire wasn't done eating. Brendan stepped out behind Rob into the mud and rain. His muscles seized from the brisk, biting rain. Rob didn't explain himself before making off to a nearby alley. Brendan hurried to catch up.

“Rob, why Arshill? Why not Reywich or Seabury near the coast?” he asked.

“What's in Arshill?”

“It's on the way and it's not *what*...it's *who*.” He said, his head on a swivel, looking for sign of gnolls. “His name is Seth. He's the inn-master at a place called The Tranquil Raven. He and I knew each other during the campaigns against Reywich. He'll know something, a reason for all this madness.”

*The Tranquil Raven? Seth?* His thoughts immediately circling Rob's words.

Brendan never knew about this innkeeper. What would Set know about this attack? If he knew, then why hadn't he prevented it.

"Did he know my parents?"

"Aye."

And did he know that Brendan had survived? First Rob, now an inn-keep near Arshill? Who else knew of his existence and didn't try to find him? There were too many secrets kept from him, too many people that could have checked up on him. All of which were too much for him now. He started to think about his father. Had he a secret life? Was his father even a mason as he had thought? Or was he a soldier like Rob? Brendan wondered how much of his life had been kept secret.

"What about mom?" He asked, "How'd they meet?"

"What's that now?" Rob looked like a man possessed. Brendan could tell that he didn't hear the question. Rob was more focused than Brendan had ever seen, more than when Rob was late filling an order for the men-at-arms, even more than when they sparred together. That's because this wasn't hammering steel nor was it training, it wasn't sparring, Brendan knew—this was the real deal.

Brendan followed Rob, chasing after his long strides and crouching behind him when he stopped. He noticed Rob's shield, a heater made from the same black metal adorned with the same blazing phoenix and thorns. Brendan had burning questions for his uncle.

“Uncle, that sigil...are the stories about the vigil true? Does it really exist?”

Rob turned to face Brendan. He could tell his uncle was thinking it over. Rob’s silence confirmed his suspicions before he spoke the words.

“I’ve never lied to you, Brendan. Never. Believe me when I tell you that this isn’t the time.”

Rob’s non-answer was enough for Brendan. The vigil must be real, he thought. Those five words rattled through his mind and sent chills down Brendan’s spine. He had so many questions he needed to ask. So many of his uncle’s stories he shrugged off as myth when those fantasies may in fact be history. Stories of Adlebrand, the Phoenix, and his posthumous phoenix vanguard seemed to be blurring with reality.

“Are you a...vanguard?” Brendan couldn’t help but ask, “The phoenix—”

“—Silence, Brendan.” Rob’s voice seemed burdened more than usual. “Hush now. No more questions until we are out of this mess. Come.” Rob ended Brendan’s chain of inquiries and darted across Iron Alley, dashed through Lover’s Avenue, and sprinted over Robber’s Road. Rob was having trouble catching his breath, but he kept persisting, stopping only to hide from the odd band of marauding gnolls.

As they made their way northeast, Brendan knew Rob meant to take Carrion’s March toward Arshill. Brendan knew “Carrion’s March” wasn’t its official name, but everyone called it that on a count of the civil war fought between Arshill and Costone more than a century ago. Both armies met on the highway and killed each other in droves. They said that there were so many dead, that they couldn’t remove them all before the

buzzards picked their bones clean. Carrion's March wasn't the only way to Arshill, but it was the most direct. It was smart. And he had no reason not to trust Rob—at least in matters of survival.

Brendan could see the road just up ahead and there were no gnolls obstructing their path. They were almost out. Rob knew this too and made his way out into the street. There was a stable just on the other side of the street, but there were no horses. As they approached it, Brendan heard the rain pelting the thatched roof, which masked the buzz of flies feeding on the horses' remains.

“Damn it!” Rob snarled. “They killed the damn palfrey.”

“How are we going to get to Arshill, it's at least a day's ride from here.”

Rob wandered from the stable and weighed his choices carefully. He looked down the road to Carrion's March, he looked up toward the clouds, before looking back toward Brendan and the burning village of Costone.

“Mhm...No. We go by foot.” He decided. Rob didn't look all too sure to Brendan despite the fire reflecting in his eyes. His fat, flushed face betrayed his tone. And the luster of Rob's armor seemed to have dulled; he was back to the Rob he knew.

Brendan was still kneeling near the stable when Rob's body shifted. Something had caught his attention. He slid his left foot forward and bent his knees, preparing for a fight as he raised his long sword. Brendan recognized this stance immediately and searched for Swift hugging close to his back. But Rob held his hand out toward Brendan, which meant *don't move*.

Rob turned to Brendan, “Promise me that’ll you’ll head my every command.”

“Uncle Rob?” Brendan’s throat felt tangled.

“Promise me, you do as I say. To the letter.”

“I—I promise.” He repeated reluctantly.

He took his shield from his back and tossed it to the ground with splat. He pointed to it and commanded him to take it. Brendan slowly crawled toward the shield which put him at the edge of the stable. He grabbed the shield as he was told. He desperately wanted to know what made Rob so nervous, so he peeked around the stable and looked. There, just a few yards down the street in the village, five gnolls searching for scraps. One of which quickly smelled Rob. His scent also caught the others’ attention and they sprinted wildly toward them both.

“Uncle Rob. No! Let me help.” He whispered. But Rob just shook his head.

“Please. Don’t fight them. Let’s just run for it.”

Rob shook his head, his answer was an emphatic “no.” Then, he walked out onto the street, waiting for the gnolls by himself.

Brendan didn’t know what to do. It was Edi all over again. His heart told him to jump out and stand with his uncle, but his mind detained his body, locked him up, and threw away the key.

Brendan watched on through the small slats between the wood of the stable. The gnolls bounded. They looked meaner than anything he’d ever seen. Half a yard away from Rob, they stopped. They tried to surround Rob, but he sliced at empty air as a



warning not to try it. They flaunted their fangs, snarling and snapping. Rob's demeanor, however, was unchanged: stoic, focused.

One of the gnoll's wore a pair of ragged vambraces. On each, three jagged claw blades protruded, extending the creature's natural reach by a several inches. The gnoll barked and gurgled, giving commands to the rest. Three of them lunged at Rob simultaneously while the other flanked him. It was easy enough for them to circle Rob, but it would prove harder to land a strike. Each time of them swiped Rob would throw them off balance using his sword to turn their momentum against them. None of them stood a chance.

For a while, the gnolls tried to get past Rob's defenses but to no avail. Eventually, they would tire and that's when Rob would finish them off. Problem was, they weren't tiring, Rob was. Rob deflected what must have been a hundred attacks. Rob fought against five enemies at once, but when fatigue set in, he gained a sixth. Every third or fourth strike, one of the gnolls managed to get past his sword and scratch his gambeson. Their strikes weren't meant to maim or kill, but to test. The gnolls were learning his pattern, timing through his parries. They were growing confidence, making bolder attempts. They even began to giggle when Rob would miss them. They mocked him with loud, high-pitched laughter. Brendan couldn't stand it any longer. He searched for something in the stable to throw and found a spare horseshoe. Against Rob's command, he left the cover of the stable and hurled the iron shoe, falling short by several feet. The clanging of the horseshoe attracted the attention of one of the gnolls. Brendan's eyes met with the beast's, they were too far to see, but he already knew what they looked like. They were edacious, consuming eyes. Now, he had a gnoll coming for *him*. However,

Rob took notice and managed to break away from the others. In a brutal flurry, Rob swung his blade and bisected the gnoll from its hips. Rob cleaved the beast in half with such force that both halves lifted off the ground. What was left of its insides after its two halves plopped to the ground spilled out, steam rising from the warm innards. Brendan went back behind the stable to retch.

Rob managed to save him from his own stupidity. As Brendan watched on, safely behind the wooden slats, none of the gnolls attempted to break away in search of him. However, when Rob halved that gnoll, the pack took advantage. They quickly swarmed him. All Rob could do was thrash about; there were too many to fight off. Each of them took turns swiping at Rob's unarmored legs, eventually cutting through the padded armor. Rob grimaced and muffled his screams like a seasoned warrior.

Brendan's eyes widened as he looked on helplessly.

He knew that because of his impetuosity, Rob's defense had been broken. The gnolls delivered a half dozen slashes to Rob's legs and he went down hard. The gnolls crouched on all fours and circled him like buzzards. The one with the jagged claw blades nipped at Rob's face. Brendan had trouble watching the scene. Rob flailed his sword at the creature, but in vain. The movement was too much after being mauled and all he could do now was wince in pain. Once it made its way behind him, it jabbed its claws into Rob's back. Rob let out a scream that echoed throughout the entire village and made Brendan's heart lurch inside his chest.

"No!" Brendan shrieked. He lifted Rob's shield and ran out onto the street. The gnolls shifted their gaze to him. He reached behind his shoulder and gripped the hilt of

his sword. All four of the gnolls strutted toward him, smirking and giggling all the while as if it were sport. Brendan stood unphased, stoic like his uncle. He already thought that the monster had taken Rob's life once and that feeling was unbearable, he wasn't about to lose him again, not if he could do something about it.

“Bren!” He heard Rob's weakened voice. “Run!”

“I'm not going to let them take you, Uncle!”

“You promised.” The words shattered Brendan's resolve. Those were the same words echoed by Beatrix. Was this what she saw in her visions? Was this the death she spoke of? Brendan's epiphany consumed him. His head hung down and he released his grip on Swift. The gnolls charged, seeing this as the opportunity to strike.

One of the gnolls leaped at Brendan. At the last available moment, Brendan lifted the shield and unsheathed Swift in one fluid motion. Brendan's focus became indomitable. The first gnoll's maw met the rim of the heater's edge, smashing its teeth and sending it careening toward the mud. The second Gnoll met the tip of Swift, the end of the blade puncturing the creature's throat just above the clavicle. It slumped to the ground, deflated. The third was smart and kept itself back. Brendan wasn't helpless prey as it had thought. Brendan brought Swift up, resting its blade on his shoulder. He shifted his stance and kept his shield high and facing his enemy. Behind him, the gnoll with the shattered fangs cowered away with its tail between its legs and howled a sound so atrocious, that Brendan was forced to silence it. Now alone, the remaining beast fled toward the village, beyond the fire until a large pack emerged from the flames.

Brendan couldn't tell how many there were, only that the searing wall of orange in the background was cut in half by a mass of black. A grotesque creature stood proudly at its front. Brendan had recognized it as the pack leader. The one whose armor looked two sizes too big for it; the one with the scar he saw earlier. The leader of the pack lifted his weapon into the air and barked so loud that it made Brendan jump. Instantly, the mass of black rumbled and ran, thundering the ground underneath.

"Brendan..." A weak voice said. It was Rob's.

Brendan ran to his uncle and fell to his knees, dropping his sword and his shield in the mud beside him.

"...you promised." Rob choked, his eyes swollen and heavy.

"No!" Even when Brendan tried to do the right thing, he couldn't. "I can't leave you." He told him.

He and his uncle were almost out of Costone. Why is Rob giving up? Why was the universe punishing him for trying to be a hero? Maybe he was cursed after all. All the guilt and helplessness, the sorrow and anguish swelled within him before erupting in an all-consuming rage, a rage he was forced to bottle up and swallow. Brendan embraced his uncle for the last time. "I love you uncle." Were his last words to a man who had saved his life. Brendan made good on his promise; He sheathed his sword, grabbed Rob's shield, and he ran. Brendan left Costone and he didn't—couldn't look back. Drenched in blood, tears, and rain, he ran with only the image of his dying uncle and his last words for company.

Brendan did not slow his pace even for a moment. Even as his eyes began to itch and his limbs grew heavier by the mile, he ran and ran until he couldn't feel anymore. Though he was encumbered, saturated with regret, anger, loss, he could no longer feel the pounding aches in his legs, the burning in chest, or the throbbing in his skull. He ran until nightfall and then he ran some more; North-bound then East, following Carrion's March toward Arshill and The Tranquil Raven. The inn where he'd find Seth, and more pain.

Five miles multiplied to ten, then fifteen. Carrion's March was no meager trip even on horseback. Though Brendan's fortitude was unshakable, his legs proved far weaker and gave out hurtling himself toward the ground. His body was exhausted. He tried to move, but his limbs no longer cared what he wanted. Unable to move, he lied there on the highway, waiting for the buzzards to pick his bones clean. Over and over again, on a loop, Rob's last words echoed in his mind. "*You promised*" the words began to lose meaning as they deconstructed from repetition. *Prah-missed*, the word suddenly felt foreign as he tried to put his thoughts together only to slip out of consciousness seconds later.

## The Mirelands

### Stone Arbor Sanctum

Brendan was in a quiet place, completely devoid of sound. In this place, the horizon seemed infinite. He found himself standing in a shallow pool of water that extended onward indefinitely. As he looked around, dumbfounded, he spotted a tower in the distance atop a large hill. Behind it, was the bloody glow of the sun it had eclipsed. The morbid light highlighted the rotting clouds swirling above. The sky was bruised and beaten like raw meat. As he moved closer, the glare of the sun intensified, forcing him to shield his eyes before eventually shutting them completely.

A sudden rush forced him to open his eyes again, but the tower and bleeding heavens were gone. In its place, stood a single palace and at its peak was a large shining gem, reflecting a pure white light. The never-ending pool around him had suddenly, without warning, turned into a boundless dune of sand. As he kept walking, his feet sunk further in the silt. As he struggled, four pairs of arms emerged. Each one grabbed a limb

and pulled him down. Sinking and sinking, a silhouetted figure appeared and stood before him. A wash of serenity overwhelmed him moments before he was completely submerged. *“Come back to us.”* It spoke. *“Come back to us.”* The timbre of its voice was light a cool breeze which calmed him as he sunk beneath the ocean of sand until there was nothing left but darkness.

“Come back to us,” a different voice spoke, “come back to us.” Brendan woke from a series of gentle shakes. Then extreme nausea thought it polite to greet him. He was suddenly in a strange place with an even stranger person nursing a throbbing pain radiating from his head and a sharp burning sensation from his gut.

“What happened? Where am I?” He said, pained. Brendan looked down and saw his abdomen dressed in bandages. He looked around the room and to the stranger standing next to him. The room was dark, barely lit with only a few sconces. Its walls were made of a smooth, grey stone and the doorways were tall and narrowly arched. There were no doors nor windows. It looked like a dungeon: old, somber, and indomitable.

The stranger looked worried. She also looked kind. She had a cute, symmetrical face with a small chin, rounded jawline, and full lips that formed attractive dimples in her cheeks. Her nose was small and buttoned and tapered smoothly toward her dark brows, long lashed, and soft violet eyes like lavender. She was wearing a religious habit, both conservative in function and appearance including a dark hide scapular with various pockets draped over a white frock. The only skin that was visible was of her hands and face, the latter marked with two blue tapered streaks under each eye. Brendan saw that her hair had all been tucked away, hidden by her wimple, but judging by fairness of her

eyebrows, Brendan pictured bright auburn hair the color of the early autumn leaves back in Costone.

Looking around the room, he spotted a hexagram with an eye at its center hanging above a small altar of candles and flowers. Brendan knew that he must have been with the Niserian apostles, worshippers of the Myrian Goddess, though he knew that the girl wasn't just an ordinary worshipper. This comforted him some. While Brendan didn't find solace in gods or religion, so long as he was in the pacifists' care, he should be safe. Brendan remembered something Rob used to say that if one happens to need aid or medicine on the field of battle, one could do worse than a Niserian nurse—especially one so...gentle, Brendan added in thought, swimming through the nurse's purple eyes as she leaned over him touching the jade medallion around his neck

“What's this?” Her voice was flouncy and gentle as a breeze. And despite a room filled with tinctures and medicinal salves, she smelled like a garden in spring.

“Just a charm.” he answered.

“It is someone you know?” Her curiosity made him blush.

Brendan pressed the medallion close to his chest, his hand over hers. He felt her soft skin for a fleeting second before she let go, flustered and embarrassed.

Brendan went to sit up before the nurse advised against it. “Easy. Don't move so suddenly, you'll undo your bonding.”

“What happened to me?”



“One of our brothers found you lying in a ditch off the highway as he was making deliveries. He brought you here.” She told him, shyly.

“Where *is* here?” He asked.

“Stone Arbor Sanctum just south of the Tinderwood. You were drenched and shivering fiercely. You were suffering from a severe fever, and we nearly lost you to it. I quickly discovered a nasty gash just below your navel, it was infected. So, I treated it with some carbolic acid and stitched you up. You only just now woke.” Her words flowed like the playful wisps of music that played around in your head after hearing it the day before. Their syllables unfurled unburdened and unstressed. Her accent, though almost completely gone, helped Brendan peg her origin from somewhere North or North-West, perhaps Reywhich or Redale.

“How long have I been here?” He asked her.

“Do you not remember what happened?” A concerned inflection chased her words.

“I got careless.” Brendan did remember, but he didn’t want to talk about it. It was probably that gnoll, the starving one he had killed. It must have been. It ripped his tunic only he didn’t bleed right away. “How long?” he repeated his question.

“Oh...um, two days.” She said distractedly. He felt as though she was thoroughly examining him with her eyes, he could almost feel them skimming. She cleared her throat and handed him some freshly laundered clothes: a new set of dark trousers, a light blue woolen tunic, linen undergarments, even a new pair of leather shoes and a belt. Brendan thanked her then noticed that his sword was missing.

“Where are my things...my weapon?” he panicked.

“When they brought you to me, you didn’t have anything.”

“Who brought me? Where can I find them?”

“You must rest.” He gently placed her hand to his chest to lie him back onto the table.

“I’ve rested long enough. I need to be elsewhere, and I need my things.” He suddenly remembered his mission to find Seth, his thoughts quickly returned to Costone, his uncle, and the look on his dying face flashing in his mind.

Her hand was delicate, yet firm. He removed her hand and sloughed off the table. Brendan felt a sharp pull at his abdomen where the wound had been and doubled over in pain.

“Where do you need to be in such haste?”

“The Tranquil Raven.”

The girl looked at him quizzically, “Why the Raven, if you don’t mind me asking?” Her tone became more subdued.

Brendan kept silent. He didn’t know if he should trust her, though she had the very look of someone trustworthy, so he spilled.

“There’s a man I need to meet with,” he said, “someone my uncle knows—knew.” His voice hung that last word.

“Knew?” she asked, “has something happened to him?”

Brendan’s gaze shifted down as he took a deep breath, the memories were still fresh, still too painful, yet he felt compelled to tell her. “There was an attack on Costone.”

“An attack? Who would attack Costone?” she asked.

“Not who, *what*,” he said, “gnolls.”

The look a sudden horror washed over her face. She had been gob smacked by the news.

“They ransacked the village,” he continued, staring blankly somewhere into a distance, “the monsters came and tore through the villagers. They slaughtered everyone in their sight, men, women, and...*children*.” Just saying the word brought back the little girl’s terrified, crying face to his mind. His shoulders hunched and his cheeks burned.

“Goddess.” She exasperated.

Brendan couldn’t meet her eyes, his shame made him tremor just thinking about the decision to let the girl die, a decision that made him hate himself even more when recalling the events of that night.

“What about the guards?” she asked.

