

Prelude: The Twin Eyes of Chaos

The rain beat across the roofs of the city of Neelgred. Lightning flashed, illuminating the city. A woman with a thick brown cloak over an equally brown robe stared up at the sky. Her short-copped hair was pale white and was sticking to her face from the rain. As she moved her hair out of her eyes her slightly pointed ears became briefly noticeable.

"Dragons curse us." She whispered.

Even in the beating rain she could still make out the two moons in the sky. The silver one glistening with promise and the red one dripping with despair.

Elsewhere in Neelgred, watching through the grating of prison room was a man. He too stared up at the two moons visible through the bars of the cell window. He was short, stout, with darker tanned skin.

"So my chance is here. I'd better not mess this one up. This might be my last chance."

He reached up to grab the small statuette dangling from a leather cord around his neck. The one thing the guards let him keep in his cell.

At the edge of the city a young man was helping his father pack up the store. The wooden items had all been brought inside when the scent of the rain first appeared. With the storm growing worse the man began to board the windows shut. Letting the moisture in would ruin the wood and they couldn't afford that.

The young man was neither tall nor short with plain brown hair. However his muscles were clearly noticeable and he lifted the boards and hammered them onto the window shutters.

He was hammering the last of the nails in to stop the window shutters from moving. He stopped called out, "Grandfather?"

His grandfather was standing in the middle of the road, oblivious to the pelting rain. Old, standing there with a cane, staring up into the sky.

"Grandfather, you should get inside." Called out the man as he ran over to help his elderly grandfather back into the workshop home.

However as the man grabbed the old man he stopped, not because he wanted

to but because he could not move his grandfather. A frail man against a brawny youth but the old man didn't move.

He was only staring up into the sky. The youth followed his gaze and saw the two moons hanging in the sky.

"Two moons?" He asked.

"Don't worry boy, let us get back inside. There is nothing to be worried about." The youth nodded, confused. His grandfather was not normally so forceful, so determined. The youth glanced up once more at the two moons before leading his grandfather back into the house.

Elsewhere a different elderly man looked up from his comfy chair. He had been resting, napping throughout the day. But when he looked out the window he froze, he saw them, the two moons.

"My dreams..... I see.... It is time." He stood, while moments before he had seemed old and haggard, now he was a tall imposing figure. His hair was short and gray and his face was criss-crossed with scars.

He stepped forward toward the darkened corner of the room. Lightning flashed, revealing a set of plate armor on a stand. He reached out and pulled the sword from the sheath on the armor's waist.

"Old friend. Let us go on one last campaign. A new world for my family."

Chapter One: Old Friends

The young man rolled in his bed as he slept to the beating of the rain on the roof above him.

In his dreams he was walking the streets of the city. The rain was still falling around him and in the sky were the two large moon, hanging so close that he felt that he could reach them.

Despite the thick rain the city was on fire. People were shouting from the buildings, unable to escape as the buildings burnt around them.

The young man rushed toward one of the buildings, attempting to break open the door with the weight of his body, to free the people burning inside. The door

shuttered but did not break. He was about to try again when he heard the clanking of metal against metal.

He turned to see the soldiers. People in armor, carrying weapons, wearing yellow and red. He screamed and ran toward them. In the center of the soldiers was his father, tied up. But as his got close the soldiers quickly wrestled the man to the ground. The young man was no outclassed they didn't need to even draw their weapons.

The young man struggled against the soldiers but it was no use. He could only watch. A tall man in a full set of platemail stepped through the soldiers, all of them stepping aside and kneeling before him. His yellow and red tabard was brilliant, lighting up even the drenching rain around them.

He draw his sword. The young man cried out. Red wings spread from behind the man in armor, rising and growing until it engulfed the entire city around them. The armored man rose his sword and then with one swift motion brought it down, severing the head of the young man's father.

The young man screamed out... jerking forward, out of his dream. Sweat beaded on his brow as the images from the dream continued to run through his head. Never before had he remembered a dream so vividly, like it was right there, lingering in his memory.

He could still hear the rain falling on the roof of the house, although not as strong as the storm that and passed over the city during the night. He pulled himself out of the bed, the room was dark but he knew that it was near morning. Even with the weather like this he would still need to work. Furniture would not make itself.

The young man had woken up earlier than either his father or mother. He hesitated at their door, remembering his father's death during the dream... but a dream is just a dream. So he passed by them and headed downstairs.

He started the stove to begin cooking breakfast. The three of them swapped who was doing the cooking. While it would normally be his father's turn, the young man's mind was too much of a mess to remember. As he stoked the fire in the kitchen and began preparing the meal he heard some thumping sounds from upstairs there the bedrooms were.

That wasn't just the sound of somebody waiting up, it sounds more like somebody was moving something. The young man moved through the house, walking up the stairs. The sounds were coming from his grandfather's room.

He knocked on the door and politely asked, "Grandfather. Is everything alright."

"Ah... Ned, you can come in."

The young man, Ned, pushed open the door into his grandfather's room. It was plain, like all the rooms in the small workshop house, but there were various items all scattered around. Ned's grandfather have traveled a bunch in his youth.

"Grandfather.... Isn't that your Chest?" Ned didn't need to say more.

It was the chest that his grandfather kept under the bed. An ancient metal chest that had been under his grandfather's bed for as long as he could remember. Ned could only ever remember it being taken out a scant handful of times and he had only seen inside it once.

The old man only nodded as he pulled the chest free from underneath the bed.

"Is something happening?" Ned asked. He knew what was in the chest but he didn't know why his grandfather was pulling it out but.... His dream had left a worried impression on him.

"The Evil Eye is a bad omen." Grunted his grandfather as he wiped away the dust from the top of the chest. "Best to be prepared."

"That is the red moon right? I don't remember seeing either it or the silver moon before. But isn't the rumors of the evil eye just a myth?"

The old man grimaced, "Kids these days. The Evil Eye is real, who knows what evil will appear along with it. When you were a wee one the Evil Eye lead to the longest drought I had ever seen. And the last time I saw the Evil Evil and and the Dreaming Moon together....." He paused trailing off.

Ned waiting, hoping his grandfather would elaborate but the old man didn't. Instead the old man pulled out the key for the ancient chest, clicked it open and lifted the lid. Ned had been a rambunctious kid the last time he had seen the contents of the chest. He had wanted to see what the secret his grandfather kept was.

Instead was not what Ned had been expected. Inside the chest was tools of war. A small fortune of weapons and armor. The old man had kept them, hidden them away instead of selling them after he was done with his time as a soldier. Ned didn't really know much about the time his grandfather spent fighting and the old man never spoke about it.

Ned had once said he wanted to be a soldier like his grandfather but both his grandfather and his parents were both adamantly against it. Instead Ned has followed his father in becoming a carpenter.

"Are you going to need those?" Asked Ned. His grandfather was taking each item out of the chest one at a time, taking care to examine each one of them. Despite how long they had been in the box they all seemed spotless.

"Better to prepare than be caught by surprise." Then he stopped, looked up at Ned and said, "Are you supposed to be cooking?"

Ned suddenly remembering rushed downstairs to continue tending to the cooking fire and make sure that breakfast was properly dealt with. By the time Ned was done cooking and his parents came to come down for dinner his grandfather has closed the chest again.

The work for the day was in the workshop, nobody would be shopping for furniture during such a downpour but work still needed to be done. Ned spend most of his time sawing wood that his father then turned into furniture. Ned sometimes did the actual work but his creations were still too crude to properly sell.

As the work day began to end somebody began to knock at the workshop door. Ned's father rose to answer the door but before he could reach it grandfather was there. It was the old man who answered the door.

Ned took a deep breath when he saw the person on the other side. A soldier, dressed in armor decorated with yellow and red, just like the soldiers he had seen in his dream.

The soldier spoke, "General Drestin seeks your presence."

"After all this time... I see... Very well. Let me grab my equipment and I will join you."

The soldier nodded. Ned's grandfather went upstairs and several minutes

later came out wearing his set of armor. Ned's father stepped aside with him and they spoke quietly for a few minutes. They hugged each other. Then the grandfather stepped over to Ned.

"Kid... no... Ned. Take care, I'll be back soon."

"Grandfather..." Ned couldn't find words. He could only reach out. It was supposed to just be a handshake but his grandfather pulled him in and gave him a big hug.

His grandfather then pulled away. He turned and left the house, following the soldier out into the pouring rain. Ned could see his father gritting his teeth, a pained look on his face.

All Ned could do is call out to his grandfather's back, "You take care too."

His grandfather raised his hand and gave a backward wave.

The door shut behind him.

"Minny pack up everything you can." Ned's father said. His mother nodded and turned, retreating into the depths of the house.

"Pack?" Asked Ned.

"Aye, go up and grab everything Lex left behind. If there is anything you want to bring with you from your room too grab that. Me and Minny will make sure we have enough supplies to leave."

"Leave..." Ned's mouth dried up. What was it that his grandfather said to his father just before he left. Ned stumbled up the stairs to his grandfather's room. His grandfather had taken out and worn most of the stuff from the chest.