“They were cowards,” he spat, “they ran inside the keep and lowered the portcullis. We were trapped with nowhere to go, nobody to fight off the gnolls.”

“How awful,” she sympathized. “How did you make it out?”

“I wouldn’t have had it not been for my uncle.” He shook his head, trying to deny reality. “He always had a plan. We were supposed to meet in a secret alcove under the city sewer when I saw a fresh body ripped apart. I thought it was him and I was ready to give up when a gnoll attacked me. I thought about letting it finish me off, but my uncle appeared and lopped its head off.

She made no sounds, only listened. Her eyes were rapt on his every word.

“Me and Rob were making our way out of the village and to Arshill. He was adamant about getting there and meeting with someone named Seth.” *Seth*. He wondered who he was and how he knew his uncle. “Then, we were ambushed by a pack...”

The nurse’s hand slowly rose to cover her mouth before he continued.

“...Rob fought them off and told me to stay hidden but,” Tears welled in his eyes, “but I couldn’t let them kill my only family. Not after I had already lost my parents, not after I had just let little Edi die, I couldn’t just stand back and watch anymore. So, I tried to draw their attention away from him, but that just made things worse.”

“What happened?” She asked softly.

“One of the gnolls bounded toward me and had me on the ground when Rob leapt to my rescue again, and that’s when they took advantage and surrounded him. I had no choice but to run.” Tears were crawling down his cheeks now. He looked up and met her eyes. He felt as if he was going to breakdown. “He made me run,” he explained sorrowfully, “I didn’t want to. He made me promise earlier that I would listen to him no matter what, so I did. He told me to run to Arshill, to the Tranquil Raven to find Seth.” Brendan started

to calm himself down after having gotten past the part about Rob though it still hurt. “I ran and ran and didn’t look back. I don’t remember much after feeling the rain batter my shoulders and a dull ache in my side. The next thing I know I wake up in here with my stomach bandaged...and you standing over me.”

“How dreadful,” she said, “I can’t imagine going through all that. Do you need anything? Anything at all? I can fetch one of the priests—”

“No.” He interrupted. “No, I’m fine, really. I must be going. I need to get to the Raven.” He sat himself up again and sloughed off the bed.

“If you will wait but a moment, I can arrange you to be taxied there. We have some supplies that we were to fetch from Arshill tomorrow. It’s only but a few miles from there.” Brendan nodded and the nurse left immediately.

After a moment, the pain subsided. Brendan dressed quickly and followed the stranger’s path. He left the infirmary and made his way up a spiral stairway, leading toward ground level. Brendan opened a heavy wooden door and was bedazzled by the bright light of the sun. The door opened to a domed hallway. Its windows, arched and pillared, looked out to a courtyard busy with Niserian apostles.

The men and women wore plain, white robes with simple vestments. Both men and women covered their skin, only the face and hands were exposed. Some of the women wore wimples like the nurse, some wore horned cornettes. The men wore the same. Their robes were so clean that the sunlight reflected from their whiteness caused him to squint.

The courtyard itself earned the sanctuary's name. There were massive, stone-like roots wrapping around the many courtyard pillars, swallowing the lesser stone of the monastery. They were large enough that the bend of the exposed roots each made benches large enough to sit a few murmuring priests. But there were only roots, no tree, no branches, no leaves. He imagined a sea monster was underneath the earth, stretching its massive tentacles into the air. Some of the other roots around the courtyard clung firmly to the stone walls as if one day it would drag the place into the depths of the earth where the monster ruled over the dead and decaying.

Brendan placed his hand on one of the stone-like roots. It was cold like stone should be, but there was something more, something that couldn't be easily explained. He felt a dull vibration as if the root were alive under a stone shell. No one else seemed to notice. It was very strange.

"Excuse me." A gentle voice pried Brendan's attention away from the strange root. "This is Stephan. He was the one that found you." The nurse had returned, bewildered but unsurprised that he had followed her. She was shorter than she looked from when he lied on the infirmary table.

"Thank you for rescuing me, sir." Brendan did his best impression of a bow. Curious, he didn't even know if religious folk bowed at all.

"No problem at all, son." He was an older man with deep lines across his forehead and eyes wearing similar robes as the others. "I feared you were dead and almost passed you by were it not thanks to my mule." There was no bow.

“Stephan kept your things, he’s also the one who can take you to Arshill.” She said. Multiple expressions raced across her face, Brendan couldn’t tell which she was feeling: sadness, sympathy, satisfaction, remorse? All seemed equally true, though none stood out over the other.

“Yes, they’re safe inside the wagon. I had faith that you would pull through,” he smiled. The wrinkles around his eyes gave away his advanced age. “Are you ready to travel young man?” The man asked. Stephan was not a very nosy person it seemed.

That’s when he realized that they didn’t even know his name.

Brendan looked at the nurse and introduced himself, “I’m Brendan.” He awkwardly tried bowing again.

The nurse’s cheeks pinkened. “I’m Amée.” She said as he hid a smile.

“Thank you for seeing to my wounds, Amée. I regret that I don’t have anything to thank you for your kindness.” Brendan said as he began following Stephan, hoping that she would follow.

Stephan took him to his wagon quickly enough. Brendan was led back through the sanctuary where he was able to appreciate the sanctum more throughout than before. Inside the central nave, was a cabaret of shadows dancing on the walls and sandstone pillars, candles taking up space on every surface. There were even candles dangling from the high ceiling strewn up by wires so thin they appeared invisible which made them appear to be floating.

Just before Brendan hopped into the wagon, the nurse tugged on his tunic.

“Wait a moment.” She pleaded. She turned to him and undid the clasp of a necklace hidden within her robes. She took his wrist with her soft fingers and placed a silvery pendant gently in his palm. It was a hexagram, the Niserian Star. He recognized it from one of Costone’s bazaars when a desperate merchant was trying to hawk his pendant for a one-night stay inside the keep. Brendan remembered that all it bought was a swift smack from a guard and his mailed cuff. “May this grant you the Goddess’s protection. It will grant you safe passage and lodging with any of our other sanctums.” Her soft hands folded his around the star in his palm. His neck twinged.

Just how many sanctuaries are there? Brendan thought as he climbed into Stephan’s cart trying not to groan in pain from his side.

Brendan thought that he had said thank you, but no words left his mouth. As Stephan prodded his mule to leave, Brendan looked back toward the sanctuary and Amée. He unclutched his hand to look at the pendant then took the chain and hung it around his neck. Once more, he looked in the nurse’s lavender eyes and regretted that their meeting had been cut short.

## The Tinderwood



## Bastard's Bastion

A couple hours had passed in silence with Stephan and his mule. The sun was still climbing as they traveled back onto the highway called Carrion's March, East toward Arshill. Brendan's abdomen still ached and wondered if not for the nurse, how much pain he'd be in now. Perhaps he would be dead if not for Stephan. He had owed the Niserians much. They had saved his life without the promise of reward or thanks. He doubted that any in Costone would have done the same, except of course for Rob. Just saying the name made Brendan tear up. He would have time to mourn later, now was not the time. Though, he was more than glad he had been reunited with his uncle's shield, more importantly, he had recovered the very last gift Rob ever gave to him—would ever give to him—his sword, Swift.

Toward the wagon's right-hand side was a heavily wooded area Stephan said was the edge of the Tinderwood. The place had an infamous reputation from the travelers he'd met in Costone. It had been known for two things specifically: dangerous herbs and dangerous men. The woods were so thick that when Brendan tried peering through the trees, he could only see a few yards inside. Anything past that was as dark as a starless night sky. The Tinderwood was expansive, dense, and home to all manner of dangers. His uncle told him, if he could avoid it, to never enter the woods and always stay on the road with your head on a swivel.

Stephan was more than quiet, nearly mute the entire journey. He only hummed the slightest of hymns as he handled the reins. Brendan didn't mind; the road was meditative and peaceful, and he bathed in the tranquility. He heard the distant chirping and tweeting of playful birds; he heard the wind weaving and whistling through the boughs, creaking, and crackling as the wagon's wheels crunched the dead leaves underneath. The smells of the wood were calming as well. Somewhere, a few miles past, he caught whiff of pine sap. Its pungent sweet spice wrestled the smell of his fresh linens and leather gifted from Amée. Brendan closed his eyes and leaned against the wooden latch at the back of the wagon, filling his lungs with the smells of autumn.

Brendan was only barely fighting back the intrusive thoughts of Rob and Costone that kept him from relaxation till Stephan's mule began to bray. As the mules jerked the wagon, the crates of glass jars under the carefully folded blankets clanked together threatening to shatter. Eventually, Stephan was able to stop the wagon before the mules sent them careening into a tree. Brendan scurried to his sword, his eyes darting back and forth from tree to tree. "What's wrong?" he asked the monk, expecting trouble.

Stephan, busy calming his mule, didn't hear his question.

Then, Brendan heard a rustling and slowly slid Swift out from its scabbard when he felt a sharp edge pinch his throat. A plummy voice whispered into his ear, "Put that thing back in its scabbard. You wouldn't want to hurt yourself now would ya?" The man said, pressing forcefully on his blade he had placed under Brendan's chin.

The man grabbed Brendan's sword and tossed it to another highwayman coming out of the woods. He took his shield and stripped off his baldric and tossed it to a third.

The man who had been tossed his sword was hidden beyond Brendan's periphery but could be heard marveling at its craftsmanship.

"Whoa, this is a fine sword!" He praised, "Euric, look at this...I think it's dwarven steel and excited steel too. *Galvanized* by the looks of it." How did these common brigands know so much about his sword, he thought?

The man who was Euric, pressed his blade harder against Brendan's skin. "Where did you get a fine sword like that, I wonder. You steal it, boy?" Brendan didn't know if the question was rhetorical or if he should even attempt an answer.

"The crossguard is etched with dwarven letters too."

"Stole it from some poor stumpy sod, did you? Eh, I would have done the same." Euric turned his attention toward the other brigands, wrestling with the mule and its master. "Hurry it up and put him in the back of the wagon." He pointed. "And rein in that ass or I'll rein in yours!"

Brendan watched helplessly as Stephan was smacked around and abused. It seemed that the highwaymen found entertainment with bullying the monk. Brendan thanked a Goddess he didn't believe in for Stephan's sake, that their fun wasn't prolonged. Euric commanded them not to "bruise the monk too bad" and had them bound his wrists with a pair of iron cuffs before tossing him forcefully into the wagon next to Brendan.

Brendan counted four of them, uncertain if there were more hidden from view. He stayed calm, letting Euric pat him down, searching for items of any worth. Euric found

the Niserian Star, twisted it around his fist and yanked it hard from Brendan's neck. The sudden pinch hurt but Brendan stayed deathly still. "Well, well, well...looks like you had quite the score little tramp. Hell, if you were of noble stock like us, I'd even try to recruit you." Euric chuckled with sarcastic bite. "Let's call it a day, gentlemen."

Euric and his band of bandits pocketed everything worth a copper and hauled both Stephan and Brendan helplessly bound in the back of the wagon further into the tress down a scant, narrow path. Brendan desperately tried to wake himself from his recurring nightmare. Unfortunately for him, the Tinderwood had so far lived up to its ironic reputation.

After a bumpy half-hour bound uncomfortably to the back of a wagon, Brendan's ass was numb, and his legs were cold and tingly. Euric and his thugs didn't seem to care when they tossed him out of the wagon only for him to fall on his face unable to feel the ground beneath his feet. They laughed at his tumble after he spat out blood and dirt. They had made it to their hideout: an old, abandoned fort, weather-worn and war-torn. The walls and façade were suffocated by a strangling ivy, the curtain wall surrounding the single castle was collapsed on the eastern side, there was also a nice gapping whole in one of the two watchtowers that Brendan thought was likely made from a trebuchet, and several missing bricks and various cracks in its foundation.

Euric commanded his men to take their prisoners to the cells. Brendan was yanked to his feet, still numb and lame from the ride, and dragged toward the keep. Brendan tried counting them all again and their numbers multiplied three-fold. At least fifteen of them, not counting some that might be inside the crumbling castle.

The jail was moldy and smelled of rat piss. The sharp contrasts from the pleasing smells of the forest were unapologetic as Brenan and Stephan were led down a small flight of stairs and down to the jail's only remaining cell left intact at the very end of the hallway. The cell was about twelve by twelve feet, by Brendan's estimation, and the bars were covered in thick rust. The back wall inside the cell was damaged too as sunlight spilled in from a small gap where it met with the ceiling. Stephan was pushed into the cell first followed by Brendan. Each of them was told to approach the bars with their hands out so that their fetters could be removed. The shackles were made for a man larger than Brendan so when they came off, it was an enormous relief. Brendan rubbed the skin where the cuffs had been digging.

The jailor pulled the cell door closed and locked it tight. He pressed his face against the bars and snickered at the pathetic pair, showing his rotten, blue-stained mouth. In a moment of desperation, Stephan slumped against the bars, pleading with the jailor for his release. Brendan thought it had been completely out of character for the monk of few words. The jailor took hold of Stephan's arm and slammed it into the bar against the elbow, snapping his arm in half just above the elbow. Stephan cried in agony and folded to the floor.

Brendan ran over to Stephan and tried to comfort him before the man passed out from shock.

"Oh...he'll be fine. Just let him pray for his arm to heal I'm sure he'll be good as new by tomorrow." the jailor mocked.

Brendan scanned the cell once the jailor left. Pools of water collected in sunken spots from the weakened foundation. The entire floor was cracked and slanted, likely from the encroaching roots from the tree just outside. The light that shone in from the gap in the ceiling was enough to light most of the room. But the light couldn't reach the entire cell and the back two corners stayed shrouded in darkness. Brendan wasn't sure, but he swore that someone or something was in one of those corners, hidden in the shadows. He didn't know if they were alive or dead thanks to the multitude of pungent smells nor was he in a rush to find out. As far as he was concerned, they would all be dead soon anyway. What did it matter if he was killed by some monster lurking in the corner? It had been increasingly difficult for Brendan to stay optimistic. He had enough of these misadventures. Again, he imagined that the past few days was just a nightmare from which he desperately wanted to wake. He wanted to be back home with his uncle Rob. He regretted that he took smithing for granted. As dull and repetitive as it was, and as much as complained, he'd do anything to go back to hammering steel day in and day out. But this wasn't a dream. His home was gone. Rob was dead. And he was deep in the woods sharing a rotting, soggy jail cell with a monk and possible corpse or two.

Brendan heard footsteps plodding from the hallway and perked up to find the man named Euric on the other side of the prison bars.

"Hey, shit-skin!" He hollered. The insult had been hurled by the leader of his kidnappers once already, it stung then, but coming from this callous jailor it had been almost unbearable. "You... with the shit-colored skin. Look at me, boy!" He yelled.

Euric tossed the Niserian Star necklace into the cell, hitting Brendan in the face.

“Trash belongs with trash.” He said sharply, sneering at him with hatred in his eyes as black as his teeth before he smugly spat near Brendan’s feet, then laughing all the while he climbed the steps leading out of the jail.

*Shit-skin.* He hadn’t heard that word in a long time at least not to his face, not since he started pounding a hammer with Rob and definitely not since he had begun to practice the sword. Regardless of haven’t hearing the insult in years, they burned at him as if the words were new. Euric’s tones and expression echoed in many ways the faces of those bullies from his village in Costone, the ones who looked at him as if he were nothing more than a pest to get rid of, someone to beat on when they were angry about other things. Brendan curled into a corner fighting back the anger that began to swell in his fists. He clutched the pendant in his hand and squeezed until he bled.

“The necklace...” A throaty voice jumped out of the shadows, “What’s it made of?” Brendan looked toward what he incorrectly thought was a corpse hidden in the other corner, clearly speaking to him with a deep, husky voice.

“I—I Don’t know.” The words slipped out despite being speechless.

The corpse, very much alive, stood up and waddled toward him. “Give it here,” it demanded. Its thick, pale arm protruded out from the darkness covered in black, coarse hair. Brendan squinted, trying to penetrate through the shadow. The arm came from an equally thick man. He was short but broad.

Brendan handed over the necklace. The man took the chain and pendant and sniffed it like a dog. Then he stepped into the sunlight and walked over the cell bars. He wore a black cloak that matched his unruly hair and large wiry beard which had been

braided and beaded with small metallic ringlets. Brendan recognized him as a dwarf right away, one of the Barazine.

“Why are you sniffing it?” Brendan asked, waiting for an answer equally as insane as the action itself.

“Numbskulls!” The dwarf chuckled to himself. He turned to Brendan and backed him against the wall. “Do you know what this is?” He asked as he held the necklace up to Brendan’s face.

“A worthless gaud?” He answered sarcastically, thinking it had been a trick question.

The dwarf scoffed at Brendan. “If your goal is to sell it, aye, it’s worthless.” He told him with a crazed look. “Does it hold any value to you?” The dwarf asked. “Would you be cross if I destroyed it?”

Brendan admitted that it didn’t even though it did. He didn’t want to tell the dwarf that a beautiful, kind girl gave it to him for protection after nursing him to health at her Niserian sanctum. What would a crazed dwarf do with such information, he thought.

The dwarf yanked the pendant from its chain and tossed the chain back to Brendan. He took it back into the shadows and began to grind it between two bricks.

“What are you doing?” Brendan asked.

“You see all the rust on those bars? Make yerrself useful and scrape off as much as you can hold and bring it to me.” The dwarf said removing a shard of metal hidden on



the underside of his belt. “As much as you can.” he repeated, pointing the shard at Brendan.

“What for?” Brendan took the shard from him.

The dwarf glowered at him. His smokey eyes peered through his greasy hair, with the most profound impatience. They were bloodshot and penetrating despite being deeply-set. “You want to sit here curled up in the corner feeling sorry for yerrself or do you want to bust out of here?”

“Escape!?” He blurted too loudly. The dwarf’s indignant reaction scorned him like a person scorns their pup for shitting in the house.

Brendan savored the thought for a moment but instantly recoiled at the prospect, fearing that he’d dig deeper into his troubles. The dwarf stood up again as tall as he could and slapped Brendan hard on the side of his face with a thick, meaty hand. “Snap out of it, boy. These bastards are the ‘Black Fang Gang.’ Ever heard of ‘em?”

Brendan held his face and shook his head.

“No?” the dwarf snarked. “They’re a bunch of right true bastards the lot of ‘em. Noble-blooded bastards too...”

Brendan never knew nobles like them. These men were uncouth, unkempt, savage.

“At least they *were* noble, generations ago.”

“Why are they called the Black Fang Gang?” Brendan asked.

“For the black fang root. These people have been chewing on that rot for generations and it’s addled their minds beyond savin’. That’s what makes their mouth blue, see?” The dwarf seemed well-informed to Brendan, though he still wondered about the fortifications and asked.

“This fort we’re in—it’s called the Bastard’s Bastion. They’ve been hounding travelers for decades, trying to grift enough coin to buy back their status and land.” The dwarf scoffed.

Warnings to stay away from the Tinderwood never included a gang of drug addicted brigands living out some delusions of reclaimed nobility by kidnapping wayward travelers. Brendan wondered if Rob knew about the Black Fang Gang and if he ever had any run-ins with them.

“Why did they imprison us when they could have just robbed us?” Brendan asked.