However Ned reached down and pulled out the sheathed sword that was left at the bottom. His grandfather had been wearing a sword when he left so this must have been a spare. Ned strapped the sword onto his own waist.

There was also a pendant beneath it. The symbol of the sun with the rays spreading out in eight directions. The Pendant of the First Light. Alarmed, Ned lifted up the pendant, how had his grandfather forgotten such an important thing, especially while dressed for battle.

He rose to his feet and began running down the stairs, he needed to get this to his grandfather. His parents yelled at him as he rushed down the stairs and into

the pouring rain outside. General Drestin, Ned remembered that name. The old former general lived on the other side of the city.

Ned ran through the rain, headless of the red moon that still hung in the sky. As he reached the center square of the city he heard it, the clang of metal against metal. Ned slowed, the center of town was full of people, he pushed he way past several of them before stopping stunned by what he was seeing.

In the center of town was his grandfather, sword drawn, gleaming even in the dim light of the overcast sky. Facing him was a large man in plate armor, decked in yellow and red. The man and his armor was exactly what Ned had seen in his dream.

The armored man's sword was also drawn. Then in a flash of lightning the two men clashed blades, once, twice, three times. It was almost too much for Ned to follow. He wanted to step forward, to call out... but it would be of no use. The two men fought back and forth, too quickly for anybody to interrupt.

Then his grandfather found an opening, slipping past the blade of his opponent, stepping forward and pushing the point of the blade forward toward the armpit where the plate mail did not cover.

The lightning flashed again, the sound of metal shearing, then a metallic snap. His grandfather's sword has broken, the shards careening across the plaza. The left arm of the armored man had caught the blade, shattered the sword, left his grandfather defenseless. Then with one sweep of the blade the armored man cut a long bloody gash across his grandfather's chest, slicing through the chainmail his grandfather wore like butter.

It was only then Ned called out, ran forward, headless of the danger. He drew the sword he had taken from the chest and screamed, "Grandfather!" The armored man barely moved to grab the blade of the sword with his left hand. It was then that Ned understood what had happened, the man's hand was not armored like he had thought, it was scaled.

With barely a movement the man tossed Ned aside, causing him to collapse next to his grandfather. The man stepped forward looking down at Ned and his grandfather.

"So you too have a family... pity. You should have joined me Lex, then it

wouldn't have to end this way. I would have much preferred you on my side."

Ned's grandfather stood, shaking. "Drestin. Your foolishness isn't worth the price that everybody will pay."

The armored figure only shook his head, "Yes old friend, yes it is." He began to lift his sword.

"Ned, run. Grab the sword and run!" His grandfather shouted as he lifted the stump of his own sword.

Ned could only struggle to his feet. He wanted to stay, to help his grandfather. But with 'Run' echoing again and again in his head, he did what his grandfather told him to do. He picked up the sword and ran.

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General Drestin looked down at the corpse of his old friend, laying on the ground, blood pooling around him. Several soldiers stepped forward to kneel besides him. They had not interfered in the fight between General Drestin and the old man, even if they had been told too it would have likely resulted in their own demise.

"Find that kid. Capture him. Do the same for the rest of old man's family. Alive if possible."

The soldiers nodded before standing and running off into the night.

Drestin lifted his left arm, looking down at the scaled features of it. There in the palm of his hand was a small cut. It wasn't the old man who had done that too him, it was the young man.

"Your grandson has potential Lex." He sighed. Then he spotted something on the ground next to the dead old man. A pendent, shaped like a sun with rays spreading out in eight directions. He leaned down and picked up the pendent. "The kid brought it..."

Then Drestin knelt down at the side of his old friend and hung the pendent around his neck. Then he rose and walked away. More soldiers stepped out of the crowd and followed him.

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Ned ran, he ran like he had never ran before. He had seen soldiers attempting to follow him, soldiers in red and yellow. But he ran, ran faster than them. It was

only when he was out of the city, safely hidden in the dark recesses of the forest did he realize it. His father and mother were still back in the city.

He looked back at the city. There at the gates were the soldiers, in red and yellow. As much as he wanted to go back in and save in parents was there anything we would be able to do. He still had the sword from his grandfather's chest but beyond that... nothing.

And that man.... General Drestin.... He had killed Ned's grandfather. Was there anything that Ned could do to stop the man, he didn't know. Although, something was wrong, Drestin shouldn't have been able to kill his grandfather on the streets like that and those soldiers, they were obeying him. Drestin was a former general, emphasis on former.

It was that connection that caused Ned to gasp, "He is rebelling. Then... I need to tell the Earl." That was the only thing he had left. The local Baron was either dead or in on it, so he needed to tell the Earl, the Earl would fix everything.

Now he just needed to get to the earl. Ned was born and raised in Neelgred but he did know some things about the surrounding area. Kringred was where the earl lived and it wasn't too far from Neelgred, at least as the bird flew. There was just one massive forest in between, one full of monsters.

It would take at least a week to get to Kringred by road, but if Ned took the forest, he could probably get there in two days.... At least that is what he thought. The rain was much lighter than it was last night but it still came down, turning the forest into thick mud. Tree roots and tangled underbrush made traversing through the forest slow going.

As we passed through the trees beckoned on by Fate he remembered running through the trees as a young child. He had gone with with Grandfather to meet with some of the woodcutters and see the wood fresh from the forest. He remembered his grandfather laughing and lifting him up onto his shoulders.

Ned raised a hand to wipe the water out of his eyes.

It has been several hours of hiking when a howling carried up across the wind and the rain. Not the sounds of a wolf.... Something deeper, louder. "First Light protect me." He mumbled under his breath, this was the reason that these

untamed woods remained untamed. Wargs.

He had hoped the rain would have made it hard for them to find him, hiding his scent. But now it was too late to question his decision to go into the forest. They were after him and now he had to run, find somewhere he could hide from them.

Left

A voice? A feeling? He didn't know but he glanced in the direction. Off in the distance, and old abandoned tower. Why or how it was there didn't cross his mind, all he knew was that anywhere was better against the Wargs than the middle of the forest.

He could hear the howling from multiple sides of him as he ran as hard as he had ever run. He didn't know how many Wargs there were or how close they were but by some miracle he managed to make it to the tower before the Wargs reached him.

There was no door, he just ran through the archway. Then he spun, drawing the sword. Stepping backward. There was nowhere else he could run but now with the tower to his back, he could at least try to fight.

The two massive beasts stepped through the doorway into tower. There was only two of them, a scant mercy. Wargs were like wolves but the size of a horse. Whether they were smarter than a wolf was something rumors and legends debated but Ned was in no position to ponder such a thing.

All he had was a sword and a wall to press his back against, not great odds against monsters larger than he was. He swallowed hard, was there any way he could survive this.

Maybe the Wargs were as surprised as he was when a blazing lance of fire shot through the air and slammed into one of the Wargs. A clear woman's voice came across the room.

"Stop dallying. Fight them on the stairs."

Chapter Two: Dragons Curse Us

The rain rattled at the windows of the inn that the woman was staying at. She

had returned to the inn room after staring at the moons in the night sky. She had been planning on staying in Neelgred for several weeks but now...

She muttered to herself and she began packing away the books that had somehow gotten scatter all across the room. "Stay... go.... Hmmm.... No, I should stay. If the Evil Eye doesn't relate to a Vestige then I'll eat my diploma." Despite her plan on staying the books went into the trunk one after another.

With all those books put away she only have her Grimoire to handle. She wrapped it up with oiled leather. She both needed to keep it on her and protect it from the weather. It got to go into her traveling back. A plain leather satchel that he could wear under her cloak.

Although... plain might have been stretching the description. Many wooden rods stuck out from the top of the bag. All carefully organized. Her wands. She checked each one of them, making sure the myriad of unique wands were all undamaged.

By the time she had finishing checking each one of them she was yawning, it was late, very late. The rain fell relentlessly outside and the wind continued to rattle the window shutters.

"The cursed dreaming moon....." She muttered as she pulled out one of the many wands. The end of the wand glowed softly as she pointed it at the door into her inn room. The light shot out, engulfing the door in the same glow. Then the light faded, leaving the woman in the lantern lit room once more.

She blew out the lantern and then finally the pull of sleep was too much for her. She laid down on the bed of the inn room and began to dream.

She was in a cavern, large and expansive, huger than any underground space deserved to be.

"Here again..."

There was something large, very large, moving around in the pitch blackness of the cave. Somehow there was light around her just letting her see the movement at the edges of her vision. However seeing the creature moving in the darkness did not concern her, she already knew what it was. The other parts of the dream were of more importance.

There were a group of soldiers moving through the darkness, one of them holding aloft a torch. None of their faces could be seen through the helmets that they all wore. The woman stepped aside, getting out of their way. None of them seemed to pay her any mind or even notice her.

They moved through the darkness, nervous from the very movements and sounds from the large creature. They had brought along a giant chest, too big for one person to carry. Even the two knights lugging the chest were having trouble moving it fast enough to keep up with their compatriots.