“For ransom.” The dwarf said almost too casually.

Ransomed to who, Brendan thought.

“Did they blindfold you when they captured you? That’s so that you can never tell a soul of their location or how to find them once you’re freed. Remember, they’ve been here for generations and know these woods better than anyone else.”

“No. I wasn’t blindfolded.”

The dwarf’s statue-like expression softened. “Oh…”

“What?”

“If they didn’t blind you, that means they don’t plan on ransoming you.”

Brendan’s sudden urge to escape filled him with renewed vigor. He did as the dwarf asked and shaved as much rust from the bars of their cell.

“How does rust help us escape exactly?”

“Not just the rust, the rust *and* the aluminum.” The dwarf was referring to the chain he bounced in his palm.

“Aluminum? How do you know it’s aluminum?”

The look on the dwarf’s face told him that he was shocked by his ignorance. “I’m a dwarf, boy.” He said, “Dwarves know metal better than you humans know fornicating and I know both better than anyone alive or dead.” He explained. “Silver smells like the sky, something you humans are smell blind to. But we Dwarves are from the earth. We can smell when storms are coming from hundreds of miles away. Silver also tarnishes and tastes a bit like a garlic fart.”

“Okay...so how does rust and aluminum help?” Brendan didn’t dare ask the dwarf how he knew what a garlic fart tasted like.

“Watch.” The dwarf scooped up the pile of aluminum dust he had made and added to the rust that Brendan gathered, placing it liberally around the bottom of one of the rusted beams between two bars. He fiddled around with his face and took a couple of the dull grey beads out of his beard and grinded them together. “They’re strikers.” He mentioned matter-of-factly.

Each time he rubbed them together, tiny sparks flew. It took a few attempts, but eventually the sparks hit their target and the combined pile of rust and aluminum dust smoldered, then fizzled, then lit up like a bolt of lightning, then raged as flash of white-hot fire. The fire burned through the small pile of rust and aluminum and shortly died after having consumed all its fuel. The corroding flame bore a hole through the iron like magic. The dwarf kicked the two bars loose with very little effort. Once they were removed, the space they created was just large enough for each of them to squeeze through.

“Wait, what about Stephan?” Brendan remembered. He wouldn’t be able to live with himself knowing that they would kill him. Stephan saved his life when he could have just passed by as he lied unconscious in a ditch.

“Look at him.” The dwarf said. “They broke his arm and he’s out cold. How do you expect to escape with you dragging the sad sack of stones on yer back?”

“He saved my life—”

“—and by leaving him there, he’d be saving it again.” The dwarf said with a hint of snark. “What where were two going anyway?”

“He was taking me to Arshill while he delivered medicine and blankets.”

“What’s in Arshill?” the dwarf prodded.

“I was actually on my way to The Tranquil Raven.”

“Come again?” the dwarf queried. “The Raven? Slaggin hell” He sighed, pausing as he squeezed through the narrow gap, he told Brendan that he was ambushed on the

road to the inn as well but seemed nonplussed of the coincidence. “Look, if you want to stay, that’s up to you, but if you want out of here, we need to do it together.”

*“If you want to go fast, go alone; but if you want to go far, go together.”* Brendan heard Rob’s proverb softly echo in his mind. The dwarf’s advice pried the words from deep within his memory. It was something his father said to him once too before he died. Odd that he would remember it now.

Brendan’s instincts tore at him to help Stephan, but he knew the dwarf spoke the truth and that if he wanted to survive, he couldn’t save himself and the monk. If he could, he would find the nurse again and tell her about Stephan, hopefully they would send help. It didn’t feel much like a decision, nevertheless, Brendan felt like scum for making it. And yet, with no more certainty, he followed the dwarf outside the cell.

“What’s your name? Mine’s Brendan.”

“Does that hardly matter right now?” He looked back at Brendan and felt a bit of pity for the boy. “If you must know, you can call me Grihm.”

“Grihm. I need to recover my things.” Brendan told the dwarf. “They have my sword... and a shield—.”

“Damn your sword and damn your shield. They aren’t worth your life.” He said. “...or are they?”

“The shield belonged to my uncle and the sword was a gift.”

“You think I care?”

“The sword is dwarven steel.” Brendan added, hoping to convince the dwarf.

“I don’t care if it was made from the gilded cunt hair of queen Sunna, herself.”

Grihm quipped. As they neared lighter parts of the jail, Brendan could see more of the dwarf’s features. He was a mature dwarf, middle-aged judging by his hooked, aquiline nose brooding over a coarse mustache that blended seamlessly into his beard which had scarce strands of silver that matched his eyes. Atop his head was a rat’s nest of a mop of hair as dark as his beard. It was long but tied up as best he could, but stray strands fell and stuck to his face from sweat giving him a feral appearance. The dwarf too off his cloak and handed it to Brendan without a word, staring at the boy with a daring plan glinting in his eye.

“Put this on and hide behind those barrels. I’ll draw the attention of the big lummo and bring him right about *here*,” he pointed to the spot for Brendan. “That’s when you clobber him over the head with this.” Grihm handed him the rusty iron bar. Brendan thought to ask what the bar was for, but knew it was a stupid question. He took the rod and crouched behind the barrels, where Grihm had told him to hide, before dawning his cloak which was somehow too big and too short.

Grihm was wily for a dwarf, Brendan thought. All the dwarves he’d met were not as colorful nor as rough around the edges. He knew dwarves were often stereotyped as unfeeling, anti-social shrews, but Grihm had been clever enough to create some magical fire that burned through the prison bars, and now he’d plan their escape too. All Brendan could do was feel ashamed and defeated. Accurate stereotypes or not, the dwarf was becoming quite the resourceful ally.

“Oy, you rot-toothed bastards! Any of you knaves thirsty, cause I gotta take a fat piss!” the dwarf yelled.

“What was that, ya midget!?” The jailor’s voice shot back, bouncing off the prison walls.

“Baseborn scab. Tell your leader, Euric, that you’re about to spoil his ransom, ya needle-pricked *bastard*.” That seemed to catch the jailor’s attention. He scurried down the stairs and stopped just shy of Brendan’s reach. Grihm didn’t mention any plans if he were to run back up the stairs and warn the others. So, he resolved not to fail in his task. Whatever happened. Brendan’s heart filled with renewed purpose. With the dwarf’s help, he was going to escape this place, find the nurse, then find Seth as he had promised.

“What in the—how’d you get out of the cell? You gnaw off the bars, filthy mole man?”

“Lick my bearded asshole, *bluegum*.” The dwarf fired back. Grihm seemed to have some experience taunting people because it worked like a charm with the jailor.

“I’m gonna flog you until you’re black and blue, you fuckin’ midget until I break every bone in your stumpy body.”

Grihm stood stoic and unmoved. He only smirked at the jailor and flashed him an obscene gesture as the jailor moved into the perfect position. As soon as the jailor was in reach, Brendan leapt from behind the barrels and cracked the man across the side of the head. The force was so hard, his arm felt the shock of the blow and sent his nerves into a frenzy. It felt like he had hit a stone wall. The jailor’s metal helmet was dented in half by

Brendan's strike. He had only hoped to knock the man unconscious, but there was no doubt that he was dead.

"Well done, boy." Grihm's encouraging words reminded him of Rob. "Hopefully, none of them heard that. You sure rung his bell, didn't ya?"

"I—I killed him." Brendan's stomach rolled over.

Brendan looked at the man. He wasn't dead, but he was surely dying. His body groaned as his lungs sucked in air as hard as it could, it was a disturbing sight for Brendan. The look on the guard's face under the smashed helm, sent his mind to Costone again. He couldn't help but see his uncle's face in the guard's. As Brendan stood there in shock, the jailor's arms and legs stretched out, then curled inward until he was almost in a fetal position. Brendan wanted to leave, he wanted to puke, but the dwarf told him to strip the man's armor off. That it would likely come in handy for whatever came next. So, Brendan stripped what he could trying not to look at the man still squirming. He slid the man's hide boots off and took off his padded, green gambeson and his single spaulder. Brendan couldn't remove the man's helmet, too afraid to look, so Grihm peeled it off the man and passed him the marred helmet, the inside of which was sticky with blood. Putting on the man's armor felt wrong, but he didn't have a choice. The helmet was even worse but he in far too deep now to turn back. If they captured him again, they'd likely kill on the spot.

Both Brendan and Grihm climbed the stairs and quietly observed the camp. Several men were nowhere to be found which was not a good sign according to the dwarf. A few were lazing about, counting inventory, or drinking ale. Grihm mentioned to



Brendan that the bastion's doors remained open until dusk, but Brendan mentioned the whole in the wall he spotted on his journey there and that it was likely their best way out. Grihm agreed. Brendan took extreme caution and waited for them to meander unawares before he walked semi-inconspicuously through the camp so far undetected, hastily disguised as their jailer.

Brendan's eyes darted back and forth like a hummingbird, involuntarily. His nerves were all but spent while shuffling inches away from each member of the gang. He was supposed to stick to the plan and make for the exit, but he had to search for his gear. He couldn't leave without it. It was all he had left him.

Brendan practiced two-fold vigilance, keeping an eye out for his things and the unwanted attention of the Black Fang Gang. It proved difficult to keep a healthy distance while remaining inconspicuous searching for his things. Grihm, shuffled just behind him, and wasn't in a position to argue. Besides, if any of the bastards were as attentive as any normal human being, Brendan and Grihm would be spotted already but they were all stoned from chewing their roots.

Grihm cursed under his breath, nudging and yanking Brendan closer to their exit, when Brendan spotted Rob's shield which was leaning against some medicine crates from Stephan's wagon alongside other weapons stolen by the gang. No one was hovering near the crates, so Brendan thought that it would be easy to snatch it without being noticed.

His sword was another matter. It wasn't with the shield but lying flat on a concrete bench in its scabbard not two feet from Euric and three of his men. Grihm and

Brendan were only a few feet away from the collapsed wall. Grihm tried pulling Brendan toward the exit, but when he wasn't budging, he left him and darted into the woods.

Brendan was only partially aware the Grihm had left. He was too focused with getting his things back.

Euric and the others had their back turned to him as he inched toward the bench. Every few feet, one of them would pivot, causing Brendan to dart behind cover. First time, he hid behind a tall stack of crates; the second time, he hid behind Stephan's wagon.

A cold bead of sweat rolled down Brendan's brow and into his eye. He was shuffling against a wall, behind some withered saplings, trying to keep out of sight. Even disguised, it would be odd to see one of their own skulking around like that. So, Brendan did the unthinkable: he mustered enough raw nerve to walk out in full view and grabbed retrieved Rob's shield. Shocked that it had worked, he pattered toward Euric and the others and grabbed his sword and baldric without issue and followed the dwarf's path toward the exit.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going with that?" Euric boomed.

Brendan's muscles tightened. His pulse quickened and he developed a wicked bout of dry mouth. He could feel his heartbeat in his fingers as he gripped the hilt of his sword. He thought about fighting them but realized it would have been suicide, no matter how lethargic they were. He stood frozen and listened closely.

"Oy, Draper..." Euric thought he was speaking to his jailer, "...go furbish that up nice and shiny for me—"

“—and stick it up your ass.” Another finished.

They all cackled hysterically.

Brendan cleared his throat and sped away promptly. Just before he turned the corner, one of Euric’s men bumped into him by accident.

“Watch were you’re going twat.” The man said. His voice reached its crescendo near the end of the word “twat.” After the man noticed their turnkey had a different face, the brigand unsheathed his long sword and shouted to Euric. “He’s trying to escape!”

Brendan charged the man with his shoulder and whipped Swift from its scabbard. As Euric and his men scrambled for their weapons, Brendan lifted his shield and backed himself against the wall and was quickly surrounded. One of the men flanked him and stood between him and freedom. Brendan didn’t want to fight anymore. He just wanted to leave. But by the looks in their eyes and stained teeth, they weren’t going to give him a choice.

Suddenly, Brendan saw a red and brown flash whizz past him, as two Black Fangs were mowed down by two imposing destriers. Grihm told Brendan to jump on the red as his brown reared and bucked away at Euric and the rest of his beleaguered men. Brendan threw himself into the horse’s saddle and galloped with Grihm to the safety of the woods. The Black Fang Gang spat and cursed as they made off with their horses.

“I didn’t think you were coming back.” He said with a dry, labored voice. “I thought for sure once you escaped, I’d be on my own.”

“Don’t think on too hard.” The dwarf chimed.

Brendan was surely grateful, but he had been rescued again. Just like Rob saved him from the gnoll inside the smuggler's passage and again fighting off the pack. Brendan didn't know whether to thank the dwarf for saving him or apologize that he needed him to. Whichever one it was, it would have to wait. The path out of the Tinderwood would be as treacherous as the path into it.

## Beobluff

### Barazine Ruins

It wasn't easy riding a horse, let alone riding one through a nigh-impassible forest of sequoia and pine. Brendan had only been on a horse once in his life and he wasn't too fond of the experience then either. Though what skill he lacked, the horses made up for it, showing an uncanny aptitude for traversing the forest. Both destriers seemed used to running in this land, adapting their gait from trot to canter, making smart turns, and avoiding fallen trunks and loose debris. They moved surprisingly fast amid the timber without any commands from the reins. Brendan just had to hold on.

The woodlands blurred by in flashes of reds and yellows, vibrant on the ground in the hundreds of thousands; bold, coniferous greens caught his eye as they whipped by, hugging each giant at their feet, growing wide and high. Each tree was a titan, rising high above the ground, towering over all blissfully unaware to any lowland being who would choose to scurry among their detritus of dead limbs and cones. Each was similar yet each

was unique. Some of them grew mishappen, their roots twisted and knotted into queer shapes. They were odd and beautiful. A stark contrast to what dwelled in the recesses surrounding them. More than once, Brendan passed by one of the slain colossi and noticed deep claw marks scarring its mass.

After a few miles at a steady gallop, Grihm reared his horse to an impatient canter into a passive trot. Directly ahead was a long gully too wide for the horses to leap across and too deep to traverse. As they slowed, Brendan could hear the caw and rattle of a nearby murder of crows, squabbling over territory. There was no wind, no breeze. Aside from the birds, it was completely dead. Brendan was reticent to break the silence. His grumbling stomach broke it for him.

“Grihm, I don’t think we’re heading in the right direction. It looks like we’re headed North-East when we should be going South-West.”

“I know where I’m going.”

“...but the sun. It’s setting. We—”

“—I know where the blighted sun is.” Grihm interrupted, swatting at a fly.

“We’re not going to the Raven.”

“Why not? We need to...*I* need to get to the Tranquil Raven.”

“Then you’re free to do so—” He answered, sharpening his tone while he swatted more flies. “Goddamn insects,” he mumbled. Brendan’s horse was in lockstep next to Grihm’s and he could see that his face was reddened with a pinched expression.

Brendan thought about leaving for The Tranquil Raven but being alone again sobered the thought as quickly as he had it.

“If you must know, we’re making a detour to Veg Bohldir.”

That surprised Brendan. “Veg Bohldir, as in the dwarven realm?” Grihm didn’t seem impressed that he knew of it. “Isn’t it abandoned?”

The dwarf’s eyes were dull, lifeless. His voice was flat when he spoke, “More like haunted.” He said. Brendan watched the subtle expressions chasing each other across Grihm’s face and wondered which would win: fear, rage, uncertainty?

Brendan knew something was bothering him but didn’t think it was something Grihm would want to bring up.

Brendan was soon pestered by a swarm of buzzing flies as well, but they pestered the horses even more. Brendan’s Red jerked its head and snorted, trying to shake off the flies. What started as only an odd fly here and there, quickly grew into a loose swarm. Only after Brendan had realized that they must have been attracted to something in the forest was when the smell hit. A pungent, almost sweet smell of cheap tansy perfume and spoiled cabbage. It was the alluring reek of death.

The horses shook their head and pounded their hooves into the ground, unnerved. Try as they might, the horses wouldn’t get any closer for them.

“Slag!” Grihm broke the silence and pinched his nose. The culprit was another horse, half-rotted and skeletonized. It had been dead for weeks judging by its condition and picked apart by scavenging critters. Whatever killed it had an enormous appetite.

Most of its skull was missing as was its hind legs and rear; bones and all. Brendan's hunger pangs vanished, replaced by nausea.

As dusk came closer, and the noises of the darkening forest threatened, the endless sprawl of trees finally ended much to Brendan's relief. But instead of a road or open meadow, a mountain of rock stood at the forest's edge. A naked cliff rose from the earth and prevented even the most fertile of trees from rearing any more of their offspring as a narrow berm stretched as far as Brendan could see. Its authority dwarfed even the most tyrannical of trees. It was a solid mass of bedrock climbing hundreds of feet high.

Grihm didn't make much of it and followed along its edge, a bit farther south, before turning around its bend to a large clearing. On the other side was a forest road that spread out and led to the opposite side of the forest. The surface of the cliff itself was almost smooth, layered and stripped, mined, and cut away. In the middle, was a temple face seemingly carved out of the stone itself. Deep grooves had been chiseled away, creating great sculptures in the façade. Huge columns and intricate geometric designs were patterned around the temple's yawning entrance. Built into the depression, was a large foyer covered in a thick layer of moss, just outside of the massive threshold. It was the biggest entrance Brendan had ever seen.

"Welcome to my home." The dwarf sighed.

Welcomed wasn't the word Brendan would use to describe his feelings. The entrance, as marvelous as it was, didn't look very inviting. Especially after noticing the blood streaks on the foyer leading into the dark cavernous corridor. Brendan pointed it



out to Grihm who dismounted his horse and led it to one of the large stone columns before hitching it.

As luck would have it, the stolen horses also came with bonus goods. Grihm reached inside its saddlebags and tossed out a length of rope, a small rusty hatchet, a crossbow with a leather quiver, and a small sack filled with necklaces, rings, and bracelets that went bouncing into the dirt.

“Ah-ha.” The dwarf said, holding up a torch triumphantly. Brendan followed his lead and hitched his horse next to Grihm’s, glancing around uneasily as his stomach roiled. He followed Grihm into the enormous dark anteroom. The blood streaks led deeper inside where two bodies lie dead. Both were splayed open with their insides missing. The smell was foul, but not as bad as their horse.

“Poor fools. Looks like they ran for it after their horse was fell, then they sought to enter the realm and got trapped.” The dwarf said, examining the frantic blood-stained smudges and handprints painting the wall. “They couldn’t get in.”

“Get in where? There’s nowhere to go.” Brendan said, pointing out that the chamber was a dead end with three walls and no doors.

“Only dwarves know how to get through.”

“What...like a key?” Brendan felt stupid for asking. He glanced up and down yet found no lock, let alone a door.

“In a manner of speaking.” said Grihm. He placed his hands on the surface of the wall and wiped it clean. Underneath a layer of grime and blood streaks were more

geometric shapes like the ones carved into the outside. Triangles inside of squares inside of other triangles. Grihm turned one of the layers of shapes and pulled them out of the wall. It was a hidden mechanism. Now free from the wall, he spun and turned the shapes around until it created a symmetric design then he turned the entire apparatus counterclockwise and shoved it back into the wall, a little past flush. A loud clang, like a giant hammer striking an anvil as big as a house, startled Brendan. The dust covering the hidden door shook away as it opened. Grihm pressed against the wall until it moved. “Like I said...in a manner of speaking.”

Brendan was giddy. He wondered if his uncle Rob had seen a dwarven door like this...*anything* like this. It wasn't until Rob's death that Brendan wanted to ask him about his life before Costone. He wondered about the Vigil and if Rob had been across the continent. He wondered what he could have seen in all that time, then he wondered how many people Rob had to kill in his years as a knight and shuttered at the thought.

“Well, don't just stand there slack jawed, help me push it open.” The dwarf called.

Brendan helped Grihm open the heaviest door he'd ever pushed and wondered why dwarves need such big doors. Grihm untangled another of his flint strikers from his beard and lit the torch he had found with the horse. The flames were sluggish to crackle, but functioned, nonetheless.

On the other side of the mammoth door was darkness. The torch emitted some light, but all he could see was a vast corridor, two high walls stretched out to infinity. The

only comfort he felt was that the stench of decaying bodies was gone. Instead, there was just a pleasant earthy musk and something like paraffin.

“What are we searching for, Grihm?” The dwarf had been alarmingly silent.  
“Grihm?”

“Shh...I can't see a damn thing.” Grihm instructed Brendan to hold the torch then disappeared around a corner. Brendan held the torch against the wall. The fire reflected dully, showing only a whisper of light. Along the surface of the wall, he spotted a small hollow.

Brendan heard clanking that sounded suspiciously like footsteps echoing from behind, so he turned around and extended the torch, attempting to reveal what had been in the boundless darkness but the void swallowed the light. He lifted Rob's shield and held it close to his chest for comfort.

Then, there was more clanging.

“Grihm?” he called out with a cracking voice, hiding himself further behind his shield.

Brendan strafed the torch left and right, stretching it as far as his arm would manage.

Brendan squinted, trying to make out what lied beyond and thought he saw something skidder passed and yelped.

Brendan jumped back a full five feet. Grihm appeared and howled in amusement.  
“Remind me not to count on you in a fight if it's dark out.” He cried.

A flush crept across Brendan's cheeks. "It's not just dark, it's absolute blackness." He lowered the shield and recovered his breath after holding it unawares. "Was that you, the clanging?"

"How should I know?" the dwarf said which did little to comfort him. "I found the drum. Hold the torch just here." So, Brendan did. Grihm lifted a small barrel and poured its contents inside the hollow. No doubt it was oil of some kind. It was a clear, viscid liquid that smelt vaguely of grease. Once Grihm was finished pouring, he placed something Brendan couldn't see inside the hollow and took back the torch.

"Stand back," he said, "I might have been a bit too generous." So, Brendan did.

Grihm inched the fire into the hollow and a sudden burst of flame exploded. Grihm disappeared again and mumbled under his breath. Brendan saw him frantically turning some sort of metallic wheel. With each twist of it, the unwieldy flames tempered down to a low roar like the flame from the wick of a candle. Brendan was astonished. Between escaping the prison with rust and a necklace, opening a secret door, to manipulating fire itself, Brendan assumed the dwarf knew magic. A turn of another valve and a pull of a lever, the entire chamber lit up. High above eye level, the walls which were polished into mirrors, contained similar hollows now alive with a single bright flame each.

The chamber was enormous, a word which did not give justice to the room's massive size. There were towering statues of dwarves that looked as though their bodies were completely covered in armor, another thing Brendan had never seen before. How could they move, he wondered?

Everything had been so big, so exaggerated. The cliff-side entrance and the twenty-foot doors were huge, but this room was twice as high.

“Grihm. Why is everything so...big?” Brendan asked, as he removed the dented helmet. His hair had soaked up some of the blood left inside from the jailer, so he would need to find some water soon to wash it out. He couldn’t stand knowing that his victim’s blood was on him.

“Wait till you see the inside of the realm.”

“Are we not inside?” He ignored the blood temporarily, wiping it off his hand and onto the green gambeson before shedding that too.

“No, boy. We are not.” Grihm snickered. “This is the antechamber, for the guests and dignitaries to meet with the Kings. This is where all business hoo-ha and worldly woes and other pointless slag were discussed, argued, or threatened.” The dwarf pointed past the statues to a set of three stone chairs atop a high platform that would have overlooked anyone from floor level. “That is where the three kings would sit.”

“But dwarves are so...small.” Brendan said, realizing that he may have unintentionally offended the dwarf.

“My ancestors may have had a complex. Not too dubious if you think about it. They were small like me and were literally looked down to by anyone not a dwarf. Once the other races began to do business with them, perhaps they wanted to feel important. Is it so farfetched that they would build everything so big that everyone else knew what it

was like to feel small?” Grihm’s voice flickered with the subtlest glimmer of pride for his people. Brendan thought he understood. He knew what it was like to feel ignored.

“No, I guess not.” Brendan was familiar with the experience. In that regard, he felt a kinship with Grihm. So, he understood and never brought it up again. Even if that wasn’t the reason, it was as good as any. And Grihm was right about one thing—it did make him feel small.

Soon, dusk became night and the pair settled for the evening. Grihm told him that they would fare better if they returned during daylight, so he suggested postponing their visit to the realm until dawn. Grihm went back to the horses while Brendan searched around the chamber a bit admiring all the artistry of the Barazine. Brendan had used a forge before and beat and molded steel into shape, but the level of skill displayed in this chamber alone was awe-inspiring.

As the light filtered through the chambers more of its masterful details caught Brendan’s attention. The mirror-like walls were far from bare, intricate lattice works sprawled up the walls toward the unreachable ceiling. Along the walls, were more recess. Inside of each were stone pillars with marble busts of whom Brendan figured were of famous dwarves. The more he investigated, the more he noticed, including grand stone tapestries larger than his cottage in Costone. The mosaics depicted something important that he couldn’t make out. Brendan could stay here forever looking at all the art and craftsmanship of this dwarven antechamber. Then, he remembered what Grihm had told him, and the promises of a larger realm made his imagination run wild.

Brendan's neck started to hurt as he looked at all the dwarven things when Grihm returned with two moth-eaten bedrolls and two bottles of mead.

The dwarf uncorked the bottles and handed one to Brendan. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you wound up in that cell." Grihm told him. "So, why are you going to the Raven?"

"You were headed there too, right? How'd you get captured?" Brendan realized that he hadn't thought to ask before now. He didn't know why. He was taken back by Grihm's sudden candidness.

"I was headed away from there, but I asked you first." The dwarf replied.

Brendan didn't know where to start, so he started at the very beginning. He told Grihm about Costone and the attack on his village and how he was forced to let his uncle to die. He told him about running to Arshill in the storm and waking up in Stone Arbor Sanctum and about the beautiful nurse, named Amée. And he told him about and the ambush that followed on his way to The Tranquil Raven.

"What about your mother, your father?" Grihm asked.

His parents? What about them, he pondered? What could he have said about his parents when he barely remembered them? He didn't where to begin, but somehow, he trusted Grihm, so he told him how they died when he was young, how he was orphaned in the streets, and how he forgot more and more how they looked with each passing year.

"They yer true parents?" Grihm asked, unaware that his question was difficult to answer.

“As far as I know. Well, it was my mother who wasn’t Myrian. I never met her. My father said that she died when I was born, he’s from Costone.”

Grihm took solace in Brendan’s trust and tried to empathize with him. “You’ve seen tragedy firsthand.”

“The gnolls...they came out of nowhere. They slaughtered everyone then set the village aflame. Have you ever heard of them doing something like that?”

“No. I’ve never heard of them leaving their territory. Hell, Beobluff is closer to the Deadlands. I’d imagine they would have raided them lot before trekking through the mirelands to Costone.”

“Have you any news of Beobluff? Do you think they were attacked too?”

“I was rotting in a cell for about a week before you and that monk showed up. So, no, I don’t think I do.” The dwarf snipped. Perhaps something Brendan said upset him. Grihm’s demeanor quickly turned apologetic, and he chugged his mead until it was gone and threw the empty bottle, shattering the glass against a wall. “Well, that’s the last of it. You wouldn’t happen to know any stories, would you?” He asked Brendan.

*A story?* Grihm was sitting on a world of stories, but wanted to hear one from him? Brendan thought the request had been odd, but there was one story he knew more than any other.

“There is one story my uncle used to tell me when I was younger.” Brendan offered.



“Let’s hear it then.” The dwarf said. So, Brendan did. He told Grihm the story of Adelbrand and Drægan, *The Legend of the Phoenix*.

As the story went: four centuries before the Age of Rebirth, the world drowned in darkness. That a powerful necromancer known as Drægan the Vile laid waste to the land, enslaved and massacred whole villages across the continent in what was known as the *Decimation*. He told Grihm how Drægan raised undead armies and conquered the world before a champion finally emerged, a man named Adelbrand, a devout monk and a fearless warrior, rose to challenge Drægan. Brendan recounted their fateful clash in the center of the Five-Mile Valley between the champions of good and evil. The tale dripped with action as Brendan passionately retold it. He regaled Grihm with the story of the final fight in the valley when the remaining human and dwarven armies faced Drægan’s undead horde and how Adlebrand flew through a maelstrom of black magic on the back of his griffon, whom he named Storm-Wing, wielding his legendary gauntlet charged with unlimited power to defeat the sorcerer. And after their narrow victory, the surviving armies freed Drægan’s slaves and held a mass orison for the dead. The story ended when the Myrian King Albrie and Dwarf King Huhgir commissioned a warrior sect called the Phoenix Vanguard in honor of Adlebrand’s meteoric rise from a world burned to ashes. Thus setting forth a forever vigil tasked with guarding the world from any being who foolishly sought to conquer it.

Brendan spoken every word exactly like Rob had once told it. And although he knew it so well, it was the first time *he’d* ever told it. He always thought that the story was intriguing, albeit fantasy, but the look Grihm was shooting toward him made him feel like a mooncalf.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing... Well, I’ve heard the same story once or twice before, also when I was younger,” Grihm said.

“You have?”

“Aye, when I very young. It’s all bullocks.” Grihm turned his back and mumbled under his breath. “there’s no such thing as magic.”

“*Yeah, I know.*” Is what he wanted to say, instead he kept quiet. Brendan didn’t believe in the stories, how could he. In all his years, he had never seen anything close to what was in the stories. Afterall, they were only fairytales told to keep children honest, to teach them about morals. Good and evil were never as black and white as the pages of a book. Brendan knew bad things happened to good people, more so than most. If good ever existed, it had left the world a long time ago.

Grihm was already snoring by the time Brendan got comfortable. His thoughts continually dwelled on his journey and how many times he’d stared death in the face and concluded that either he’d been the luckiest person on the face of the earth or the unluckiest. Soon, he would be at the inn, talking to Seth and he would be prepared for whatever awaited him whether it involved luck or not, but he knew tomorrow held no promises. “*Prah-muh-ses.*”

## The Realm of Veg Bohldir

Brendan didn't wake with ordinary neck pain. His entire spine ached, his muscles stiff and frozen from the hard floor and thin blanket. Worse, famine set his stomach on fire as it began to eat itself. With all the commotion of the last few days, Brendan hadn't eaten since the morning he left his home for the bazaar which had been more than a few days past. His stomach, incensed, growled, and writhed inside him.

Grihm still snored even propped up against the wall. "Grihm, wake up." He kicked his foot. The sleepy dwarf snorted himself awake and rubbed his eyes before looking at up at Brendan.

"I've woken to worse." He grumbled, "...I've woken to better too." Adding a pinch of snider with which Brendan was growing accustomed. "Right. Let's go then." And so, Brendan followed.

Grihm led Brendan behind the chairs of the three kings to a space behind just them. There was another lock, he noticed, the same geometric puzzle as before. Though, this one finished in a different shape as the other. Again, Brendan was made to hold the torch. "The shape you make...is it like a rune or does it symbolize a rune?" He asked.

“Aye.” Grihm said curtly.

As Grihm solved the mechanism, Brendan admired the masonry of the chairs of the three kings. He expected them to be identical, yet all three were uniquely sculpted. One was stone white, sharp-angled and bifurcated at the top, cut with precision and care without a single rounded curve. On the opposing side, instead of white and lithic, the other chair was dark and metallic. Like its opposite, there still weren't any spherical shapes of any kind only a tessellation of diamonds and hexagons etched into its back. The last chair, between the other two, was in a category on its own. Its position among the others was prominent. Its features were more extreme, chaotic as if it weren't hewn or sculpted at all but forged. Its edges were jagged and spread out like the frozen tongues of a fire. Faint light peered through the throne like a dark slab of crystalline glass.

Just below each chair, on the raised platform on top of which they stood, were three accompanying epitaphs. Brendan's attention drew to the middle inscription, whose family of runes matched the ones on his sword's crossguard. The same style of runes that Rob swore was dwarven for *swift*.

“Grihm, what do these runes say?”

Grihm eyed it with a token glance, knowing exactly what it said with an air of familiarity gone sour. “It's a name.” he muttered.

Of course, Brendan thought. The names of the three kings. There were only two dwarven kings Brendan knew from stories: the first was Veg Bohldir, one of the three original dwarven kings and the namesake of the realm in which he and Grihm currently found themselves. The second was king Kilroy Huhgir, who had been king during the great

decimation; the king who helped Adelbrand defeat Drægan in the stories. Brendan was reluctant to ask about them, unsure of the distinction between legend and history. Both blurred for Brendan when remembering Rob's surcoat and shield both of which bore phoenix sigils, clues which meant that they weren't all some children's fable. Drægan, Adelbrand his griffon, even the enchanted gauntlet, things that he knew weren't shouldn't be real, now he questioned them all. Though his doubt was still strong, it had been steadily wavering.

“Kilroy Huhgir.” The name sent a jolt through Brendan's body.

“As in *the* Huhgir? From the Decimation?”

Grihm held in a deep breath, “No. Huhgir, as in Huhgir the Truant, who died four decades ago.” Brendan looked confused so Grihm elaborated to end the inevitable series of questions. “Huhgir is a common dwarven name among the Dwarves of Bohldir.”

“What about Kilroy?”

“What about it?” the dwarf was visibly annoyed.

“Kilroy, the name. Is that common among your culture too.” Brendan caught the dwarf off-guard.

Under Grihm's burly whiskers was a hardened smile. “You're starting to irritate me.” The dwarf spoke through his teeth.

“I'm sorry. I was just curious.”

“Well, I’m not. Can’t you see I’m trying to open this ludicrous fluxing door. It would’ve been unlocked by now, if only I could concentrate for a full slagging minute without all the questions.”

Brendan heard him loud and clear, tightened his lips, and promised not to ask any more questions.

“...Kilroy is a family name. Every male child born of a Kilroy passes on that legacy. And no...Kilroy is not a common name, it’s a familial name—a royal one.” Grihm submitted.

“Wouldn’t they pass on the last name, not the first?”

“No.” Grihm answered, finishing the puzzle lock at last. A familiar popping echoed from the wall and Grihm slid the door aside. “It’s more tradition than a mandate.”

Brendan nodded that he understood and followed the dwarf through. The door was truer to dwarven stature than everything else so far in Veg Bohldir. Brendan, close to six feet tall, brushed his hair on the top of the threshold as he passed through which forced him to duck awkwardly through the passage beyond.

The tunnel was carved out of stone but only for function. Brendan noticed the roughness of the cuts. There were no carvings or etchings, just a rough, earthen shaft. And luckily for Brendan, it expanded the further they went because his sore back couldn’t take much more hunching.

At the end of the long underpass, there was a faint aura of soft purple light bleeding through. As they emerged from the passage, the floor dropped off and the walls

emancipated, and opened to the largest cave Brendan had ever seen. The cavern's inner walls were covered with massive crystal pillars, hundreds of giant shards, some as tall as the Ivory Spire in Costone, all jutting toward the center like a massive geode. It was from the crystals that the enchanting purple glow originated. Sunlight broke through from fissure above and refracted through the crystal. Even the smallest among them were still larger than he was, Brendan reckoned.

Brendan imagined that the cavern could fit all Costone, including the village and keep, and still be mostly empty. It was an entire world below, equal to the one above only more breathless in its majesty. Brendan couldn't fathom how spacious it was but could tell that it plummeted hundreds of feet below to a dark shallow water. His eyes followed the murky stream to a mouth at the very far end of the realm where a tremendous stone highway, suspended above the water by grand pillars, which connected Veg Bohldir to whatever lied beyond. There was too much for Brendan's eyes to take in.

"Pick yer jaw up and follow me." Grihm said bluntly.

Off to the side, there were stairs zig-zagging all the way down to the bottom. It would've been easily missed if not for Grihm. Brendan followed the dwarf down twelve flights before stopping.

"This is Veg Bohldir." Grihm gestured toward the center of the realm as if he were inviting Brendan to explore.

Directly ahead of Brendan was a black stone bridge similar to the one he spotted leading toward the darkness. Lining the top edges and spanning the length of the bridge, was more of the curious black glass that King Kilroy's throne was made from. Similarly,

they too resembled frostbitten fire. At the very end of the bridge stood the imposing fortress that looked as if it had been carved directly from the stone. Its centerpiece was a structure that looked like a hollow dwarven helm lying in wait for two spelunkers to wander into its mouth like the prey of an Agrippa just to bite down and consume them with a single gulp.

It took around twenty minutes for Brendan and Grihm to reach the fortress. At the top of the entrance, the same dwarven inscription, that spelled out the name Kilroy, stretched across the doorway in giant runes. Below, was another door with yet another puzzle lock. Grihm sighed as if he'd forgotten about the door. Vexed, he went to work unlocking the "last fluxing lock he ever wanted to see." As if on cue, Brendan started a line of questions for Grihm.

"This tower says 'Kilroy.' Does that mean it belongs to the King and his family?"

"Common sense says yes." Said the dwarf.

"All these locks, do all dwarves have the secret?"

"Yes...and no."

"What about this one?"

"...No." Grihm sighed.

"Then how do you know it?" Brendan had a feeling he knew the answer: Grihm must have been an incredibly crafty burglar. The dwarf even looked like a rogue with the black cloak and prickly personality. Brendan followed that line of thought, and his imagination did the rest. Maybe Grihm knew a Kilroy who gave him the key. Or maybe he



stole the secret or won it in a game of Zara. Or maybe...he was a dwarven saboteur, he thought.

Grihm concentrated on the lock, deftly moving its pieces. Brendan saw that the dwarf heard his question. That's when it all came together. "It's yours, isn't it? Your name is Kilroy. Kilroy Grihm." Brendan said, excited to have solved the riddle. "Was Huhgir your father or grandfather? That would make you king of—"

"—Nothing! It makes me the king of nothing." Grihm unlocked the door at last and entered the tower. Brendan followed patiently behind, keeping his distance from the huffy dwarf.

"This is amazing, Grihm." Brendan's jaw dropped once more at the marvelous dwarven architecture. Even as he grew up pilfering from the nobles in upper Costone, he had never seen such marvels in his life. The ceilings were high and vaulted. A carved relief spackled its surface. Though Brendan could tell it was a work of art, it was falling apart and covered in dust. A far cry from the brilliance it must have had.