When they reached the center of the room the knight with the plumed helmet knelt, speaking to the large creature off in the darkness. The two knights lugging the chest brought it forward, placing it on the ground, and opening it to reveal a pile of gems and gold.

The cavern shook from the movements of the giant creature. Then, out of the darkness come an enormous scaled arm. Claws larger than the knights. On the center of the hand was a glimmering bejeweled bracelet. The light from the torch sparkled off it in rainbow colors.

The knight with the plumed helmet reached forward and took the bracelet from the massive hand. Then the knights left, leaving the chest behind, taking only the bracelet with them. The woman left with them.

As they left the cavern the woman was greeted to the pattering of rain as she woke from her dream. "Uggg... come on. At least show me something juicy." She rose and stretched. The faint light from outside barely broke through the overcast sky.

She gingerly went down stairs of the inn to get something to eat and to clean up. She returned to the room with some bread and a bowl of cooked eggs. She set it on the table before opening up her trunk. She fished through the books before pulling on them out.

"Heraldry... heraldry...." She flipped through it stopping on several pages, "Looks like that would have been during the Plague of Sorrow." She nodded to herself, "Make sense. That Vestige must have ended up here then after that. One of those knights likely took it afterward and retired here."

She placed the book back into her trunk. She cracked open the window

shutter, just enough to look up out at the sky. Yup, the red moon was still there in the sky. "Why is finding vestiges never easy. Of all the days, I just had to show up now... Dragons curse me. Fate curse me." She grabbed the trunk and slid it across the room to the door.

She took it down the flight of stairs and handed it off to the inn keeper with strict instructions about where it needed to be sent and terrible things that would happen if it doesn't arrive there safely. That along with a generous payment of coin would ensure it would actually arrive at the intended destination.

With her trunk gone she collected all of her remaining gear from the inn room. Mostly it was just her satchel with all her tools and her backpack of clothing and other supplies. She left the backpack behind but her couldn't afford to leave the satchel.

She rose her cloak hood and headed out into the rain. She was going to go see the local Baron. If anybody knew about local war heroes it would be the Baron of the city. She walked through the city with rain pattering on her cloak.

The Baron's manor was large and well appointed. The woman didn't particularly care for those kinds of things however. When she arrived at the gates the guards attempted to turn her away. However all it took to get into the manor was to show them her guild identification. After that they were all scraping and bowing and letting her in as quickly as they could.

She was brought into a luxurious meeting room where she got to take off her cloak. The servants offered to take it from her but she rejected that saying she would be leaving soon and would need it.

It wasn't too long before the Baron arrived. "Scholar Elaina. How pleased am I to see you here. To what honor do I deserve a meeting with a ranking member of the Esteemed College of Wizardry."

Elaina could only sigh to herself, "Thank you for meeting with me Lord Aislan. I am sorry to have meet in such a poor time. I had meant to send a letter to setup a meeting, but with the Evil Eye hanging in the sky I could not afford such a luxury."

Servants poured tea and brought out snacks and cakes for her enjoyment. However she ignored them.

The Baron nodded, "Yes, a foul omen. Do you know what it entails? I presume you are here in some way related to it? To have such a prestigious wizard visit this fair city could not be a coincidence."

She wanted to correct him, to say that earning a doctorate from the academy was not as impressive as it sounded, but to do so would weaken her position and she haste was evident.

"While I do not have exact evidence as such I time I suspect as you do that it is not a coincidence. I am looking for somebody, somebody I was hoping you could help me find. The person I am looking for would be an old war hero, one who fought during the Plague of Sorrow, and one that I suspect has no small amount of prestige."

"Had you come but six years ago I would have directed you to my own father but many such war heroes are passing on." He put his finger to his chin to contemplate but Elaina could tell that he already had his answer, he was just waiting to present his own side of this deal.

"I am willing to help with you such things but is it not the way of the College to offer aid with their own aid."

"Of course. Your aid will be paid in kind." She hated negotiating but not many could offer what a wizard could offer, and many places desired such skills. She reached into her bag and retrieved three special silver coins, they weren't the standard ones in circulation, these had the symbol of the College of Wizardry carved upon them. "Three silver duty for your aid in locating the man I seek, more should I require extra aid."

There was a sour look on the Baron's face. Elaina has bypassed too many niceties and brought the expected payment directly to light, not something that the nobles would do. He has been hoping to push the actual discussion to exact payment until later then he could pressure her to pay much more than a mere three silver duty.

With the Evil Eye still hanging in the sky he could not just refuse her request nor her payment. And haggling now would be an insult to his own office as the Baron. The Baron just moved his hand, motioning at the servant who took the three coins from Elaina's hand.

"I had just needed your word but with so generous an offer I can but offer all I can in aid. I suspect that the person you are seeking is General Drestin. He has since retired but he got many metals during the Plague of Sorrow. He was also a close friend of my father's and I have had him visit many times."

The Baron motions again toward the servant, "Go and send a message to General Drestin, tell him that I wish to speak with him about matter of great importance. The quicker that he can arrive the better. And bring a carriage with you so that he can arrive post haste."

As the servant left the Baron turned back to Elaina, "And with that he should be on his way." The Baron smiled, "Now please tell us why you are here so I can better help you achieve what you desire?"

She gave a smile in return but it was forced and painful, these nobles has such love for words and misdirections, something that I had to learn when dealing with them. She politely lead the conversation away from her actual task and to the state of the town and what needs the Baron would have for a wizard.

There were mages all around, hedge mages practicing their own arts. Perhaps even some less trained wizards passing by, or clerics aiding with the powers of the gods. But sometimes a problem took the understanding of a wizard, somebody that could actually know magic.

She managed to keep him distracted long enough that the servant returned, whispered in the Baron's ear. Then the baron stood up, "I'll go greet General Drestin and then we will be right in. Just relax, shouldn't be more than a minute."

Elaina nodded. She relaxed on the coach, at least until both the Baron and the servant had left the room. Then she rose to her feet. She had begun to feel chills. It could just be the rain but her robe mostly kept her plenty warm.

She flipped open he satchel and pulled out one of the many wands stored within. A white one, make of wood, with many holes drilled into it. A swish and a flick later she could feel the air moving around her.

The air moved and flowed around her, then she froze. She had expected to hear the sounds of conversation, to listen in to the baron and general talking. Instead she hear a scream. Her mind quickly went through several possible

scenarios and none of them were good.

She slipped her wand back into her bag while moving over toward the window. The meeting room was on the second floor and she could see down into the courtyard below.

Thick crystal glass kept the storm at bay while still letting you see outside. Expensive stuff. She kicked the glass and it shattered out into the night. She reached back into her satchel and pulled out another wand. Thick on one side and thin on the other each side made of a different material.

She could see somebody approaching, but she had already made her decision. This however was the worse part. She had done it countless times but it still caused her to worry needlessly. She leapt from the window.

As she feel she twisted the wand in her hand and her fall slowed letting her land gracefully on the ground without much force. She slipped the wand back into her satchel and began to run. A wizard had many options available to them but a direct confrontation with a bunch of soldiers was a poor matchup especially for Elaina.

She ran as she contemplated her next move. This General Drestin was almost certain the person she was looking for, the person with the Vestige. Maybe Drestin was a fine upstanding person who just wanted to talk with her, but she wasn't willing to risk it. A misunderstanding and a broken window could be fixed, getting stabbed through the chest was much harder to fix.

When she turned around a corner about to leave the manor grounds she abruptly stopped. More than a dozen soldiers, wearing red and yellow colors. They turned toward her. She had been running too loudly. She took a step backward. A group of soldiers, exactly what she didn't want to deal with.

She reached into her satchel and pulled out another wand.

Golden yet crystalline. She lifted it and at the same time closed her own eyes while running toward the soldiers. A blinding flash of light filled the gate outside the manor. There was shouting from the guards but she hadn't stopped to see what was happening. She had just continued to run. It was a trick that required the subject to not know what to expect.

It got her past the guards and onto the streets of the city. She could hear them shouting behind her. But she had already slid her wand back into her satchel. When she removed the wand she was holding a small box. She flicked open the top, revealing two small dried mushrooms. She took one out and stuffed it in her mouth while closing the box and putting it back into her bag.

She chewed and swallowed the disgusting mushroom. As she did her clothes and form rippled and changed. She turned around a corner before stopping. She sat down under one of the eaves and waited.

When the guards ran by all they saw was a poor beggar asking for some coin. They continued searching, looking for the mage but found nobody. When they returned to the manor the beggar stood up. Haggard looking she began walking through the streets, avoiding crowded areas. A keen observer might notice that the rain didn't seem to stick to the woman and that her raggedy clothing looked remarkably dry, but people usually didn't spend a lot of time looking at beggars.

By the time she reached the edge of the city the spell was already beginning to fail. Elaina glanced out from behind the corner, looking at the gate. The guards looked normal, no red or yellow coloring. She debated staying in the city, "No, I need to send for aid from the College, with the number of unusual soldiers I saw throughout the city, this isn't something I can do alone."