As Brendan walked through, the room morphed into a dizzying maze of staircases and crisscrossing halls. Hidden rooms and chambers, not visible from the outside, split the fortress up into a castle fit for at least a half-dozen families. It was like a village unto itself. There were doors made of gold, silver, and stone. Each section seemed to be themed as such, matching the walls and décor. There were miniature bouquets of those purple crystals lining each threshold. Brendan was curious about their function. And just when he was about to ask about them, he noticed that Grihm was gone.

To the west side of the fortress, there was a large area that looked like a forge, but a forge made for dwarves as the giant metal kettle suggested. There were valves and pipes everywhere which led to a massive metal structure Brendan didn't recognize. The Barazine were amazing, he thought. The ghostly odor of heated steel should have given it away, but everything in the fortress smelled like a forge. Brendan investigated closer and found some dusty molds of axes and hammers, but only their molds. Everything had been emptied out. As if everyone packed up and left.

Brendan kept getting distracted by the fortress, the sheer size of which would be disorienting for any non-dwarf. He wondered if any human had ever been this far inside the realm.

“Aagh...” Grihm yelled.

Brendan heard Grihm from somewhere above. Then a loud bang.

He raced toward his voice, climbed up a staircase until he was on what had to be another wing entirely. Above was gold and silver and intricate castings made for a king, but this was something different and far more precious. Almost everything was made from the same mysterious obsidian.

Grihm yelled again.

There was a large hallway lined in thick square pillars. More of the crystals lined the halls which led directly to an altar.

Bang!

Every few feet there was a recess built into the walls of the hallway each home to an ornamental weapon and a set of dwarven armor. The armor was like nothing he'd ever seen. Despite his last four years working as Rob's apprentice. Armor wasn't mailed, it was fully plated head to toe. The joints had been articulated to give the wearer flexibility without sacrificing defense. It was revolutionary. The plates were guarding all the parts that would typically maim a soldier: shoulders, wrists, legs, head. Brendan had never seen armor like this. Absent were any gaps that would let slip a spear, nor any joint that could be severed by a blade. The entire thing was solid and impregnable. Resting just above was a small skull in a great helm. In fact, there was a skull above each set of armor. Death lined the walls of this hall which made it less inviting.

BANG!

Grihm was pounding an old dwarven helmet into a wall. A set of plate armor lying dismantled on the floor.

"Grihm, what are you doing?"

"Shut up and help me break down this wall." Grihm was at the very end of the hallway. He was trying to get inside the wall.

"What's going on, is there something back there?"

"My mother."

"What!? Your mother?" Brendan wasn't sure he heard him correctly. His mother was in the wall? Why?

"What is this place?" Brendan asked.

“A tomb,” he said, walking away from the inlet and toward another still displaying a set of armor. Grihm reached inside and pulled out a mighty war hammer. “This is more like it.” He said, his face stretched wide in a smile.

Brendan quickly backed away as Grihm swung the massive hammer into the wall he had been laboring on, crumbling the recess into pieces with a few hardy swings.

“There she is...” he said before discarding the hammer like a piece of trash.

Brendan saw him walk through the wall. Inside was a hidden chamber. There was no armor, only a dress of some kind, very elegant, very brutal. Grihm grabbed something black and stonelike from the top of the alter and placed it in his bag then walked back out before the dust had time to settle.

“I got what we came here for. It’s time to leave this place.” Brendan had many questions for the dwarf, but as he thought about it, he refrained after seeing tears swelling inside Grihm’s eyes. Just before they ascended back to the surface, Grihm pardoned himself into what Brendan assumed was his childhood room, though it had been bigger than most villas in Costone. After a few restless minutes, Grihm walked out, carrying a pack with him. His beard had been trimmed, braided, and reset with dozens of his metallic beads. Even more transformative, he had shaved off all his hair and was as bald as could be.

## Grimrock

Done with the ruins, Kilroy and Brendan re-saddle their destriers and head down the road South-East. It would've taken longer, but the dwarf suggested that they take the road out of the dwarven realm toward the city of Beobluff before turning West toward the Raven, completely curtailing the Tinderwood and any chance of running into the Black Fang Gang. It was the safer route.

Brendan knew of Beobluff but had never been there. But he knew it used to be sovereign under the Weghmoor kingdom before the Myrian Civil Wars. Now, it was a vassal state of Costone.

The way south was a breeze compared to galloping the Tinderwood. They were making good time, despite their grumbling stomachs. Brendan hoped that they would stop to find a quick meal, for them and their horses.

They followed the highway for a few miles before coming onto a bend. The road would have taken them in the opposite direction so, keeping with their route, they went right, down a narrow path that wound through a dense tract of sprawling woodlands. Brendan gazed through the trees as he rode. Everywhere he'd been the last few days had shown more diversity than he'd ever seen growing up in the muddy mires of Costone. These woods were old-growth and primeval. Unlike the Tinderwood, these trees weren't so tightly packed. Overhead, the sun rose over the canopy above, filtering the soft blushing light through the leaves saturating the morning mist in apricot hues.

Kilroy was quiet and sulking in his saddle with a vacant stare. Brendan was concerned. He hadn't spoken a word since leaving his ancestral fortress.

“Grihm...I mean Kilroy?”

“Call me what you want.” Brendan knew him as Grihm first, so that's what he called him.

“What was it that you found in the tomb?” It had been bugging him since Grihm emerged from his home with a stuffed bag slung over his shoulder.

After a few more seconds of silence, the dwarf spoke. “You knew of my ancestor Huhgir the First...from your stories?” Grihm’s mustache wrinkled.

“No. Well, yes. But mostly from my uncle Rob. And he got them from some book written by someone named Vyncis Mælen.”

“Did you ever read it yourself?”

“Some...”

“What did they say about him?” His tone softened as if in wonderment.

“They said he earned the nickname ‘first’ because he was the first of his name. Or maybe it was because he was the first to place his trust in Adelbrand, someone other than a dwarf. But they all describe him as being honorable and loyal to a fault, but also a wise, intelligent ruler and a cunning warrior, who was of the highest caliber of king. The pinnacle...of the Barazine. Vyncis wrote of sagas that say that he helped craft Adelbrand’s gauntlet used to defeat Drægan.”

“And do you believe it?” It was Grihm with all the questions now. “You believe the gauntlet is real, the gods, and this all-powerful sorcerer addicted to death magic?”

Brendan was conflicted. No, perhaps he didn’t believe Adelbrand was real, and perhaps he didn’t believe that he defeated a tyrannical necromancer over four hundred years ago with a magic gauntlet. Admittedly, it all sounded a little too childish as Grihm spoke of it. He did, however, believe that the legends could have been based on real events as all legends undoubtedly were. But it was so long ago that some of the historical accounts may have been embellished and read more like poetic tales designed to teach children the

about the folly of man's hubris or some other such nonsense. And the only in-depth historical records came from a scholar who lived centuries after the *Decimation* had ended who had also been famously dead for more than three decades. Brendan admitted to himself that he desperately wanted to believe in the magic written in the lore, something so powerful that could explain all the misery he had recently found in the world. Some evil magic causing all his pain. And if it were true, that would mean magic could make the world better too, but he had never seen magic with his own eyes, even when Grihm explained the fire inside the ruins, he still stubbornly held on to that juvenile wish.

“Are you a conjurer?”

“Am I a what?”

“A conjurer, a mage. They were said to have existed long ago and are all extinct now...or never actually existed. But I watched you manipulate the fire in the antechamber. How'd you do it?”

Grihm didn't quite know if Brendan was serious. “That wasn't magic.” He laughed. “That was a gas line. There's a hollow metal rod built inside the wall that connects each of the braziers. What you saw was me soaking and lighting the prime. The rest ignited when I opened the gas valve.”

“Oh...” Brendan didn't quite understand the machinations Grihm described, but he guessed he didn't see magic after all. Then maybe it was all just some stories of senile fiction, he thought.

“It seems like you want to believe it.”



“I don’t know, Grihm. I think I do. I’d like to believe that there are forces beyond my control, that there was something holding the world together, you know. There must be a reason for everything, a reason for living, a reason that the universe gives to us and takes it all away in an instant.” His mind dwelt on his uncle, on his parents. “Maybe the existence of magic, keeps hope alive. Maybe if it’s real, it means that I can make someone come back. And if not magic, then the heroes themselves; I want to believe that someone that can stand up for the innocent and protect the weak from the devils of our world.”

“You have a sword. Why don’t you defend the innocent with that?”

“I tried...I failed.” He said, rubbing the vambraces that covered his forearms and remembering the gnoll attack.

“You know, I grew up with books too. I didn’t have the one you mention with the phoenix and the other, nor did we have any chronicles written by some old dotard, but we had lots of dusty tomes and scrolls hidden in our library. I remember one of them was written by someone named Albert Crater. Some ancient kook æthrologist.” Grihm’s edge softened.

“You mean Alcar Crædon? The Archjudge of the Conjury?” Brendan’s voice jittered.

“Aye...maybe that’s it. Well, according to him, magic was real. I only read a few pages. It was stodgier than a fat shit if you ask me. All philosophy and rules of morality. But that wasn’t my question. Do you believe the part about the Incarnates?”

“Incarnates?”

“Yeah, you mentioned Adelbrand...and Drægan? From the way you told me the story, they seemed more like the Incarnates Alcar wrote about when you think about it.”

*Incarnates?* It was the first time Brendan ever heard the term.

“...and if they lived, that means they died. What happened to them? Where are they buried? And why don't we celebrate this Adelbrand if he'd supposedly saved the world? I've heard nothing of them until you. Is it some Myrian myth?”

Grihm managed to place seeds of doubt in his mind about the whole thing. But what was that word he used, *Incarnate*? Why was that word so familiar? Had he heard it before somewhere? From Rob, from a book? It made him anxious. Belief or no belief, Grihm possessed knowledge he didn't.

“What are incarnates?” He asked.

“In that story, you told me, you said Adlebrand and Drægan were the avatars of good and evil. That Adlebrand had been the goddesses champion and Drægan the dark god Rhoem's. Sounds eerily familiar to what Alcar bumbled on about. I remember reading something about ‘the power of the gods made flesh’ though I don't think he was talking about his gods. Whichever god he was talking about, he used the word ‘incarnate.’”

Brendan agreed that the sounded too familiar to be coincidence, but he was reluctant to jump on that wagon to where it would lead. He'd rather just forget about the whole thing of magic and gods and get a good meal in his stomach.

Brendan smelled wood burning and his appetite bubbled. Just past another small bend, smoke rose into the flrid orange sky carrying the scent of cooking bread from a

small, clandestine village. The homes were small and few and planted in firmly in the ground. Each home was a hill and looked as though it was born from the earth, pushing up the land as it emerged. As they approached, he noticed that the village was built around a shallow crater. Lying in the pit, was a single boulder.

The village didn't have any markers or signage of any kind. There was no one outside except for an older man quietly sitting by his home, smoking pipe weed. It was the home from which the smoke and fresh aroma originated. Grihm and Brendan pulled on their reins and came to a halt. Grihm handed Brendan his reins and leapt down.

“Excuse me sir. Might there be any food for weary travelers? We're good for trade if it'll help square you off.”

The old man had no teeth, making his jaw collapse when he chewed. He gave no impression other than a mute. He pointed toward one of the other homes. Brendan spoke for the dwarf, thanking the old man for his help. Grihm, on the other hand, gave Brendan a silent look. He felt the same: this was a hidden village, not on a main road or highway. He wondered if Grihm knew this place. When they turned down the path in the woods, Brendan never expected to find a village waiting for them.

Brendan jumped out of his saddle as well as walked along side Grihm. The latter knocked on the door to which the old man pointed. The door was marked with some sort of symbol Brendan thought he recognized carved deep into the wood, but he couldn't place it. Grihm knocked and knocked until a man revealed himself. He looked about Grihm's age, perhaps a decade older, rusty hair with greying roots. He had answered the door

barefoot and dressed in layers of grey and brown robes. His eyes were as green as the sod roofing his home.

“Who are ye, bothering me at this ungodly hour?”

“Apologies. Me and the boy here are near starved. Our mounts too. Might be you have some food to break our fasts and some hay or oats to feed our horses? We have goods for trade if you prefer that to coin. We’d appreciate any you could spare and once we’ve eaten, we’ll be on our way.”

“And which way would that be?”

“—West.” Brendan interrupted, replacing the words that formed in Grihm’s mouth before they could reveal too much. “We’re going West...to uh, visit my grandmother, Beatrix, in Costone.

“Your kin too, dwarf?” the man sneered.

“The boy, I came across while travelling my own path. We’ve the same destination so we joined each other’s company. We’re of no relation.” Grihm told him, trying to make him smile.

“You don’t think I can tell the difference between a midget and a mongrel?” The man spat with disgust. “And neither of you had the sense of bringing enough rations to last your journey?” Brendan’s nose flared and his lip curled. He was losing his patience with the man and found that his hands were becoming restless. In fact, the more words that flapped out of the man’s jaws stoked Brendan’s agitation.

“Our supplies were stolen from us while we slept.” Brendan said through a clinched jaw.

The geezer sucked his teeth, “See that house over there? Take your horses around the back and latch them there. They can eat what’s left of the hay. I’ll have something ready by the time you get back. Then you lot can leave a man to his peace.” And the man shut the door in their faces.

Brendan was furious. He’d never seen such inhospitality. He’d been taught to respect travelers. His father said it was because you never knew who you might be spurning. You could inadvertently be rejecting your own murderer, desperate and willing to kill for a bite of food. Or it could be a rich merchant whose wagon broke down and would be grateful to pay back your kindness with coin. Most of all, you were supposed to be kind to strangers because it was the right thing to do. This man was a stranger too and Brendan didn’t like him very much.

“What’s wrong with that man. Did you hear what he said?” Brendan asked Grihm as they tied their mounts as instructed, far enough from the man as to not hear them.

“I heard it.” Said the dwarf. “I don’t like the nithing either, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

“But you offered to pay. How’s that begging?”

“We’re putting him out. I don’t see a mil, no fields, no room to raise beef or anything else. Just a small coup. Besides, you think I’m gonna pay him after what he called me?” Grihm winked.

“Not that I care, but what if he doesn’t like giving away food for free? What if the other villagers try to rob us?” The man gave Brendan a terrible feeling. Something didn’t feel right.

“That’s what we got you for, hero.” The dwarf snarked. The last time Brendan wanted to be a hero, he failed, paralyzed by fear. The only fight he’d ever won was against a haggard, half-crazed gnom. The thought alone was causing him to freeze up, despite his sweaty hands.

Brendan left his shield with the horses and the pair made their way back to the house that belonged to the enormous prick. As promised the man had their food ready by the time they returned. Except it was left outside. The man hadn’t been bothered to hand it to them in person. He really did hate them, Brendan thought.

“I guess he didn’t want payment.” Grihm huffed under his breath.

“Maybe he had some sense.” He said, looking at the bowl, “its pottage. And from the smell of it, not fresh either.”

“Beggars can’t—”

“—be choosers.” He knew. For Grihm’s prickliness, he was surprisingly calm about all of this. He was even showing gratitude in receiving slop by a man who hated him for the way he looked. As a king, maybe he had other problems to think about.

Regardless, Brendan knocked back the revolting soup. He regretted not starving to death for this was worse. The taste wouldn’t leave his tongue and there was nothing to

wash to taste out either. The only beverages they had were the bottles of mead they killed last night. It was so bad that Brendan thought he might throw it back up.

“I didn’t think there were still settlers this deep.” Said Brendan, eyeing the small, logged cabins and its peculiar decorations of animal bones and sigils. Again, the sigils looked familiar to Brendan. He tried to remember where he had seen such symbols, but he was having trouble putting his thoughts together. The two sat in quiet for a few minutes silently listening to the wind whistling through the trees.

That’s when the trees began to tilt. He looked to Grihm with a pallid, glazed expression. “G-Grihm?” he muttered. The trees surrounding them started to dance in the wind, their leaves rustling and shaking, their bright, fiery eyes whistling and convulsing. The sky turned black. Brendan saw more villagers staring at him from atop the hills and behind the trees and from inside their huts. Stiff shadows wearing monstrous faces and flaming eyes. He looked for his horse, he reached for Grihm. He tried to get up, but his knees buckled, and he tripped. “Grihm” he cried out feebly before collapsing face first to the ground. Everything went black.

A cold sweat crawled down his spine. A brief hint of heat and light washed over him as he started to regain consciousness, though the world was still violently spinning. His bowels burned as he woke to his arms and legs bound to a wooden fixture; his limbs were spread apart. Directly in front of him was the single monolithic boulder he saw living at the bottom of the pit. Above, standing around him on the edge of the crater, were a half-dozen jagged shadows holding fire and chains.

One of the shadows stepped out and on top of a kind of platform. Its face was that of nightmares: stark-white, splinters where a mouth should be with black sunken holes for eyes darker than the shadow-man himself. Dangling on its sides were several glimmering sparkles that fluttered near antlers made of lightning.

The shadows started to chant in a haunting melody, guttural and repetitive. Brendan was still weak but tensed and strained his muscles as best he could, but try as he might, he couldn't escape his bonds and just the effort alone made him nauseous. The shadow with the ghoulish face lifted its arms in orison to the moon between the trees. Brendan thought he saw movement from the massive stone in front of him. It was three times the mass of his horse and firmly entrenched. The stone's rough exterior and crevasses made it look like a withered skull screaming in agony. A tangled web of vines growing down its side added to the horror and resembled peeling flesh. Carved into its forehead was the strange wheel symbol he had seen in Beatrix's apothecary in Costone. He could feel what felt like a heartbeat pulsing from it. And when he could no longer fight to look away, he stared into its eyes which swirled with darkness. Then, what he heard as a long hiss came oozing out from its wicked maw.

Brendan's body tremored. He desperately tried to wake himself, shaking his head and biting his lip. He felt his pulse high in his throat beat furiously and loud.

As the orchestra of voiced persisted, the shadow-man spoke proudly. "With the blood of the abomination, we cleanse thee."

"Lo, do we beseech you!" the others replied in unison.

"With the flesh of the unclean, we feed thee—"



“Lo, do we beseech you!

“With the breath of the damned, we call to thee—”

“Lo, do we beseech you!”

Brendan shook uncontrollably, jerking and squirming as their leader ambled down the pit.

*“Please don’t kill me. Please don’t kill me.”* He repeated to himself.

The shadow-man crept ever closer, its spiny teeth and jagged horns twisted while reaching with a withered outstretched hand. Its coal-like eyes were as dark as pitch and oozed blackness down its bony face. The cold hand reached Brendan; its touch was searing cold. *“No, no, no, I don’t want to die.”* He begged to himself once again, hoping that this was only a night terror. The stone skull behind the shadow-man still hissed, calling like a desperate cry in the dark from a deep hollow cave.

“With the spirit of the forsaken...” the shadow-man spoke. “Oh, Lord of Death...lo, do we beseech you!”

Suddenly, Brendan heard distant, wailing screams. The shadow-man let go of Brendan and rushed toward the commotion. Brendan couldn’t see what was happening, he only saw the giant skull hungering in front of him, waiting to devour his soul. Still dazed, he saw the shadows dart across the trees and the moon light, clashing with each other in the flickering light of the fires. He heard screeching and clanging and occasional droughts of dead silence. For a single terrifying moment or two, Brendan thought it was over. Until he felt his arms and legs being cut free.

Brendan fell flat on his face then was lifted by Grihm holding his shield to his chest.

“Shh...take it while they’re distracted and let’s move.” Grihm said with extreme urgency.

But Brendan could barely move.

“Slag!” he said, “Come on, Bren. You’ve got to get up.”

For a moment, he thought it had been uncle Rob come to rescue him again, but as the ground moved beneath him and the world spun on at a dizzying pace, he saw that it had been Grihm. The burly figure of shimmering metal stood before him like an indomitable figure painted head to toe with the orange and red light of fire and blood.

“You were right not to trust the shitbag.” Grihm told him.

“Grihm? Is that you?”

Brendan felt that he was growing more lucid and with Grihm’s help, made it out of the crater. When he looked around the village, he saw carnage: Felled torches scattered about, their flames writhing in the dirt angrily lashing out. A couple villagers had been lying lifeless on the ground. Some had their face crushed and others were still leaking to death.

As they moved toward the tree line for some way of escape, the shadow-man with the horns returned with three others at his back. Brendan took his shield and held it tight, and with his right hand unsheathed his sword. He looked toward Grihm and saw the strange black object in the dwarve’s hand and thought the soup was still making him see things

because it looked just like a skull, a small dwarven skull. And there was a long chain attached and wrapped loosely around Grihm's forearm.

A brutal fight ensued. Brendan couldn't get his footing and swung wildly like a desperate animal put into a corner. But with his shield, he couldn't control Swift as he ought to and whiffed several easy strikes. If they had been competent fighters, he would have been dead for sure, run through after the first swing, but these men weren't trained soldiers, they were savage cultists, the same as the gnolls that took Rob from him. Brendan lashed out in a fury then soon blacked out.

When he came to, he saw Grihm's somber, stony expression, on the back of a horse. Brendan was still slipping in and out of consciousness as they galloped away from the cursed village. Was he dreaming? He thought. Had he been fighting? The question could barely form before he passed out again.

The Town of Arshill

The Tiny Lute

Brendan found himself lying in an ocean of sand. He watched the white-hot sun high above him spinning around and around, circling the cloudless sky. He lied there unmoving, letting the abrasive dust roil his skin. Everything hurt: His throat cracked with poverty and every swallow forced by the arid winds fractured the skin of his lips. Brendan rolled onto his stomach and crawled up the drift in desperate search for water. Every inch moved sent aches to his stomach. His arms and legs felt as heavy as anvils and weighed heavier still until he could no longer move. Too tired to continue, Brendan dropped his head into the sand. Underneath its sunbaked surface, it was cool and comfortable. Serenity showered over him as he surrendered himself to the desert.

A murmur woke him from his calm, "*Lindiwe...*" the name tickled his spine, "...*one who is 'awaited'*..." the words flowed through him, filling him with a cold vitality. "...*open your eyes, my child.*" Brendan looked upon the figure speaking to him. She was regal and elegant. Her skin was dark and beautiful, the very shade of night. She wore robes of streaming golden sand. Her eyes were blue and rejuvenating like chips of glacial ice. As he stared into them, unable to look away, he felt her sorrow. But suddenly those blue eyes melted away as the earth ripped the two apart. Then, Brendan was falling from the sky, diving headlong into the sea. At the very last second of his plummet into the water, just as he was about to break the surface—

Brendan gasped from the splash of freezing cold water seizing his lungs. When he opened his eyes, he didn't find a desert, or the mysterious woman nor was he in an ocean. Instead, he found himself on the ground next to a river with Grihm hovering over him with an empty bucket.

“There! You’re awake.”

Brendan swept the water from his face and looked at the dwarf. Brendan screamed and was in a state of panic when Grihm calmed him down.

“—wait, what happened, where are we?” he asked.

“So, you don’t remember anything?”

“I remember...” he thought, “The last thing I saw was—the skull, the rock. It was going to take my soul.” Brendan’s eyebrows jumped. “Who the hell were those people, the ritual, what were they trying to do to me?” Brendan’s heart thumped in his throat and his ears felt like they were on steaming.

“Nothing good,” said the dwarf.

“Wait—it was you! *You* saved me.” Said Brendan “I thought I was going to die.

“Yeah, well something smelled funny. We dwarves wouldn’t have lasted this long in this world, with you lot, without a healthy level of...let’s call it ‘survival acuity.’ And well, I’m as paranoid as they come.”

“Wait, you knew? Why didn’t you tell me? We could’ve left.” Brendan was becoming more distraught thinking about what could have happened if Grihm hadn’t bothered to come back. With each passing second, he got more upset at the dwarf until he took a deep breath and calmed himself by remembering Rob’s words to him when they sparred in the sandy courtyard behind the furnace: “*Remain calm and in control of yourself, for nothing can happen until you can think clearly.*” He would never forget it.

Brendan took a deep breath.

“...Thank you.” He exhaled.

“Ah, don’t mention it. But if we’re keeping track, that’s two you owe me, *hero*.”  
Grihm smirked.”

That’s just like Grihm, making light of a terrible situation. Though Brendan was still finding it hard to get a beat on the dwarf. Sometimes he felt warm and social other times he felt cold and distant. Whichever version he was with, he was still glad to have him. He’d be dead or hell, still locked inside the cell at the Bastard’s Bastion.

Kilroy told them that they had travelled together all the way to Arshill without further molestation. He told him that he had been poisoned, drugged by the old man at the hamlet in the woods. Grihm told him that once he fell to the ground that other people wearing strange frocks and masks open their doors and came after them. Grihm tried to carry him to safety, but the villagers were too fast, so he took his horse and fled deep into the woods where he was followed, leaving Brendan alone and vulnerable until he snuck back and lit one of their lodges on fire as a distraction.

*Damn cowards*, Brendan kept thinking to himself after Grihm had also told him that the cultists had killed his horse. She was a good horse and they killed her. And he would have been next if it weren’t for the jaded dwarf. Even though Grihm could be—grim, he wasn’t all bad. In fact, Brendan started to like him. Even considering him a friend. His first friend, really. But it seemed to Brendan that escaping death was their only bond, though he hoped that wasn’t the case.

“Grihm?” A question kept lurking in Brendan’s mind.

“What?”

“I’m starting to remember the cabins.” He confessed. “There were weird symbols scratched around their doors. I think I know where I’ve seen them before.”

“Hmm...I must have been paying too much attention.” Grihm said.

Brendan recalled the night he broke into Beatrix’s apothecary and saw a strange ancient book. The runes looked eerily similar to the ones that decorated the cabins.

“You gonna keep me in suspense?” Grihm asked.

“Sorry,” Brendan replied. “There was this old book...”

“Go on”

“It was in Costone. I found it a few years back while trying to steal a necklace from an apothecary. She was this old hag who spat omens and malisons at anyone she felt deserved it. On the last day I was in Costone, she told me that I was *‘marred by death’* just before gnolls raided the village. Then, those assholes tried sacrificing me to the *Lord of Death*. They were the same symbols.”

“Well, unless you remembered what they looked like, I’m afraid yer up shit’s creek.” Grihm said. “But don’t get all fluxed, maybe someone in Arshill can help you.”

“Do you think I’m cursed?”

“Where’d that come from?”



“I’ve almost died more times than I care to count in the last week.”

“You’ve seen a lot of death the past few days, but that doesn’t mean you’re cursed.” Grihm reassured, “if anything at all it makes you *more* human.” He said reassuringly. “Cause you lot can’t go a slagging week without killing something.” He added in jest.

Grihm helped Brendan up and onto his horse, before trotting the rest of the way to Arshill. Brendan’s wound was throbbing and so was his head. One harrowing encounter after another, it was a shock to him that his heart hadn’t failed. Perhaps if he had been alone. With Grihm at his side, everything seemed more bearable.

“Grihm.” He said.

“What now?”

The town of Arshill was a pleasant sight far from the wilderness and ruins of the Minas. Brendan became so swept up in the beauty of the natural world, that he overlooked its dangers and was glad to be in civilization once again. They were still a few hours East of the Tranquil Raven, according to Grihm, so they drove into town to rest their tattered nerves and replenish their empty stomachs, this time sans poison.

Arshill was a city unlike Costone. It wasn’t walled like the capital nor protected by a wall of solid stone perched safely atop a high hill. Instead, it was open and spread flat beside a mellow river. Though what it made up for in openness, it lacked in size. Brendan counted three-dozen buildings and only two streets. It was only just bigger than

his home village. However, he noticed that no one in Arshill looked at him with crossed eyes. They simply went about their business.

But everywhere they walked there were Costone sigils flapping in the breeze. The silver wings of a raven spread in flight over a void of black and purple. Underneath each Costone raven was the Arshill's sigil, twin black crows on a thick starburst of white and blue. In the crows' beaks they shared a silver annulet signifying its fealty to Costone. Each shoppe, barber, tavern, or inn flew both flags in that exact arrangement. But each shoppe displayed their crow proudly on their signage. The blacksmith's was a hammer and vice, framed by two crows; the tavern's was a drunken lutenist framed by two crows; the tanners' was a piece of hide and two fleshing knives, framed by two crows. The same pattern was true for every sign he saw—all identically framed by two crows.

There were many places to choose from, but only one place that beckoned their immediate attention—the tavern with the inebriated musician, called The Tiny Lute. True to its name, the tavern hosted a performer playing the comically sized instrument. The patrons were in good spirits if not a little raucous.

Grihm gave him a silver coin and patted him on the back, a genuine smile grew under his whiskers as he harked toward the tapster. Brendan rolled the coin between his fingers and followed the dwarf, looking at the other guests enjoying their food and drink. The tavern was dark inside with only candles lighting its interior. At the bar, he exchanged the crown for a narrow wedge of fully aged goat cheese and a hot shepherd's pie. He washed his meal down with a large tankard of strong ale. The tangy finish of the cheese complimented the savouriness of the pie, flavors which were enhanced by the

crisp, herbal snap of the hops. Brendan's mouth was in ecstasy. He cleaned his dish with ease and ordered another tankard, this time a malt. It was delicious and thick with layers of caramelized toffee with accents of dried orange.

When Brendan found Grihm, he was sitting in the back of the tavern talking with a buxom blonde woman mostly finished with his fourth small beer.

"Who's your friend?" the strumpet smiled, with a large, noticeable gap between her two front teeth.

"This is Brendan, *my ward*." He winked at the boy, pulling him down to sit. "Tell her what happened at the Bastard's Bastion." The busty woman listened with rapt attention to the story of their escape. The woman seemed impressed, and her freckled cheeks flushed after hearing Brendan's recount. Kilroy held his chin high and flirted with the maiden for what seemed too long. His kissing and smouches made Brendan feel uncomfortable. So, he waited outside with the horse to practice his sword draw.

Swift was a long sword and a bit annoying to maneuver latched to his hip. Moreover, it made removing it from the scabbard, whilst strapped to his back, extremely difficult. He thought about visiting the tanner for a different scabbard or the smith to ask another way to draw out his sword, but the day was getting late with more than a few miles between them and their destination.

Finally, Brendan would find out who Seth was and how he knew his father and his uncle. He thought about the Vigil and Rob. He thought about his stories of Adelbrand and his magic gauntlet. He thought about Grihm, the heir to a kingdom of ghosts. Perhaps Seth was just a means to an end. Maybe Rob knew Seth was going to help him, someone

who knew his uncle that could find work for him and help him resettle. He could imagine that life. He would work until evening, then visit the Raven for drinks or maybe return to his home, maybe to a lovely wife—perhaps, Amée, the lovely nurse he met at the sanctuary. He could forget about the nonsense of magic and heroes. Perhaps meeting Seth would end his adventuring for good. Though, he would miss experiencing the world, but at least he would never feel the pains of hunger or thirst again. Or the pinch of cold steel on his throat, the chill of night on bare skin, or the crippling fear of dying. Maybe, at last, he could properly mourn his uncle—a thought he repeatedly shoved aside. He didn't understand why, he rejected the reality hoping that he has somehow survived. There were questions still burning inside and he was determined to find the answers, but first he had to find Seth.

## The Mirelands

### The Tranquil Raven

Grihm had enough coin from selling some of his goods to purchase another horse to replace Brendan's. The boy made quick friends of his new palfrey, a rose gray mare. He didn't know what to name her, so he stuck to calling her "Mary." As they rode West, toward the eventide sky of blue and pink, Brendan felt a rush of curiosity and excitement.

The Tranquil Raven was larger than he'd imagine. It made since once he remembered it was a tavern as well as an inn. And that meant it had beds. He and Kilroy walked into the main foyer and saw a scullion sweeping the floor and man soaking at the bar, drinking himself into a stupor in peace. It was very calming and empty. Brendan kept thinking about Seth. He was supposed to run this inn, but he wasn't around. Unless the man at the bar was Seth. Brendan doubted that very much.

An older woman walked down the stairs and greeted them, asking them if they sought "cups or cots." They settled on cots and paid the woman with a couple silvers. The

sweeping maid was instructed to take their things. When she grabbed for Brendan's shield, he withdrew. He didn't mean to jerk it away from her. It had been involuntary. "It's alright, child. We'll keep it stored. No one else will touch it, you have our word." Grihm nodded which meant that he should trust them. He reluctantly agreed and followed the woman up to their room. It was smaller than the cell where he met Grihm, but it was vastly better. It was warm and kept clean. There was only one bed however, and Grihm objected. When he was told that there weren't any other available rooms, he told Brendan that he should sleep on the floor. Brendan didn't listen, eventually sneaking on the bed. The dwarf didn't force the issue and was fast asleep, snoring loudly in a manner of minutes.

Brendan couldn't sleep; there was too many things to think about. What if Seth didn't know about the gnoll attack? How would he tell him about Rob? What happened if he meets Seth, and he doesn't tell him what he wants to hear. What if he couldn't help him? Worse, what if he could? Brendan lulled himself into a deep sleep weighing the endless consequences of infinite conversations.

The light bore through the wooden blinds and woke Brendan from his sopping pillow. He sat up and stretched his muscles and noticed something different about the room. There was a man sitting in the shaded corner holding a rolled parchment in his fist. Brendan searched for his shield and remembered it was taken by the woman. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Funny, I know who you are." The man said. His voice was gravelly and low like he was forever suffering from stuck phlegm in his throat.

“Seth?”

“Aye. And you’re Brendan, Marcus’s boy.” His nose was hawkish as were his eyes. He had a plain face with high cheek bones, and he wore a dark, loose-fitting cowl the same as his clothes. He looked like a shadow in physical form and so slender that he might fall through the floor.

“How’d you know?”

“I saw you when you was a little tyke.” He said, “barely came up past me breeches. Plus...you’ve got your father’s snore.” When Seth spoke, he didn’t blink. And as he looked at Brendan, his eyes looked through him, at something not present, something inconceivable. “Ser Rob’s dead then?”

The words stabbed at Brendan like a knife. They made him felt responsible, guilty that Rob sacrificed himself for him. And it was absolutely true. Brendan drew up his shoulders and tucked his elbows to his sides.

“He’s not with you which means he’s dead. How’d it happen?”

“...Gnolls overtook him.” The words felt foreign as if they weren’t real. His next words spilled out, ... “I tried to help; he wouldn’t let me. I know I could have helped; I know I could have.”

“Easy, easy. Don’t go blaming yourself. It’s your job not to let that sacrifice be in vain. Be the man he knew you to be, Brendan.”

“I was watching and he...I could’ve helped...he died—” Brendan couldn’t hold it in anymore. He mourned a week’s worth in an instant. Unfortunately, his outpouring woke the slugabed dwarf.

“What’s all this now?” Grihm muttered. But he was ultimately ignored.

“Your uncle is harder to kill than you think.” Said Seth, shaking the rolled-up parchment. “He’s alive.”

Brendan thought he herd Seth tell him that Rob wasn’t dead. As if he didn’t see him lying on the ground with gnolls all around him with his own eyes. Brendan’s anguish turned into confusion and rage.

“Look...” Seth handed Brendan the paper. “...it’s from Rob. I’d know his signature anywhere.”

Brendan took the paper and held it between his fingers. It was so light he couldn’t even feel its weight. He looked at Seth with skepticism who looked back at him with eagerness. Brendan unfurled the note and read each word, written in his father’s hand:

*Seth!*

*I found them! But Gnolls attacked Costone before I could rescue them. We are not dead. We’re being held against our will inside the keep along with half the missing. Talk of conspiracy is spreading. It’s Lady Elise. Bertom Rane is the key. Something big; something soon. Keep Brendan safe. It’s time for him to know the truth...*

~R.J.



Brendan dropped the letter and sat in silence. He felt more tears building up. He couldn't believe it, yet there it was: Rob's letter, his words. Brendan's mind became a flurry of thoughts: How did Rob survive? Why would Lady Elise hold his uncle hostage? And who was Bertom Rane? "Wait," his thoughts jumping from one question to the next, "Who are *they*? Who did Rob find?"

By the look in Seth's eyes, Brendan could tell he was choosing his words carefully. "What do you know of your parents' deaths?" He asked.

No. It isn't possible, Brendan thought. He looked at Grihm who shrugged ignorantly, yawning, and scratching himself. "Are you saying that Rob found my parents and that they—that they're—"

"Alive. Aye. It looks like it."

A childhood loneliness and anguish flashed by in an instant. All the pain he suffered through was brought back to the surface but so too were the fond memories of his parents. He wanted desperately to see his parents, to hug them so tight that they would burst. But how would he if the King's own betrothed gave the commands? Hell, how did Rob even get a letter out? How would they rescue them? The keep would be crawling with Ravenguard, how was he supposed to find a way in or find his parents?

Brendan read the letter again, but his vision was blurred by tears. "When Uncle Rob and I were trying to leave the city, he told me that the Vigil was real. Is that what he meant by *tell me everything*?"

"I'm not sure."

“How’d Rob get this letter to you?”

“I have my ways.” He said as a huge rat crawled up and perched on his shoulder.

Grihm squeaked when he noticed the greasy rodent, “Slag! You’ve got a rat on your back.”

“His name is Muffins and he ain’t no rat.”

“Then what would you call it then?” Grihm didn’t wait for a response and hastily sequestered himself to the farthest corner of the room away from the creature to Seth’s whimsy.

“On the night the Gnolls attacked, Uncle Rob saved me. He cut one of them in half. He was wearing a set of armor I have never seen before. The sigil looked familiar. A phoenix surrounded by a ring of thorns. Was Rob more than a blacksmith? Was he in the Vigil?”

Seth stood up and untied his tunic and pulled it down, revealing his bare chest and an old brand scaring his flesh. “It’s called the Circle of Thorns. It’s one of the Vigil’s three vanguards. And it’s very real. Rob was a vanguard before he met Marcus.”

“Is that how you know my father and uncle? Was my father in the vanguard too?”

“No. He weren’t. He was a travelling bard, your father. He had meet Rob in the Rhylands, near Almor, while he toured the mountainside for *‘inspiration.’* Rob was stationed there as an ambassador and spy. You see, that’s what the Circle of Thorns is—we’re spies, assassins, saboteurs, thieves.”