She looked back down at her satchel, she could use the last of the mushrooms to get through the gates. She shook her head, better to save it. It has seemed like a good idea buying that box of mushrooms rather than the much more expensive wand, now a year later she really regretting not having the wand. Those mushrooms just were so useful that she had gone through them too fast.

"No, it would be better to send them on a goose chase." And with that determination she left the city normally through the front gate. However far this General Drestin's influence had spread he hadn't yet caused the gate guards to interfere with entering and exiting. So all she had to do was go past the gate guards and follow the road out of the city.

She walked, keeping to the road until the gates of the city were out of sight. Then she very very carefully stepped through the mud to the edge of the wood. Hopefully whatever tracker was going to be sent after her departure wouldn't

see that she had left the road. And with that she was off into the forest.

A trek through the woods wasn't what she had been hoping for when she woke up this morning but she had been through worse. She brought out her white wooden wand and gave it a flick, the wind wrapped around her, that would keep her smell out of the air. Her trek through the forest a quiet but tense. She didn't know what monsters might lurk in the forest but it would be best to stay on her guard.

After more steps than she cared to track she saw a building off in the distance. An old abandoned tower. She was thoroughly soaked to the bone by this point and exhausted, and annoyed. Even so she kept quiet as she approached the tower, abandoned places like this were often homes to all kinds of dangerous monsters.

When she approached the tower she brought out her golden wand and lifted it. Light illuminated the dark corners of the bottom of the tower. To her relief the place was empty, at least the first floor was. A set of badly worn stone stairs led up to the second floor of the building. She stepped up them one by one to reveal and barren room.

"Suprise." She told herself, "An actually abandoned tower, will the wonders never cease. Seems like not even goblins want to live in this forest... which means something nasty lives in these woods. Great..." She trailed off sarcastically.

She brought out from her satchel a small metal contraption that she moved several pieces of to make a small tripod perfect for holding a wand. She put the golden wand away, plunging the room into gloomy darkness.

When the light returned it was in the form of a glowing ball of fire that floated above the new wand she had pulled out. A red wand, that seemed to be made out of scorched wood. She placed the wand carefully in the metallic container. When she sat down and finally took a moment to rest.

"Uggg... I'm an idiot. I didn't even ask what this General Drestin looks like. However am I going to explain this. Will they even send anybody to aid me? Knowing those bureaucrats they will either recall me or just tell me to figure it out." She sighed.

She was attempting to try off her cloak while muttering complaints to herself when she hear the howling. Like wolves but deeper. She groaned. She was preparing herself when she heard the sounds of somebody running.

Lifting up her wand to the stand she crept over to the stairs to look down and see what was happening on the bottom floor. Wargs, two of them, and they were hunting a man. An average sized man with a brawny frame who had a sword. What a pain.

She straightened, pointed her wand at one of the Wargs and the flame at its tip flew out to the Warg crashing into its side. She called out from the top of the stairs.

“Stop dallying. Fight them on the stairs.”

The man responded quickly, breaking away from the surprised Wargs and running toward the stairs. Although it wasn't too long before the Wargs were after him. She shot another bolt of fire at them as they approached keeping them from nipping at the man's heels.

When he was half way up the stairs he turned back toward the Wargs. She smiled a little, at least he wasn't a coward wanting to hide behind her. He would do.

“I need time to gather my magic. Make sure to keep them off me.” She said.

She couldn't tell if he nodded but he stayed in front of her. The stairs were harder for the Wargs to climb and they had to come up it one at a time. Elaina wasn't a sword master but even she could tell that the man was a rookie with a sword.

There was just a moment to put her wand back into her satchel and pull out another. A black wand that twisted and turned in odd ways. The Warg snapped at the man who did his best to fend the beast off with his sword.

As the beast tried to find a way past the blade she waved the new wand and the shadows began to move, reaching up off the floor and grasping at the Warg. The tendrils twisted around the monster, holding it in place.

“Now.” She called out and the man did not hesitate. He stepped forward and swung the blade at the monster. Slightly to Elaina's surprise the sword went right through the monster's neck. She twisted her wand and the shadows

attempted to bind the second Warg as well.

However the foul beast was smarter than it looked. It dodged away from the shadows. Leaping over the man with the sword and straight at Elaina. The man was moving, attempting to slash the Warg in the air, but that wouldn't stop the weight and force of the creature's body or its teeth.

Her other hand was raised a blue light glowing from the beads on the bracelet she wore on that hand. One of them cracked and in the air materialized a transparent silver shield that blocked the creature... mostly blocked. It stopped the teeth certainly but the mass of the creature crashed into the shield which then crashed into Elaina who was flung back into the top of the stairs.

Pain jolted through her body but she gritted her teeth and made another motion with her wand hand. This time the black tendrils succeeded in binding the monster and with that the man and his sword finished off the second Warg.

"Ow ow ow ow." Finally called out Elaina as she twisted and curled. A stair had gone directly into her back and it hurt.... Badly. She managed to grit her teeth enough so look up at the man with the sword. "Oh, hi, uh... are you alright? Wargs didn't bite you?"

He shook his head, "No, I am fine. But are you alright? The Warg just rushed you." He knelt down to look at her, then began to relax when he did not see any blood.

"No bits here but ouch, my back. Thing knocked me into the stairs." She tried to stand and stumbled. The man offered a hand but she just waved her hands, "Nah, I'm find. Can't let a small things like splitting back pain stop me." She rummaged around in her bag and pulled out a small metal vial. She uncorked it and drank the liquid inside. The pain began to recede. "Ah... much better."

"A healing potion?" He asked, surprised. The man might never have seen one before.

"Calling that a healing potion would be an insult to alchemists that sell healing potions. No knit bones or closed wounds with that potion. Just less pain and the confidence to kill yourself by continuing to fight." She put the vial back into the bag before looking at the corpses of the giant wolves.

"Ugg... the stretch of their blood will draw scavengers. Where are you

heading?"

"Kringred"

"Excellent. That is my destination as well. Come on, let's go before more nastiness shows up."

The man could only nod in surprise as her taking control of the situation.

She continued, "Unless you want to split up in monster infested forest." She went back upstairs for one moment to collect her cloak which had been drying before walking back down to the bottom of the tower.

"I'm Elaina by the way." Was her greeting as she passed the man once more.

"Ned."

She just nodded and with that the two of them went back off into the forest toward the city of Kringred.

"Why are you heading to Kringred by way of the forest." She asked.

"I have to talk to the Earl about a rebellion."

"... that really should be something you don't just tell wanderers in the forest. What if I was a part of this rebellion."

He shrugged, "Didn't seem likely."

"Mysterious wizard in an abandoned tower doesn't seem like the rebel type?"

"Nah, local rebellion, a wandering elf doesn't seem like they would be part of it."

Elaina huffed, "Half elf thank you very much."

"Half elf?"

"Quarter elf technically. Way less snooty. Can't see in the dark and my mother was a human. I could give you a full description but I'm sure we both have better things to talk about."

"Oh.... "

They passed through the forest silently for a while after that in awkward silence.

Finally Elaina spoke again, "This rebellion. Does it have to do with those soldiers in red and yellow?"

"You know?"

She nodded, "Yeah. They either wanted me to join them or perhaps kill me to

stop me from interfering. I didn't stick around long enough to figure out which."

Elaina quickly shared what she knew, that she suspected that the Baron of the city was killed by a General Drestin and that she thought he might be responsible for the coup. Ned nodded and agreed. He told Elaina about what happened to his grandfather.

Elaina raised a hand stopping him, "Wait... what did you just say?"

"General Drestin caught my grandfather's sword in a scaled arm and just broke the sword."

"Curses.... That seals it."

"Seals what?"

"The reason I was here in the first place. A dangerous magical item ended up in the hands of some soldier that eventually moved to Neelgred. I suspected that person was General Drestin after his actions but if you saw a scaled hand, that confirms it. The item is in the possession of General Drestin. Now I definitely have to report this to the college."

"Then let us hurry. Getting to Kringred faster would be better."

Elaina agreed and they continued the journey through the forest.

Chapter Three: Smoke and Steel

In the dungeons in the city of Neelgred was short, tanned man. His entire head and face had been shaved completely bald. The ruined clothing he wore only partially concealed his thick frame. Thick noxious smoke filled the room he was in, only partially released by the barred grate that let him see out into the raining night.

He sat against the wall staring out through the bars. The room was chilly in the rain but the man hardly noticed it. Now he was just biding his time.

When his time finally came there was the grating sounds of the door to his cell being opened. Two soldiers with red and yellow colors stepped into the room. "Come with us." Was all they said.

The man stood and followed them. Outside the room the noxious smoke was

less prevalent. He flexed his fingers a couple of times, but the smoke was still too thick and he was being carefully watched by the two guards.

They pushed him forward through the cell block into what he could only assume was the warden's room. But the person he had previously thought was the jail master was nowhere to be seen. Instead a knight in thick armor sat at the desk, even sitting the man was taller than the prisoner.

"You are the one known as Sarik correct?" Asked the man behind the desk.

Sarik nodded, "Yeah."

"The jail master told me you are going to be executed. Banditry is quite the crime."

Sarik only grinned, showing yellow teeth, "Banditry huh? And what does somebody like you want with a bandit like me?"

"Why, I'm offering you a chance at a pardon."

"Pardon? Why would you be offering me something like that?"

"Consider it a payment. I have heard of you, a bounty hunter. And a skilled one at that. But even skilled bounty hunters run into bad luck. Killed a poor choice of bounty and suddenly the bounty hunter is nothing more than a bandit."

"Alright. I'm listening."

"I'm sure you are. After all, there would be little reason to keep a regular bandit imprisoned... but a bounty hunter who would risk their life in return for being freed. That is another matter, and I'm sure you have been waiting for this opportunity."

Indeed he had been. The man before Sarik was right. He hadn't been kept imprisoned because of his crimes, he had been imprisoned because of his future usefulness.

"So, what is it you want me to hunt? A monster?"

The armored man shook his helmet. "No, although there might be monsters involved. I am looking for two people. Two spies who know too much. My soldiers almost captured both of them but they both fled the city separately. I want you to find one, preferably both, of them, alive if possible."

"Two people?" Sarik smirked, "Normally I wouldn't say that would be

hard... But..." He looked at the soldiers around him, then lifted his manacled hands slightly.

"One should be easy just where he is located is the hard part. A man, average height, brown hair. He stole a special heirloom sword before fleeing into the forest."

"The forest that is full of monsters?"

The helmet nodded, "Indeed. Recovering the sword is of paramount importance but capturing the man is also important. If you can recover him alive then I'll make sure there is payment beyond just your freedom."

"How very generous. And the other person?"

"The second person is going to be the tricky person. She is a Wizard."

Sarik's eyes narrowed, "Like a real Wizard?"

"College educated. And a half-elf wizard as well."

Sarik smirked, "I see, that is why you want me to handle her. But Wizards are tricky quarry to keep alive. Expecting me to return with her alive is a tall order."

"Her return alive would be worth it. And as a bonus I'll let you keep any of her equipment, after I have had the opportunity to look through it for secrets."

"You sure? A real wizard is bound to have a fortune of magical items on them."

"She was last seen leaving the city by sunward gate. My scouts were unable to continue tracking her. Either she used magic to escape or she too took the forest."

Sarik nodded, "Understood. Half elves are pretty rare, wizard ones even rarer. She should be easy to locate. Do you still have my gear? If you don't I will need a stipend to acquire new gear."

The helmeted man nodded and one of the soldiers brought out a backpack. A second soldier stepped forward with a key and unlocked the manacles binding Sarik's hands. He stretched his hands for the first time in a while before looking into the bag of his stuff. Eventually he was satisfied.

"Alright then, you have a deal... although, I should probably know who I am making this deal with."

"I am General Drestin. And you would do good to keep your side of this deal. I wouldn't want to see you captured again as a bandit and accidentally

executed."

"You need not worry. I'll bring back these two people." He stood and lifted the backpack onto his back. He lifted the backpack and was about to leave.

"Wait..." Said Drestin, "I wanted to send one of my soldiers with you. To aid you."

"Are they willing to die to forest monsters in the night?" Asked Sarik. "I might be good but a standard soldier would just get himself killed. At long as you are alright with that I don't mind them coming. Just don't expect them to come back alive."

The soldiers near him gulped loudly. They might be loyal to Drestin but to be put on a suicide mission.... None of them stepped forward.

Drestin finally nodded, "Very well." However he was clearly not fully accepting. He stood, absolutely towering over Sarik who was barely even half the height of Drestin. Drestin reached out with his left hand, brought it down on Sarik's shoulder.

There was a twist of pain on his face and then Drestin lifted the hand. One his fingers was the glistening of blood. Sarik froze, not revealing anything. The left hand of Drestin wasn't armored, it was scaled.

"Now make sure you return to me with good news. And within a ten-day. You wouldn't want to know what will happen to you if you take longer than that."

Sarik gave a smirk, concealing his pain. "You will have them." Then he turned and left the room. Following the hallway and up the stairs to the ground floor. There he pass by some more guards and out into the night which was still pouring rain.

It was only after he was long gone from the building that he reached up to his shoulder and felt. He could feel the warm blood on his finger. The wound still stung, more than he would have expected. Poison, a curse, he didn't know. He would need to take the job seriously, he frowned, he really didn't like that Drestin man.

Sarik had only a couple of coppers left in the bag. His other money was not returned with the bag. But a few coppers was enough to buy some jerky. Enough

for a couple of nights. By the time he left the city he had also switched out of the prison garb and was wearing his gear proper.

A stiff leather jerkin, reinforced in critical areas with some metal. A long knife, practically a short sword. His bow was slung across his back along with the quiver of arrows. Several pouches were attached to his waist to make the tools easier to access.

If the half-elf was still taking the main road the time to catch up would be long and he didn't think she would be taking it. Both the man and the woman would have taken the forest. Were they working together, Drestin didn't say but Fate had a habit of interfering like that.

So he walked directly into the forest. Night was the time of monsters. But as he walked into the darkness his eyes began to glow yellow. That was fine with him, because he was the monster. He past through the forest in darkness and silence. Even his smell was that of the forest and the monsters.

He moved effortlessly though the forest. Terrain like this was easier than other places he had traveled before. Here it was only monsters that wanted to kill you, not the very plants themselves. As he got farther he found the tower. The smell drew him to it. He stepped into the tower to see the corpses of the wargs.

Spindly arachnid creatures were using their bladed arms to cut at one of the Wargs. Scavengers. They didn't even notice him before he had pulled out the bow and shot all three of them. They were motionless as he approached the Wargs.

"Sword wounds. The one who made them must be quite strong... and..." He examined the wounds. "Heirloom sword... what you meant was magic sword." No standard sword could cut so easily. Sarik could have used his dagger but he wouldn't have been able to just such clean wounds. He would have gone for the eyes or other vitals.

There were also scorch marks on the Wargs and other strange signs, "Looks like the two of them are in collaboration. That certainly saves me time finding both of them. But with them able to kill two Wargs..." It wouldn't be a problem. He just needed to make sure that the Wizard didn't know that he was coming.

There was one problem however, he had a bigger lead on him than he

expected. It was almost morning soon. And they were clearly hear in the late afternoon sometime yesterday. By the time he caught up to them they would almost certainly have finished crossing the forest. He would also need to have a rest soon.

Perhaps that was the best, finding somebody as unusual as a half-elf in a town would be trivial.

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When dawn broke Elaina and Ned left the cave they had been resting in during the night. Neither of them knew exactly how much longer they would need to be traveling so the rest had been short and they ate breakfast rations as they walked.

They walked through the day and well into the evening before the forests began to break and they finally found themselves in plains. The rain was much lighter this day than yesterday which made the going easier than expected.

There was still more travel to go to arrive on Kringred but the walk was lighter on their spirits since they didn't need to worry about potential attacks of monsters. When they finally arrived at the gates of the city it was nearing nightfall.

No soldiers in red and yellow were seen by either of them which game them some comfort as they entered the city.

Traveling through the city to the noble's quarters. It was even larger than the one in Neelgred. Ned gapped a little as he saw how impressive the Earl's residence was compared to the Barons. While he had been to Kringred a few times before he had never had any reason to come here.

The guards are the gate stopped them. Ned had been prepared to beg to see the Earl but all it had taken to gain entrance was for Elaina to show her college badge. They guards then gasped and proceeded to bring them in to speak with the Earl.

"Uhh..." Said Ned nervously, "Were you some important person that I was supposed to know about?"

"I am a Wizard."

"Yeah, I get that much, but is it really that impressive? We have several wizards who practice in Neelgred but I don't remember any of them being treated with such deference."

Elaina turned her head so look at Ned more closely, "I think you are mistaken. What you had in Neelgred are not Wizards. Perhaps you had Mages, but to be a Wizard is something different. A Mage is somebody who practices magic, usually local magic. But a Wizard is one who studies magic."

"There is a difference?"

Elaina frowned and scrunched up her eyebrows trying to find a good way to explain it. "There is a lot of difference. Perhaps a better way to think about it is that Wizards are experts at learning mage, while most other people are experts at casting magic."

Ned frowned, sure, he understood what she said but didn't really understand why that was important.

"Also I'm not just a Wizard, I'm a Ranking Member of the College of Wizardry. Not Council but a little below that."

"You lost me again."

Elaina shook her head, "It really doesn't matter for you, plus I don't really like formality so just speak however you want with me."

Ned nodded.

Their conversation about Wizard hierarchy was brought to a close by the doors opening and the Earl arriving. Elaina stood and bowed before the Earl. Ned quickly followed afterward.

The Earl was well dressed but gave a tired aura. His clothing was slightly rumpled at the edges as well. Ned didn't notice the unusual unkemptness of the Earl but Elaina did.

"I am sorry to interrupt you Lord but we come baring urgent news about a rebellion in Neelgred."