“What do you mean *met*? Are you saying they’re not brothers—Rob is not my real uncle?”

“Oh, I thought you knew.”

Maybe that’s what Rob meant by “tell him *everything*,” he thought. More and more discoveries bombarded Brendan, pulling him deeper underwater. Rob wasn’t his uncle; his parents were alive; the Vigil was real. But then that meant Adelbrand was real. And if *he* was real then Drægon was real then surely magic had to be real too. Rob wanted him to know the truth. And it was the answer to everything! *So, what now?* He thought.

Grihm was being quiet, listening patiently to their conversation while he stood in the corner, combing his hand through his beard. “Spies, assassins, and thieves...” he grumbled. “I should have known.”

“It were on a need-to-know, Grimy.” Said Seth, “It weren’t personal.”

“Doesn’t matter. Why would I care?” he threw the door open, “I’ll let you too finish your heart to heart. I’ll be waiting downstairs drinking you out of business.” His eyes shot straight into Seth’s. His demeanor soured instantly. “We still have our *matter* to discuss.” And with that, Grihm left and thumped downstairs.

Brendan had no idea what Grihm was referring to, but decided it wasn’t any of his business. Besides, there were still questions Seth had left unanswered.

“So then, what was Uncle Rob? Spy, thief, or something else?”

“Spy.”

“And you?”

“...something else.” Seth finally blinked. Brendan wondered what he meant by that.

“So, what now? Are you going to rescue my parents, assassinate Lady Elise?”

“It’s actually *Queen* Elise now. My intelligence says she arranged for her advisor, the man Rob spoke of in the letter, Bertom Rane, to perform the rites. Her father had been there visiting from Reywich. Rumor is that he’s her captive too.”

“But why? Why would she do all this?”

“That’s what we aim to find out. What we do know is that she wants to hire the Golden Legion to keep her Kingdom “safe,” using that brazen gnoll attack as reason enough. My moles intercepted a missive. She wrote that she fears another attack. Says that’s why they had a closed wedding ceremony. It all seems just a little too convenient to me.”

“I’ve heard of the Golden Legion! They’re one of the three vanguards, aren’t they?”

“Aye. The knights in shining amor.”

“So, if she was behind everything the Golden Legion would never agree. Would they?”

“But that’s precisely what they *need* to do.” Brendan didn’t understand. “The Legion will do as their duty demands. Most of the legionnaires won’t know, but the inner

circle will observe from within. The moment our new Queen gives them any reason to remove her from power, they'll do so. How convenient for the Legion that they just happen to be in the area? It'll be a checkmate before the game ever begins." Seth confessed. "Rob is smarter than he looks; he'll protect your parents till then. And if I know anything at all about your father, he won't need Rob to protect his own ass. He may have just been a bard, but he did travel with Rob and me and he picked up a few things."

"So, is the Legion there?"

"That's where you come in." Seth smirked, "I need you to take the message we intercepted from Elise's courier—he's actually one of ours—and take it to a man by the name of Aaren Rose, that's the Legion's commander. He should be up in Stahyrst with the Rhyland chief in about a sennight."

"Why me and not the courier or one of your other spies?"

"Because you're a wild card, an unknown. And let's just say I don't like to play with just the cards from my deck. It's restrictive, and I don't like boundaries."

"What if I don't want to go?"

"That's fine if you don't. Stay here. I'm sure I can find a broom for you to sweep. There's plenty of sheets to change. Though, it would be a shame if Rob's protégé left his parents' fate in the hands of a stranger like me who you barely know or trust. Besides, it looks like you and the dwarf made friends. And it's likely he'll be headed in that direction."

"What makes you say that?"

“If I had to guess, it’s what he bought from me that will take him there.”

“Why? What did he buy from you?”

“...a trail.”

Brendan had to decide what he was going to do. Luckily for him, it was an easy decision. He was going to find the leader of the Golden Legion parleying with the Rhylander chief and hand him Queen Elise’s urgent letter. He wasn’t going to leave it up to fate. He was going save his parents himself; he was going to help bring the queen to justice; he was finally going to be the hero.

Brendan woke the next day and made his way downstairs and ate a hearty breakfast before he and Grihm prepared to embark yet again, this time to the frozen highlands of the Rhylanders. He always had around a dozen questions at a time about the people, and he’d always wanted to see what their women looked like. He wondered if they looked as fair as that nurse from the sanctuary. He wondered to himself what she was doing at a time like this, early in the morning.

Brendan passed a leather satchel to Grihm to strap onto his horse when he heard a familiar voice that tickled the hairs in his ears. He looked around and spotted a hooded young woman wearing a tanned apron talking to the old bar maid who pointed directly at him. The girl turned her head, and her lavender eyes meet his. It was her, Amée.

“Amée? What are you doing here?” Brendan asked, blushing.

“After meeting you and hearing your story, I couldn’t help myself. I knew that when we met, it was fate. Through luck or providence, the goddess brought you our sanctuary for a reason. *We* met for a reason.”

Grihm looked disapprovingly at the girl. “Who’s the leech, Bren?”

“It’s the nurse who tended to my wounds when I fled Costone, Amée.”

“Hello.” She outstretched her hand to shake the dwarf’s, but Grihm didn’t reciprocate.

“Whaddya want girl?” He asked dryly.

A frown wove into her wrinkle free forehead. “Apologies, if I offended.”

“No need for apologies, girly; no need for you either. And I don’t care if *I* offend.” He stormed off to gather the rest of their things for the journey.

Brendan and Amée were both speechless. Why had Grihm been so disgruntled toward the nurse, he thought.

“Sorry about him, he can be pretty grumpy. I don’t think he’s much of a morning person.” He chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

“I knew that I should leave the sanctuary to offer my aid in your quest, but it seems that I was too late. Did you meet with...*Seth* yet?” She asked.

“Turns out that my quest is just beginning. We’re to go to Stahryst to the Rhylanders and meet with the Golden Legion. I’m going to get their aid to free my parents and my uncle” Brendan tried not to smile when he said the words.

Amée looked confused.

“They aren’t dead, Amée. Seth, he found a letter from my uncle. He’s alive and so are my parents. They’re being held prisoner under the keep of Costone.”

“Let me come with you.” She pleaded. “I can be of great use.”

Brendan didn’t know what to say. It was like a dream come true. He had often thought of her but never thought he’d see her again and now she wanted to come along with him on his quest. Then he remembered Grihm.

“I’m not too sure Grihm feels the same, but I would welcome the company of an experienced healer.”

“Does he speak for you?” I mean, does he decide for the both of you?”

Brendan thought the question odd. Of course, he didn’t. Brendan was his own man. “We don’t speak for either. Sure, you can come along with us.”

Just then Grihm walked past and said, “No she isn’t.”

Brendan followed the dwarf and begged why not.

“Because we haven’t the food, the supplies, or a third fluxing horse for starters.” Brendan’s excitement dropped. “Secondly,” he added, “you can let your prick make all the decisions for you, but when it starts affecting me, that’s when I draw the line.”

What did he mean by that, he wondered? Though, he wasn’t arguing with the logic. It was true that he looked on Amée favorably, perhaps a little too much so. If they were to get into real danger again, could he guarantee that he would be able to act



accordingly to his instincts or would he needlessly sacrifice and make poor decisions because of the way he felt about the nurse? There was a lot to consider, yet something seemed to have forced his mouth to move.

“I can hunt to food. I can get more supplies. And she can share my horse.”

Brendan concluded and walked back to Amée proud that he has stood up the dwarf whom he found intimidating since the first time they met.

“I don’t want to cause any trouble.” Amée said rather shyly.

“Don’t worry about him, he’ll warm up to you.” He said. “Welcome to the group.” He smiled.

With Kilroy leading the pack looking like the sourest of pusses, Brendan couldn’t contain his smile as Amée held on to his waist sitting behind him in the saddle. And together they set off Westward toward the Rhylands with the heat of the rising sun behind them.

## Kingdom of Reywhich

### Slayer's Guild

Brandan, Kilroy, and Amée traveled North then Northwest to the grasslands bordering the mirelands of Costone, known as The Stretch. It was a tranquil ride. Nothing in the world distracted Brendan from taking in the scenery: the waving islands of blue grama on an ocean of verdure, its fresh fragrance mixed with the sweet smells of lilac flowers at the cusp of their first bloom. The winds played silent melody to the sounds of hoof beats. The lush, open meadows and natural citrus orchards sprawled at random through the hills and refreshed his soul.

Travelling through the South was beautiful too, but where there were woods, there was danger. Out in The Stretch, they'd be safe from any sneak attacks or ambushes. Brendan had just about enough of those. And on the off chance someone would try to attack them, this time, Brendan resolved not to be the one who's saved. *Never again!* He told himself. Plus, now there was Amée and he wouldn't let harm befall her.

It was a two day's ride from The Tranquil Raven to their midway point. Kilroy slowed his destrier and grumbled as he gnawed on the chain that hung from his mouth. He had picked up the habit after their first few hours of journeying. He threw out his arm to signal Brendan to stop. As he turned his horse around on its forehand, he mumbled something through his chain.

“I can't understand you.” Said Brendan.

Grihm spat the chain out, “There's a cabin just off the main road. I spotted it about a dozen yards back. We could huddle there for the night.”

Brendan checked with Amée and both agreed. Thought the sun would still burn for a few more hours, they likely wouldn't find another shelter at such convenience. Plus, the idea of setting up camp in the woods, at night, unprotected, wasn't very inviting.

They approached the cabin and found it abandoned. Grihm helped with the horses and unloading. He told Brendan that he should gather some kindling while *he* hunted for their supper despite Brendan resolving to hunt for the extra food. Reluctantly, Brendan gathered the wood while Amée waited at the cabin. Once he was finished, he waited for the dwarf to return while practicing his sword draw again. Amée walked out the cabin with new clothes. She no longer looked like a Niserian apostle. She wore dark leather trousers with boots and a green velvet bodice over a sleeveless white tunic that was belted with pouches. And no longer did she hide her hair under a wimple, instead, her hair flowed down her shoulders in streams of shining rose gold. Brendan was practicing in front of the nurse who watched on with keen interest. After Brendan embarrassed

himself thoroughly, Grihm returned with an armful of mushrooms picked from the nearby woods.

That night, they all ate what the dwarf called “chicken of the woods” sitting by the fire. But it didn’t taste much like chicken. Grihm’s face was beaded with sweat as he gorged himself with truffles. Brendan knew why Grihm travelled North. But he wasn’t so sure he should say it. He didn’t know the dwarf well enough to ask such a personal question, so he didn’t bring it up. Instead, he asked Grihm something else.

“What?” Grihm asked, looking at Brendan’s face. “I can tell somethings tugging at your trousers.”

“Have you ever met a legionnaire?”

“I have.”

“Where?” Brendan inched closer, leaning a bit further toward the dwarf.

“At their citadel.”

“In the valley!?” Brendan’s voice grew shrill, looking at Amée embarrassed. “that’s where Kings Albrei and Huhgir, your ancestor, watched as Adelbrand defeated Drægan. You’ve been there?”

“I have.” He repeated with disinterest.

“What’s it like?” Brendan’s heart skipped in his chest. “It is as tall as they say? It’s supposed to reach the clouds overlooking the valley.”

“It was pretty high, but I was only just hitting puberty when I last seen it.”

“Did you go inside?”

“No. We went to meet with their commander—”

“—Aaren Rose?”

“No—shut up.” Grihm looked at Brendan sideways, “As I was saying, we met their commander at the entrance to realm Thal Kelwor. I remember he was armed in gold, a tasteless metal. He was uppity and he talked slow. He and his legion were making peace with the dwarves who kicked them out of their lands before my time. We never even went up to their citadel.”

“Why did the dwarves kick them out of their citadel?”

“How the hell should I know?”

Brendan’s imagination ran wild, no thanks to Grihm. The citadel was real which meant someone built it. Why? Because of Adelbrand. It had to be true. “How do you not believe the story of Adelbrand then if you’ve actually been to the citadel? It was built in his honor?”

“I’ve lived on this earth for forty-two years. Not once, have I ever seen magic in all that time. Just because your stories talked about the citadel doesn’t mean that Adelbrand or Drægan ever existed. It only proves that whoever wrote the story knew of the citadel. He probably made up the rest.” The dwarf gave his thoughts on the matter and returned to eating. Brendan didn’t ask him anything else for the rest of the night.

“We learned of Drægan in Reywhich,” Amée said, “his sins are taught to every apostle that joins so that we may know evil when it arises.”

“What about the phoenix?” Brendan asked.

“Oh yes. Adlebrand was the first of us, his example is what led to our dedications, our way of life. He was the goddess incarnate. A champion of courage and virtue.”

There was that word again, *incarnate*. Brendan couldn't help but cling to every word. What she said had been a key, but the more she talked, the more doors revealed themselves to his inquiries.

“Have *you* been to the citadel?”

“I—I've been to many places. And a few sanctuaries in between. But I must say that I've never seen such a place.”

“Really, what places have you been?” Brendan couldn't help but ask to Grihm's obvious displeasure.

“Well, I am originally from Reywhich but I've been to Feyclif, Redale, and Seabury. I've even been as north as Fellsgar.”

“Where's Fellsgar?”

“North of Haväll near the glacier.”

“What brought you that far North?”

“One of our sanctuaries. I was on my pilgrimage.”

“Pilgrimage?” He asked.

“A walk,” Grihm cut in. “It's a long fluxing walk.”

What was eating at Grihm? Amée took offense and retired swiftly to bed. By the time he could think of continuing his conversation with Grihm, it had already been hours past dawn, so Brendan decided to retire to sleep too. But Grihm stayed up, looking fiercely into the fire stuck in deep thought. It was the most severe he had ever seen him.

The next morning, they all packed their things and retook the road with Amée sitting behind Brendan once again, though looking more worn for wear. The dwarf gnawed on his chain as usual as Brendan contemplated his eagerness to believe in good and evil. Maybe Grihm was right, he thought. Maybe the supernatural elements of the story were just poetic embellishments. Honestly, did it truly matter? Brendan still couldn't shake the thought. But the legion existed, and they were the means to freeing his family. What's more, Amée knew of the tale and seemed to know about incarnates. He couldn't explain it, but he trusted the nurse's every word despite knowing that religion was built on faith and faith alone. And he had found it in her.

A few hours into the ride they ascended a large hill. As they climbed, the silhouette of titan rose from the horizon. They were miles away, but its size was so vast that it appeared close enough to reach out and touch. A solid wall of earth rose hundreds of feet into the air creating a massive plateau above to the Rhylands. And resting below, hidden within the plateau's shadow, was a large city. A remnant kingdom from a different time.

Suddenly, the nurse spoke up after many hours of silence. "Why are we going to Rehywhich?" She asked a little shakily.

Reywich was tucked safely in front of the plateau. According to Grihm, it was far older than Costone, and larger too but with less than half of the population. It sat on the border of the Rhylands and was once all that stood between invading tribes of half-giants and the Myrian people. Queen Elise was from Reywich, Brendan knew. When she became betrothed to the King of Costone to end their war, Rob told him that the monarchy of Reywich dissolved, leaving only their viscount to lead the city.

“We need to resupply. Plus, Grihm says he needs to meet with someone who can point him in the right direction.” Brendan said to the nurse.

“But I know where to go.” She protested. “We go North from here, there is a road that winds up to the highlands.”

“Yes, but he’s looking for someone. You see, we are sort of on two separate quests. And Reywhich was on the way.”

Amée was acting a bit nervous, but Brendan thought it could be because she hasn’t been home in years and was more than likely a little nervous to be coming back, especially not wearing her usual religious habit.

It was far too chilly in Reywich. Most of the people wore fur hats and heavy cloaks over their clothing. They were dressed in simple clothes, bland even. The trunks and cuffs of their shirts were embroidered with various stitching, and they looked like a people lost in time.

As they came into the city, Brendan received more side-glances and stares than he was accustomed, they looked at them as if they were someone important. They weren’t



looks of disgust, but of curiosity. Refreshing, but still, he wished he didn't receive any looks at all; he tightened the grip of his shield as they plodded along.

Grihm seemed to know where he was going, so Brendan followed closely behind, leading Mary by her reins. The dwarf had told him that they were going to detour to find a particular guild headquartered in Reywich. Of course, Brendan wanted to find Aaren Rose to deliver the letter, but he wanted to help Kilroy.

“They call themselves *Slayers*” the dwarf said.

“The *slayers*?” Amée repeated. Her tone was alarming.

Brendan had never heard of them, no such guild existed in Costone. “Slayers? What do they slay?”

“I've met a few of them tracking near the Deadlands beyond Veg Bohldir. They're just professional trappers and hunters. They slay unwanted beasts.” Grihm told him, looking out for any guild members.

“They are cruel people, savage and taboo in Reywhich.”

“Why?” He asked. But she refused to answer.

Unlike Amée and Grihm, Brendan didn't know what they looked like, so he assumed that they would be carrying trapping tools and hunting weapons and resigned himself to looking for anyone with such things.

The building, shoppes and homes, looked just like old Beatrix's tilted apothecary back in Costone. They were all white with red wooden roofs. They all had jettying, like

Beatrix's, made of stone and framed by cross-hatching wood beams. Their signage were all simple planks with symbols burned into them by way of a branding iron. He saw a tanner, apothecary, broderer, ferrier, a Chandler, a cobbler, lorener, poulter, and scrivener. He saw a glazier's shoppe, a locksmith, and a cooper. Hundreds of shoppes lined the streets of the city, but no slayers. Brendan was starting to become impatient on their goose chase, and he was regretting not heading straight to Stahyrst.

Grihm stopped and spoke to several passing strangers asking him where the slayers might be, most of them shook their heads and went by. Everyone was tightlipped about the slayers, most of which pretended like they didn't exist.

"They won't tell you where the slayers are." Amée chimmed.

"And why the hell not? They here in this city are they not?"

"They are taboo."

"Well, girly, I don't have time for silly superstitions. The quicker someone tells me where these slagging Slayers are, the quicker we can carry on and the calmer I will be." His voice rose like a volcano ready to explode at any moment.

Amée looked ashamed to even consider speaking it, but she finally confessed why they were not spoken about. "They are cursed."

"Cursed? What do you mean?" Brendan asked.

"They are profane; they share a forbidden covenant that is shunned by the faithful."

“Is everyone in Reywhich Niserian?” Brendan asked.

“Then why not run them outta town?” Interrupted Grihm.

“Because we are all terrified of them.”

“Well, I aint. Now, are you gonna tell me where to find them or are you gonna make me start kickin down doors?”

Amée closed her eyes as if she feared to look in the slayers general direction and pointed to a long building on the edge of the city.

She told them that they’d find the guild they were looking for next to the Eastern gate. But she warned them that they shouldn’t go through with it. But Grihm cared not for her petty fears and incredulity. He was an unstoppable force and once set on his path, there was nothing that would stop him.

Brendan knew that the dwarf would not stop until he found them. Grihm had bought a trail from Seth, and he wagered that whatever was at the other end was important.

“Why are we searching for the slayers, Grihm?” Brendan feigned ignorance.

“Seth told me that they knew where my father was.” He said with an ugly twist of his mouth. Brendan was shocked that he confessed so willingly. “Seth gave me their cosign to meet with their master. I plan to ask him where my father is, find the good for nothing bastard, and kick his ass.”