That immediately caused the Earl to straighten up, then almost teeter before catching himself on a table. "A rebellion? But.... Who? It couldn't be the Baron..."

"From my understanding it is being orchestrated by General Drestin,

although I was not able to learn about his motives.”

“General Drestin... the war hero?” The Earl held himself up using the table before staggering over to the couch across from Elaina where he practically fell onto it. Only barely forcing himself into a sitting position.

“Indeed, my companion here saw the General himself acting on the battlefield and I fled the Barons residence, who is dead.” She left out the part where she didn’t specifically see the Baron die.

“Oh dear.... Oh dear....”

“And to make matters worse, the General has gotten his hands on a powerful magical item. One that the College sent me here to recover, so I can confirm its extreme danger. I assume even here in Kringred you saw the Evil Eye?”

The Earl gulped nervously. “Yes, we saw it.”

“Then you need to prepare you troops. Your city will be next. It is only because we took the forest to arrive here that we managed to arrive before the General.”

The Earl paled noticeable more. “My troops. Yes, of course.” He rose once more, “Yes, I will get my troops ready.” Then he turned and practically ran from the room. Elaina rubbed the bridge of her nose.

Then she stood and passed over some papers to one of the servants, “Here are all that I know. See that the Earl gets it. And do you have an inn recommendation?”

The servant took it, “The Golden Ham.”

“Understood. Also tell the Earl that I will be there for the night should he need me.” The servant only nodded in response.

Elaina left. Ned, uncertain of what to do next followed after her.

When they had left the manor Elaina growled and said, “Curse me. To think that the Earl would be so useless. If he is still in the city in the morning I’ll eat a sock.”

Ned shuddered, “Useless, but... if the Earl can’t deal with the rebellion?”

“Then it will be up to even higher ups. And by then it will be too late. Ugg.... I’m going to have to ask the College for aid now.” She turned and began walking away from the manor. Then she stopped and looked back at Ned, “What about

you?"

"Me?"

"You told the Earl about it. What are you going to do next?"

Ned didn't have an answer. His emotions began to bubble. Angry and fear but he didn't know how to direct them. He had only been a carpenter, what could he do.

"Don't know huh? Well, if you want to do something, I could use an assistant. The chances of the College sending me anybody is almost zero, and you have a sword. Plus if you just stay in Kringred you are likely going to be caught by Drestin and his men. They are probably after your magic sword."

"What... huh? Magic sword?" Elaina had just bombarded him to so much that he was having trouble processing all of it.

"Magic sword, Soul Forged more than likely. And did you want in or not?"

"Are you going to stop him?"

"I'm certainly going to try, can't let somebody like him wander around with a Vestage." She turned and began walking again, "So come along. We probably only have a day or two before the General's soldiers get to Kringred and I need to have a plan before then."

Ned began following after her, "But I didn't say yes."

"So?"

"Yes, yes I will join you. But I'm not certain how useful I will be. I'm just a carpenter."

"A carpenter with a Soul Forged blade. You managed to kill a Warg with it, so it clearly likes you. And after what General Drestin did to your grandfather I'm sure you have enough motivation. That puts you better than most mercenaries I've worked with."

"I still don't know what you mean about Soul Forged, and the sword likes me?"

Elaina sighed, so few people learned about all these things. "Fine, I'll explain once we get to the inn." They walked through the streets, Elaina stopped once to ask a passerby about the location of the Golden Pig.

When they arrived she pulled out some coin and purchased a pair of rooms.

Then once they were in the privacy of one of the rooms she pulled open her back. She pulled out a piece of paper covered with golden runes. She shushed Ned as she quickly wrote upon the paper.

Once she has finished writing, basically covering the entire sheet. She folded the paper in half, walked over to the window, opened it up, and tossed the paper out. Rather than falling to the street it lifted up and flew off. Quickly disappearing.

"What was that?" Asked Ned curiously.

"Message to the Wizard College. With luck they will send me aid to help deal with the General... but I have never been lucky." Finally she sat down and looked across at Ned, "Alright, now is the time for questions. Ask them."

"What do you mean Magic sword?"

"Have you not looked at your sword?"

Ned slide the sword out of the scabbard and looked at it. It was a beautiful weapon. The blade was pristine and the hilt carved with ornamental curves and had several gemstones placed in it. However Ned didn't have any idea about how to distinguish a magic sword from a regular sword.

However Elaina had pulled out what looked like a medallion from her satchel. She lifted it and it gave off an odd purple glow that bathed the room. However the illumination was odd. Elaina and Ned showed up clearly in the light, as did the sword Ned was holding. However the room faded, became hazy and indistinct. Even the clothes that Ned and Elaina wore were faded and muted, although not as much as the surroundings.

Elaina put the medallion back into her bag and the strange light vanished.

"Yup, Soul Forged."

"And what does that mean?"

"Those who worship the Blind Blacksmith have special tradition. When they die their souls are forged into weapons or tools. Magic items, forged using a soul. They watch over those the item is given to. Passed down through generations to aid the living."

"So they don't go to the Brilliant Palace? Wait, does that mean my sword is a ghost?"

Elaina cracked a smile, "Yeah, pretty much. Soul Forged items are not too different than ghosts. When they are respected the item can have great magical powers. On the other hand, if you go against the feelings of the item it can curse you. Your sword seems to like you, at least the mana in quiet around the blade."

"My grandfather left this in the home. He didn't go to fight Drestin with it. Even when I tried to fight Drestin, my grandfather told me to grab the sword and run. I didn't think about the sword part until just now. Did he want to protect it too."

"Likely." She yawned, it was getting late. "But if you have more questions, we can leave them for lat..." She paused. Stopped mid sentence. It was the smell. "Curses." The thick pungent smell was seeping into the room along with the smoke that always came along with it. She took a deep, deep breath, but it was already too late.

She glanced over to the window... on the second floor. "Ned. We are under attack."

He stood, his sword still drawn. He turned to face the door. "This smoke... poison?"

"Magebane." She reached to her back and drew out an item, not a wand. Just a dagger. She crept toward the window. Without her wands, a jump from the second floor would be risky. And maybe exiting through the window was what they were expecting.

Then there was a knock on the door to the inn room. Elaina and Ned exchanged glances. The door was locked, but opening it might be more dangerous than leaving it locked.

"What do you want." Called out Elaina.

"Just a friendly chat." The voice was deeper, and dangerous sounding.

"Friendly chats don't involve Magebane Incense."

"I once met a wizard that could control people's minds. Consider this a health precaution."

"Mind control is forbidden magic."

"Only if the mage gets caught. Did you want to talk or should we do this the hard way?"

"Open the door." Elaina told Ned. Then she whisper, "But be ready for anything. And don't expect me to be much use. I'm going to jump out of the window if things go badly."

Ned stepped forward and with his sword ready he unlocked the door. Then he took several steps backward, out of the range of any trickiness.

The door was pushed open and the man on the far side stepped through. He was short, a fair bit shorter than Ned and Ned wasn't tall. He was armed and armored in a way that made you know that he was dangerous.

He didn't have any of his weapons drawn but his hand was very near the knife at his waist. He stepped forward into the room. "So you two are the ones. I was expecting you to be more dangerous looking."

Ned tightened his grip on his sword. "What ones?"

"General Drestin is pretty keen on capturing the two of you. And he would prefer you alive."

"A hound of Drestin are you?" Said Elaina. "How kind of you to show yourself to us."

Her eyes flickered to the window, did he have assistants outside?

The man said, "There is no need to be hasty." He was clearly watching them both very carefully. "I have a very important question for you Wizard. Do you know of the General's hand?"

Elaina licked her lips, trying to figure out what the man actually desired, "The one that is scaled I assume? I know of it, and more."

"Then tell me... do you have a cure?"

While Ned still looked confused and prepared to strike at any moment, Elaina had finally put the numbers together and had an answer. "It is not a poison but a curse. There are only two people anywhere nearby that could break the curse. Drestin and me."

"Is that a promise?"

"Yes."

"I'm also 50 marks a day as a retainer. Two week minimum."

Elaina made a pained expression, "That.... That is blackmail."

"This has been blackmail from the beginning. You want the deal or not?"

"Curses... Fine. You have your deal."

The man smiled, "Good." Only then did he remove his hand from his dagger.

"Uhh.... What just happened?" Asked Ned.

"Our kind mercenary wants to stop working Drestin and would prefer to work with me."

"I don't like being threatened. Had he paid me and hadn't threatened my life I would have just done the job. People like that don't often go through in the end either." Said the man.

Ned kinda nodded, "Alright... then... he is safe?"

"Once he puts out the Magebane Incense. After that you can put away your sword."

"Still cautious. Good." He stepped backward. He reached down to a brazier to the side of the door. He capped it. The smoke still lingered in the air but ever so slowly the smell was beginning to fade.

Once Ned got a nod from Elaina he sheathed his sword. He still scowled, "Although, are you really paying this man 50 marks per day? That price is outrageous." His sense of money was taken from working as a carpenter. 50 marks would be more than their workshop got in an entire week.

The man grinned, "Good mercenaries are expensive. Can't expect people to risk their life for you for small change."

"Annoying, but correct." Said Elaina. "Now come in and shut that door. I need to see your curse."

"Yes boss. You can call me Sarik." Said Sarik as he stepped in. He was already sounding more professional.

"Well Sarik, I am Elaina and this is Ned. Although you probably already know that." She said and Sarik nodded. "Curses are tricky things. Most people seek out a cleric to remove curses."

"True enough. But Wizards can do it too right?" His voice was almost barbed for a second before returned to polite casual.

"Some Wizards. There are many types of curses that I probably couldn't do anything about, but this one, this one I can deal with." As she spoke Sarik pulled

off his leather chest piece and then his shirt, revealing his shoulder. It was black and red, like a bruise but very large.

"Definitely Vestage work." Said Elaina as she examined it. "Did he give you a timeline for this?"

"A ten-day."

"Well, he certainly messed up the amount of curse. This will likely kill you on four or five days at the current rate. He probably didn't know how to properly apply a curse to a dwarf."

Ned looked over, "Wait, he is a dwarf?"

"What kid?" Ask Sarik, "Never seen a dwarf without a beard before?"

Ned looked a bit panicked and confused but Elaina explained, "Dwarves put a lot of cultural significance on beards. As part of that, exiled dwarves are forced to shave their beards."

Sarik nodded, "She got it. Only is we redeem our honor are we ever allowed to return." He snorted and his tone was cold, professional. "Not that I really care."

"Right... well, it looks like it was good for you to switch to me. You might have died from this before you even returned to Drestin." She glanced over to Ned, "If you didn't know, Dwarves are particularly susceptible to curses." She rummaged through her bag for one of her wands.

A rectangular piece of metal. It barely looked like a wand as all. Just a piece of metal.

"You mentioned Vestage before." Said Ned, "What is a Vestage?"

"Oh, right, I guess I should explain that. A Vestage is a magical item created by a Dragon."

"A... dragon? Big, scaly, fire breathing monsters made the arm? I guess it is scaled."

"What you described are demi-dragons. True Dragons are something very different. Very rare, very powerful. It would be difficult to describe what it means to be a Dragon."

However Sarik interrupted, "Don't confuse the lad. Dragons are the gods of Monsters. A Vestage is a divine relic, except one that hates people. No wonder

my shoulder hurts so much.”

Elaina looked miffed, “Fine, that explanation is close enough.” She brought the wand across Sarik’s shoulder. He made pained expressions. “And Vestage are relevant because the very reason I am here is to recover the Vestage. So I came prepared.”

The wand almost rattled in her hand as she passed it over Sarik’s arm. When it did that she pulled it away. She rummaged through her bag again. Pulling out a vial and handing it over to Sarik. “Alright. Drink this. In the morning you will have another treatment with the wand. The wand will prevent the spread of the curse and the drink will help dilute the cursed mana. Three days of treatment and my estimation will be the curse will no longer be lethal. Twice a day for a week and it will be completely gone.”

“That doesn’t sound particularly effective.”

“If you want effective go to a Cleric. They would just blast out the curse with sheer magical force. You would then be bedridden for a week. And I’m certainly not paying you to lie around doing nothing for a week. So suck it up and take the slow treatment.”

Sarik drank the vial before reaching up and rubbed his shoulder. It was painful but it didn’t have the same terrible biting pain that he had been experiencing before. “Not bad boss.” He rotated his shoulder a couple of times more. “So what is your plan now?”

“Be annoyed. Getting the Vestage from Drestin is going to be a challenge. The college is likely useless, the Earl is less than useless, and the upper nobles are going to take too long. Stopping the rebellion isn’t really my concern but facing off against Drestin with only three people and him having an army behind him is too dangerous. I have some beginnings of plans but I need to know what my options are.”

She pondered. “Even assuming he uses cavalry Drestin won’t be able to arrive here tomorrow. That gives tomorrow to gather resource and supplies. Then we are going to get out of the city. An abandoned military observatory is located not too far from here. I wanted to use that to see what Drestin’s forces are like. Once that is done, I’ll have an answer to the question about what the plan is.”

"You aren't planning on stopping the rebellion?" Asked Ned. Steel was in his voice.

"There isn't any way I can directly stop it. But take out the guy on top, strip him of his powerful magical item, I expect that to stop the rebellion in its tracks." She eyed Ned, "If you think of a better way of handling this please let me know."

Ned closed his mouth, as much as he wanted to stop the coming storm, they were just a small group.

"Alright everybody. Enough for tonight. Get your rest now. And Sarik, handle your own room. I'm sure 50 marks will be enough to cover it." Elaina took out some coins from her back and passed them to Sarik.

"No problem. I'll be back here at the break of dawn to check in." And just as he took the coins he was gone.

Once he was definitely out of earshot Ned said, "Can we really trust him."

"The man will die of his curse without me. So I expect him to show up for the next few days at least. You too should go to bed. Enjoy being able to sleep in a bed while you can." Ned nodded and left, leaving Elaina alone.

She pulled out a wand with a bell at the end of it. It jangled very slightly as she ran its point around the edge of her door and the edge of the window. She did not want to get interrupted during the middle of the night, and if it did happen she at least wanted to know.

"Now to see if there are any spells that might be useful." She pulled out her Grimoire and read it deep into the night. Once exhaustion finally began to take her she put it away before laying on the bed. What had she gotten herself into this time?

Chapter 4: A Bottle of Trust

The next day was supply shopping. Elaina handed out some money both to Sarik (as payment) and to Ned. She didn't know the next time they would be in a city so ensuring they had everything they needed was important. Especially true for Ned who only had the clothes on his back and the sword on his waist.

Elaina went shopping for magical components. Proper wizards were rare but hedge mages were much more common. Most couldn't easily afford (or know

how to use) wands so magical components were the casting focus of choice.

Everywhere had different and unique components and knowing what to do with each of them as part of being a mage, knowing what to do with foreign components just by examining them, that was something only wizards could do.

She grumbled as she looked through the shop full of random things. She wished she had brought a staff with her, a staff can channel much more powerful magic than a wand, and they were such a pain to travel with.

The area around Kringred was a basin surrounding by mountains. Water, and rain, was frequent. Rivers and lakes were common. The musk of swamps and decay could also be smelt during strong winds. Wild lands and dangerous animals. She could feel the energies coming from the magical components.

River gator scales. A small sack of thick peat. Several vials of clear spring water. Such things might not have specific value for normal people, but for a hedge mage or a wizard they could draw in mana, convert it, and let magic happen.

Exactly what was going to be useful and what was not was still uncertain. Even a wizard couldn't decipher local magic without experimentation. She also spent some time talking with local hedge mages. With a smile, and a few coins, they could be persuaded to share some tidbits of the workings of local mana.

Her component pouches were bursting when she left. More pure sources of mana were rarer and easier for less experienced mages to use. Due to that they were more expensive. Pure water crystals, decayed bones, they were useful but Elaina didn't need to use those. Plus she was already spending far more than she initially planned by hiring Sarik.

When she arrived back at the inn she found a folded piece of paper stuck in the upstairs window shutters. A surprisingly quick response. She pulled it up and read the golden paper. She groaned, but it was nothing she hadn't expected. The college had decided to allocate her some additional funds.

"Great... exactly what I needed. This isn't even going to cover Sarik." She crumpled up the paper burnt it with a candle.

She was writing notes when Ned arrived back at the inn with his supplies. She glanced over him. "You made sure to get armor to wear?"

He pulled out a chain shirt.

Elaina nodded, "Good. Armor won't protect you from everything but it sure will prevent many ways of dying."

"I understand that but why don't you wear armor? Do you have some kind of magic that will protect you?"

She chuckled a little, "There are certainly Wizards that do that. But I take a more practical approach." She lifted the sleeves of her robes, "Instead I just have the chainmail sewn between the layers of my robes. It can be a bit hot and heavy at times but it helps avoid people stabbing me, a feature that I have found to be pretty useful. Makes it a pain to dry out though."

"Oh." Ned was more surprised by that. The woman had been wearing that robe basically since he had met her, all the way through the forest. He was surprised she had the endurance for such a thing, perhaps she was more in shape than he had expected a wizard to be.

"Now get that chainmail on. And make sure to wear it all the time when we are traveling. You never know what might happen on the road."

Ned left to go get changed and pack all the new camping supplies that he had brought with him. Elaina still had research to do and people to speak with. With her own things organized with her new supplies she left.

Sending a letter to the nobles was first on the list. The Earl might have already done that but who knew so she just ensured that the letter would go out. Then the merchant's guild. Partly to warn them about the upcoming danger but also to get maps.

Merchants were one of the two main sources of jobs for adventurers (the other being nobles). While Elaina didn't consider herself to be an adventurer, knowing what jobs were around often helped her avoid dangerous regions when traveling in the wilderness.

Those points of danger along with the map let her know what to avoid. She also regretted her plan to visit the abandoned watchtower. Of course it was full of monsters, why wouldn't it be. Still she thanked the merchants for their aid and wished them good luck in avoiding the upcoming conflict.