Finally, they had come up on the guild. Brendan spotted it thanks to their peculiar artistic flair. Their headquarters was heavily painted. It was a mural of a hunter and what looked like a companion wolf, fighting a wyvern, the scene of which spanned the entire building. On one side, the hunter and the wolf trapped the creature in its lair. Then, the scene transitioned to a fight around the middle. As he neared the other side, the hunter held the severed head of the wyvern triumphantly with his wolf companion howling to the sky. There was something strange besides the fact there was a hunt painted on the side of their building, the hunter and his wolf had bright yellow smoke painted around their mouths. The wolf was huge, and the hunter wore armor made of leaves.

Grihm walked up to their metal door and admired it for a second before pounding on it with the underside of his fist. A slit opened and a set of eyes peered out from inside. “Who goes there?” a voice asked.

Amée shied away, desperately trying not to be recognized colluding with the “cursed” guild.

“The name is Kilroy Grihm. I’m here to speak with Damian Morris. Seth sent me.”

“Before you preen, by pain of death: What comes between the wolf and its master’s breath?” the voice behind the door asked.

“The two are one, the one is two.” Grihm responded, “Uh...only death *severs* the bonds of a Slayer crew.” He answered the door’s riddle, nearly in the form of a question itself.

The heavy metal door unlocked and slid open, both Grihm and Brendan slithered inside. But Amée didn't follow. Brendan asked if she was going to stay outside the entire time and she nodded. Who or whatever the slayers were, Amée and the other people of Rey which were terrified of them. But why? How had they been cursed, what sort of pact had they committed to be so feared?

The room was dark and lit by at least a dozen braziers. On the walls, there were trophies mounted, hoisting the heads of numerous beasts. Wolves, tuskers, a basilisk skull, and the giant horned head of a wintrebeest among many others he didn't recognize.

The place was empty aside from the doorman. He told the dwarf that his master wasn't there, that he was on a hunt when a group of three slayers emerged from a back room holding weapons. They were heavily equipped with brutal armor. There was a short man with a crossbow and quiver wearing six knives on his chest. The other two were twins, one male, one female. All three wore armor adorned in metal studs and spikes. One carried what looked like a sword on her back with a curved, wooden hilt resting in some sort of half-scabbard while the other slung a metallic spiked hammer across his chest.

"Who's this?" one of the slayers asked. It was short man who had a thick mustache growing over a large scar.

"Asher. This is Kilroy Grihm. He's looking for Morris. I don't know the other one." Said the doorman.

"Well, they'll have to wait until we return." The voice came from the female twin with a giant cleaver sheathed to her back.

“Hold on a second, Jax...” Her twin said. He turned his gaze toward Brendan. His eyes were fiery embers that hid behind the coal like warpaint smeared horizontally across His face.

“Oh no...don’t even think about it, June?” His twin shot her a terrifying look. “This one’s only a child and that one’s a dwarf.” Jax said in defense of himself.

“What the devil are you talking about?” Grihm asked. Brendan agreed. The twins spoke to one another oddly. When one looked, the other responded as if they knew what each were thinking.

“Morris isn’t here.” The mustachioed man told him. “He’s out on a hunt.”

“When will he be back?” Grihm asked.

“We were just on our way to find him.” Jax hit Asher in the arm.

“Find?” Brendan interrupted.

“He’s been gone for two weeks. We’ve no choice but to search for him.” Said June, unafraid of Jax.

“We’ll come with you. I need to speak with him, and I don’t have time to wait around twiddling my curlies.”

The slayers huddled together and decided that they could come on the condition that they would have to follow their commands and defend themselves from danger. Brendan didn’t like this plan at all. He knew Grihm was desperate but charging headlong into a hunt was far from ideal. He thought his friend was making careless decisions and

was starting to obsess over finding his father to the point of danger. Brendan thought this was highly hypocritical considering his reaction to bringing the nurse along. Besides, every moment they spent tracking down Grihm's father was another moment his own parents spent imprisoned in Costone. He was getting irritated with the dwarf and his persistence, but he was his only companion aside from Amée, so what choice did he really have?

They all met outside the East gate and mounted their horses. Brendan told Amée that she should stay behind, but she wouldn't have it. Despite her fears of the slayers, she followed Brendan wherever he would go. He was her destiny, she told him. Brendan felt the blood in his cheeks burn.

The crossbowman, Asher, took a small dapple-grey courser while the twins shared a muscular, sealbrown dray. Breaking into a full gallop, their horses trampled the earth in search of their missing guild master, Damian Morris, and Grihm's only lead to his father's whereabouts. Wherever they were headed, Brendan wondered what could have been so dangerous that the master of the slayer guild wouldn't be able to handle. Brendan had a terrible feeling they were headed toward more woods and more trouble.

## Whispering Wilds

Asher led the retinue with the slayer twins, June and Jax, close behind. Grihm and Brendan followed, but they were fast and unsurprisingly adept at riding. Just nearing a fork in the road, Asher stopped. He looked around in the sky, then at the dirt below before whistling sharply. A huge eagle covered in slate-black feathers dove down and landed on his forearm where he wore a thick leather sleeve. The eagle was massive,



nearly half Asher's size with talons so large its claws wrapped easily around his padded arm. Brendan had never seen such a bird. It looked ferocious with its curved beak, steely gaze, and double crested crown of feathers.

"What's he doing?" Brendan asked Amée.

"Foul magic." She answered with an air of spite.

"It's called joining." Jax overheard their conversation and corrected the nurse.

"What's *Joining*?" Brendan asked.

"Shut it, Jax!" Her twin cut in.

Brendan watched Asher and his eagle. He caressed its head, spoke with it, and released it back into the air. Asher jerked his head in the Northern direction and took off. His eagle flew above them, gliding effortlessly in its domain until they came across a farmstead. As they rode through, the ranch gate read Silver Sage Meadows.

Grazing on its expansive property were a herd of Aurochs in full rut. All the bulls were snorting, and steam bellowed out of their nostrils. Brendan couldn't help but gag smelling them now for their musk was strong and hung heavy in the air as they galloped.

Alongside the fence of the property, there was a narrow hoof-beaten trail where Asher's eagle had soared over and as the eagle flew, Asher rode until they were in the thick of a wooded glen. The further they rode, the more unforgiving were the slopes and hills. Rocky terrain jutted out from the earth and ice-cold glacial waters bled through the boulders in slow-trickling streams. As they rode in deeper, what looked like a morning

fog lay thick over the trees and ground. But as they neared the fog, Brendan's horse jittered.

“Slag...” said Grihm.

All the horses were quickly reigned in. Brendan looked carefully and realized that what he mistook for fog, were webs. A superstructure so thick the visibility was that of a blizzard.

“Arachne.” Said June and Jax simultaneously.

Brendan had never heard of Arachne and wondered what manner of creature it could be. But seeing how the entire glen was covered in webs, his imagination didn't stray far from some sort of foul spider. He could feel Amée holding on to him tightly when he tried to dismount. Brendan couldn't blame her; he didn't want to be here either. He reassured her with a kind smile and helped her off Mary. “Someone could get injured, and you might be the only one who can help them.” He told her, reassuring her decision to come along. A decision Brendan was regretting himself.

She nodded her head and followed Brendan on foot. Grihm was in front of Brendan who was followed the other slayers led again by Asher. The man's eagle was useless in this terrain and Brendan wondered what the bird was doing. But even without his bird, Asher appeared to have a keen eye and noticed something stuck in a tangle of web. It was a skinny purple ribbon.

Jax walked up behind Asher and grew frantic. “*Kiss.*” She grabbed the ribbon and looked around for someone.

Grihm moseyed over to the large woman and asked her what she meant by “kiss.”

“It’s Zain’s shadowcat,” she said, “the ribbon was a gift from me.”

Jax’s warrior face was beginning to falter. Brendan could tell that she had been deeply affected by this ribbon.

“Kiss!” She called out, cupping her mouth with her hands.

Brendan immediately jumped. “Wait, won’t the monster hear you?” He asked.

“Arachne can’t hear. They only feel through their web.” Replied Asher.

“You people are mad.” Grihm added holding firmly to his chain and his mother’s crystalized skull.

Then Asher picked up on a trail that led even deeper into the maze of sticky webbing to Brendan’s unease. Carefully they weaved and carved their way through the thick mass carefully winding through the worst of it until they reach an open area covered in a thick mat of dead leaves and patches of brittle mycena, a fungus that only grew inside decay.

“Look!” June pointed out. It was mass of giant legs, crumpled and twisted onto itself protruding from a carcass of a giant spider-like creature. The hair on the back of Brendan’s neck stood on end. The creature was huge at least as thick as his horse with ten legs each just as long. The monster appeared dead, but he could imagine the horror of it when it had been alive.

“What the hell is that?” Grihm asked rhetorically.

“Looks to be dead.” said June.

“But where is Zain and Morris?” Jax added.

Brendan felt safe enough to get close to the Arachne. He shuffled closer to it foot by foot until he could see its every detail. Its legs coiled over its body, but he noticed that it had been disemboweled, but by what? Did this Zain or Morris slay the beast? If so, where were they now?

“If the thing is dead, then shouldn’t they have come back?” Asked Amée.

Less than a second later, two men come running out of the thick, hacking frantically through the webbing.

“Zain!” June hollered, relieved. The man was tall and lean wearing a thick leather coat and tight metal bracers adorned with long spikes. His blond hair was short and slicked back and his face had been cleanly shaved. But the look on his face as he bounded toward them didn’t make Brendan feel comforted.

Zain ran past followed quickly by someone Brendan took to be Morris, an older man seemingly in his silver years wearing similar spikes as Zain but wearing them on the shoulders and upper arms of what looked like a padded chainmail gambeson. His weapons were clawed gloves with two, seven-inch blades on each hand.

Amée sheltered behind Brendan as he and the others braced themselves for whatever Zain and Morris were running from. Brendan reached for the hilt of his sword and slowly pulled it out and held his shield in front of him.

“What, are you doing?” screamed Morris, “Run!”

Brendan took a deep breath and stood his ground. And from the direction where to two had been running, he heard a ruffling in the distance, a groan, then a whimper. Over the slight hill, a wolfhound came flying over and smacked hard against the tree before landing on the ground. Brendan tightened his grip and waited for whatever tossed the wolf to appear.

Grihm, Asher, and the twins stood with Brendan with their weapons drawn and ready against the warnings of their guild master. But when the rest of their guild stood to fight, both Zain and Morris caught their breath and found their courage too.

“What is it?” June whispered. “What killed the Arachne?”

That’s when the creature appeared. Slowly, the hulking creature rose into view. The first thing the Brendan saw was a gargantuan pair of antlers at least six-feet wide bright red and sopping with blood as their velvet hung loose from them like flesh peeled off bone. The creature’s face was gaunt, sunken, reminiscent of both deer and man. Its black eyes blazed with hunger which Brendan could tell it had been starving. It even looked to have chewed off its own lips, exposing its yellow stained teeth which were threatening to fall out.

“It’s...*a demon.*” Breathed Morris heavily.

Brendan noticed the blond man named Zain. The look on his face was hurt as if the creature took something from him. That’s when Brendan noticed the monster was holding, in its slender fingers, a pulp of blood and shiny black fur. Jax winced once she realized that it was Zain’s shadowcat, Kiss. It was limp and lifeless in the devil’s jagged grasp.

In an instant, both June and Jax simultaneously went berserk and ran toward the creature, screaming and yelling. Jax unsheathed a huge cleaver from her back while June brandished a large hammer with a thick spike protruding out the end. The rest leapt into action right behind them. Zain uncoiled a whip covered in hundreds of tiny razors. Grihm was swinging his mother's crystalized skull like a flail and Brendan charged with Rob's shield and Swift. Morris, however, sprinted toward the fallen wolfhound.

The demon moaned hauntingly like the sorrow of a hundred crying mothers weeping over stillborn children. It's unnatural voice nearly caused Brendan to faint. The demon hurled the dead shadowcat then lifted itself up and over the hill with thin haggard limbs and stood no less than twelve feet tall, a lumbering behemoth of primal rage.

As if they knew exactly what each was thinking, June and Jax swung their weapons in unison, hacking at the beast's legs like axes to a tree. The devil wailed and swung at the pair with its massive claws catching Jax across the chest and sending her to the ground. But it had been June who recoiled as if he had been the one who took the blow.

Grihm huffed and swung his chain and let his mother fly. The skull met its mark and cracked the demon's ribcage. As the beast doubled over, Brendan rose Swift into the air at an angle and jerked it down with all his might and slashed it behind the knee, bringing down the colossus to its crooked, inverted knees. Asher pointed his crossbow square and launched a bolt that ripped into the creature's left eye. It stumbled back and thrashed about wildly.

Suddenly, as if it turned off the pain like snuffing out a wick, the demon charged through and gored Jax to a tree, pinning her with its bloody, mangled antlers. An expression of shock washed over her face. She reached out for Zain before slipping out of consciousness and dropping her cleaver. At the same exact moment, Jax doubled over in pain and gripped his chest before passing out. Amée rushed to him with her tool kit of tinctures, bottles, and bandages.

Zain let out a blood curdling scream, the same kind of scream that happens when a lover dies in front of them and lashed out at the fiend. Streaks of blood spurted out the beast's back as the razors of Zain's whip dug trenches into its flesh with each wet, thunderous crack.

The demon, still pinned to the tree with Jax's body stuck between them, bleated and snorted in pain, struggling to free itself. Jax's body jerked violently when the beast finally pulled away from the tree and attempted to flee when Brendan heard the howl of Morris's wolfhound who charged at the beast with smoke billowing from his mouth and latched its jaws around the monster's arm and dragged it down to the ground. Asher pulled the trigger of his crossbow again and again sending at least a half-dozen bolts into the demon's back, but it still didn't go down. Brendan ran for its neck and was going to end it when it popped up in an instant and attempted to gore him just as it did Jax. Brendan's shield took the brunt of the blow, and he was sent flying. The air had been knocked out of his lungs and he struggled to take in air. The demon hoofed toward him and tried to stab him with its rack, but Rob's shield prevented his vitals from being pierced, yet the creature's horns managed to get him deep in the arm and leg. He tried

batting at the monster's face with his sword, but the antlers blocked its edge from reaching its face.

Asher's eagle flew down from the webbed canopy and pecked and clawed at the back of the devil's neck, forcing it to turn its attention away from Brendan. Grihm swung his chain and managed to wrap it around one of its hooves which he and Morris wrenched as hard as they could while Zain took the monster's back and wrapped his razor whip around the beast's neck sending the tiny blades deeper inside as he pulled. The demon's strength dwindled, and its bleating turned into gurgling as the life was drained from its body. Grihm and Morris struggle to hold the beast in place subsided as the creature fell to the ground. However, Zain didn't let up until the devil's head was detached from its body. Only then was it all over.

The monster was dead, its head severed and lying on the ground next to its body riddled with crossbow bolts and deep wounds. Everyone recouped and rushed toward the twins.

"Don't worry about June, help Jax." Said Morris.

Amée didn't understand but followed his orders anyway.

"Flux! What in the great depths was that?" Grihm yelled once the danger had passed. But no one could answer. Whatever *it* was, Brendan had never heard of such a beast. Something about it seemed unnatural, like it didn't belong in this world. And the way it moved and cried out seemed raw, like an infant whose very brief existence had only been pain.



Grihm stood over Brendan and held out his hand and lifted him onto his feet after which he immediately favored his left leg which had been punctured by the creature's horn.

"Why do you insist on fighting with that thing?" Grihm asked, obviously talking about the shield.

Brendan felt slightly offended by the dwarf's suggestion.

"I can tell by the way you lug that thing around that you don't know how to fight with it," he added with a crude bite. "Set my word in stone; It'll be the death of you."

"The shield *saved* me. I would have been minced meat had I not had the shield." Brendan argued.

"You're clumsy with that thing. I've seen you practice with your sword. You move as swiftly and sharp as the wind, but with that thing, you become as graceful as a boulder and it's gonna get you killed. Or worse...it's gonna get me killed." He said disappointedly before quickly shuffling toward the others who had been hovering over Jax.

Brendan was shocked by Grihm's words, but through his bluntness, there was always some truth in what he said. Perhaps Rob's shield had been a hindrance. Perhaps, he thought by holding on to it that he was somehow holding onto Rob's spirit. But that was no longer the case as Rob had been alive, so why was he still holding onto it now? Brendan sat up and hunched over and suddenly felt lightheaded. He felt embarrassed, ashamed. Rob had taught him how to fight smartly, like a seasoned knight, yet he had

been playing victim in every encounter since the gnoll attack of Costone. Brendan pushed the thoughts down and reunited with his sword and limped his way toward June who was just now up and waking.

“Are you okay?” Brendan asked, propping the slayer up.

“I feel..empty.” He said, holding his midsection from some phantom pain.

Everyone crowed over Jax’s body. June jumped to his feet and hopped to his twin’s side and held her head in his arms and looked upon her shattered body with tears streaming down his face.

Brendan looked for Amée and saw her slouched over, her head hanging low. Her hands and clothes were bright crimson from Jax’s blood. Her armor had been ripped off in chunks where Amée tried to stop the bleeding when Brendan noticed that she didn’t have any breasts. That’s when it dawned on him that June and Jax had been identical, but that Jax had been living as a woman. Zain, her lover had been distraught and weeping over her body, embracing her brother in the shared loss of one of their own.

Safely back at their lodge in Reywhich, the slayers mourn over the death of Jax in their sables. They dressed her body up in similar black garb and covered her mortal wounds with what was her favorite tapestry, then placed two stones on her eyes before lighting candles placed around her body. Each of them spoke over her and June recited a slayer prayer while Grihm, Amée, and Brendan watched on. Amée looked more depressed than usual, and she hadn’t waited outside as she did before. Something changed in her.

Brendan was glad that she was no longer afraid of the slayers. Not only was Jax’s body

laid to rest, but a similar ceremony was held for Zain's slain shadowcat. It lifted Brendan's heart to see that they even treated their animal companions as if they were family.

After their short vale, Grihm split off with Morris to speak, the wolfhound followed close behind.

He wanted to thank Amée for bandaging him up and tending to his wound, so he sought her out to see how she was doing. But when he approached, she had been visibly crying.

Her eyes met his and she backed into a corner and slumped to the floor.

Brendan slid his back down the wall and sat next to her. "What's the matter?" He asked.

Embarrassed, she wiped her face and cleared her throat before telling him that she had been ashamed that she had shunned the slayers, that she believed them to be cursed and untouchable. But she told him that after witnessing their bravery against a true cursed creature and the self-less sacrifice she witnessed from each of them, she realized that she had been wrong. She also said that she felt horrible that she couldn't save June, but her wounds had been immedicable and that she prayed for Jax's soul and hoped that she would return to the breast of the goddess.

Brendan didn't know how to comfort anyone and thought briefly about wrapping his arm around her shoulders when she suddenly rested her head on his chest and heaved with sorrow. He was surprised but didn't resist it. He held her tight, and they both cried

together. Brendan felt a warm sensation cradling his heart and for the first time, felt like he had known what it was like to fall in love.