The next stop was visiting all the lesser nobles in the city. While a city of this size only had a couple of Knights and Dames she went to each one of them. That they were all surprised by the eminent rebellion gave Elaina a bit of a shock, had the Earl told anybody at all?

She silently stowed away the fact that they now all owed her more as she left the mad hustle pre-invasion preparation. Her notes on the surrounding area and dangers was continuing to grow. When she returned to the inn once more she found Sarik and Ned at one of the inn restaurant tables, glaring at each other.

"What is the matter you to?"

"Difference of opinions." Was all Sarik said.

"The man only cares about money and himself." Said Ned.

"Passion is dangerous." Said Sarik.

Elaina shook her head, "Well I hope you too can continue to work together. No problems with that I take it?"

"No problems. I know how to be professional." Said Sarik.

Ned turned his head away, "No problem here either. Don't mean I like him though."

"Good enough for me. Have you both done all the preparations you need?"

"My supplies have been refilled. No good poisons for sale in a town like this and hopefully we won't need too much Magebane Incense, I only have a small stub left." Said Sarik.

"I got all the basic camping supplies I will need, plus the armor and a backup knife. Are you still sure I shouldn't also get a bow?"

Sarik grinned, "You have any experience with a bow?"

"No."

"Then you are better off not waste your money. You have me and a Wizard, there won't be lack of ranged options."

"The sword hasn't been that hard. I'm sure I can manage a bow."

"Your sword is special. Be thankful you have a Soul Forged blade." Said Elaina. "You might have the physique needed to be a swordsman, but your skills still need a lot of work. Try practicing some with the backup knife and you will see how much of a difference it will make."

"Soul Forged. That would certainly explain how a carpenter managed to fight a Warg." Said Sarik while he rubbed his chin. "But despite that the kid had potential. Even a Soul Forged weapon can't give you courage or gumption and he had both of those."

Ned said, "Hey, you don't need to call me a kid. I'm plenty enough of an adult."

"Whatever." Said Sarik. "Humans." He shrugged his shoulders.

The stared daggers at each other for a while longer but Elaina didn't try to mediate. It would just be delaying the confrontation. She had the inn bring her some food and let them glare at each other while she enjoyed her meal.

"Hmm... noodles. Delicious." She said as she ate her meal. She brought out a bottle from her satchel. "Do either of you want some?"

"Wine? More of a beer person personally, but human beer is pretty weak so I'll have a glass." Said Sarik.

"I suppose I can have some too. I've only had local cheap wines." Said Ned.

The inn provided some mugs. She poured out the remainder of the bottle, splitting it between them. "This one is pretty fruity, made by minotaurs."

Ned practically choked on his drink as he tried drinking it.

"Minotaurs? Didn't know they could make wine." Said Sarik.

"Popular in the Endless Desert." She said as she sipped the wine. It was bright and rich. Humans normally made wines out of grapes but some of the exotic fruits in the Endless Desert made for a very unique wines.

They drank the remainder. "Ah... very good." Said Elaina smiling. "Would have hated to have that go to waste."

Neither Ned nor Sarik were looking wobbly. Elaina was not completely out of it but she did teeter backward and forward.

"Boss.... That was a bit foolish." Said Sarik with a scowl as he helped guide her through the inn and up the stairs. "If I was really going to capture you now would be the time to do it."

"Pssss.... Wouldn't have another time after this to finish the bottle. Plussssss... you still need me to fix the curse." She wobbled some more as Sarik guided her through the door into her room.

"Aye, true enough, but still...."

Ned was on Elaina's other arm. "Is being this much of a lightweight an elf thing? She basically only have two glasses there."

"Quarter elf, geez. Can't your even remember that.... Now my father... he was the half-elf... that cursed debaucherous old fool." She slurred some of her words as she teetered and fell into the bed.

"Yes, yes, boss, we get it." Said Sarik as he lowered the woman onto the bed. "Now get to sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow."

She muttered to them. "You need to seal the windows and doors." She reached over toward her bad, fumbling with the flap.

"No magic while drunk." Said Sarik and he pulled the bag away from her. "We will sure everything is locked up."

"Oh, good." She laid back and was out like a light.

Sarik shook his head, "For some reason I'm surprised she managed to survive this long."

"Most people aren't as cynical as you." Said Ned.

"Yeah.... Well people die. And for some reason this idiot is trusting me."

"I don't trust you."

"Yeah, well you did drink your special wine and get plastered. Somehow I doubt she would have done that if she didn't trust me. A fool."

"Maybe you should try to live up to that trust."

"I'm her hired mercenary now. All I need to do is live up to that job." They closed the door to her room and Sarik then stepped to the side and leaned against the wall. "Now go kid. I'm going to keep watch."

"I'm no kid." Ned then stepped to the other side, leaning against the wall too. "And I'm not going to trust you to watch over her."

"Heh.... suite yourself." Said Sarik.

In the morning Elaina was feeling very refreshed. She stretched and sat up. It was time to go. She put together the last of her stuff and put on her satchel and cloak. She double checked the room to make sure she didn't leave anything.

She left the room and headed downstairs for breakfast. When Ned and Sarik

arrived she looked up at them, "You too look a bit out of it. Did you make sure to get proper sleep."

Sarik shook his head in exasperation. Ned just shrugged and said "I'll be fine."

They each had their backpacks ready.

When breakfast was done they all left the city. Heading out into the fields that surrounded the city. Once they got through the fields they passed a palisade and were off into the forests to see.

Chapter 5: Seeing the World

The hike through the forests took them well through the day. Had the hike not been mostly up hill the whole way it might have been refreshing, instead by the time the tower came into view Elaina breathed a sigh of relief.

It was then that they got to take a break. Sheltered in the trees, Sarik watched the tower while they ate and drank.

"There are supposedly Goblins living in the tower. Any sign of them?"

Sarik shook his head, "No signs of goblins. And the same was true during the travel here. Want me to go scout the place and see if I can see anything."

Elaina nodded and Sarik disappeared into the underbrush to approach the tower. A few minutes later he had returned. "The reports must be outdated. No signs of recent goblin habitation. Nobody has been in or at of the place today. The storm washed away any tracks before that."

The building was a tall stone structure with special mechanical equipment on the top floor.

"Any other ways in than the main front door?" Asked Ned.

"Not unless you can fly. Or climb extremely well." Said Sarik. "Although there are no shortages of flying monsters so that could be the case."

"Maybe it really is abandoned then." Said Ned.

Elaina shook her head, "No way. If the goblins left then there must be something else here. Goblins don't just abandon their homes for no reason. There is plenty of food in this area so something must have forced them out. And

finding them to ask is out of the question.”

“Asking goblins?” Asked Ned.

“Sure, goblins can talk. Most would prefer to spill the beans rather than try and risk a fight. Goblins might sneak and steal a lot but direct confrontation is not something they are good at.” Said Elaina. “I guess there is only one way to find out and that is to go through the doors.”

The hesitantly walked up the rest of the hill before they arrived at the base of the door.

“This looks a lot like the tower there we fought the Wargs.” Said Ned.

“Yeah, very similar. They were probably both built at around the same time. My guess is during the Istrainian period when this kingdom was actually nine different...”

“Focus” said Sarik interrupting Elaina’s segue into history.

“Ah, quite right.” She dug through her wands to the one that seemed to be made of charcoal. She held it while Sarik and Ned got to either side of the door. Both had their weapons at the ready. Ned reached out and pushed the door open. He did it quickly, fast enough for him to jump back and avoid anything on the other side of the door.

However it just creaked open, nothing jumped out to attack them.

They slowly stepped into the tower. The place was dark and gloomy with only a couple of higher up windows letting light in plus the door they were entering from.

Sarik glanced around the room, “Signs on goblin inhabitation, but they wouldn’t have been here for a few ten-days at least.” He was right, little tents and piles of refuse were all across the bottom floor of the tower. “Although, no sign of what it was that might have drove them away.”

No monsters jumped out from behind the goblin tents or from the stairs up to the second floor. They moved across the room, keeping attention all around them. As they reached the center of the room there was a creak and the door leading into the base of the tower slammed shut.

The lights from the windows also dimmed and the cast lights across the room

twisted and turned.

"Curses" Said Elaina, "No wonder the goblins left." She pulled out a medallion from her satchel, lifting it up in her free hand. The purple light flooded across the room, backing out everything but Elaina, Ned, and Sarik. Then the three forms appeared. Floating figures, tortured shapes reaching their hands toward them. "Ghosts."

The circled up. Sarik called out, "You have a magic to handle ghosts?"

"Ned, you hold them off while I prepare a spell. A Soul Forged blade should be able to harm ghosts." Called out Elaina as she began to riffle through her bag of supplies.

Ned nodded, he stepped forward and slashed with his sword. The ghost didn't even bother to dodge, and it very much regretted that decision. The scream of the ghost broke through the eerie silence, grating on their ears. It shivered and shattered before the ghost dissolved into motes of purple light.

The two other ghosts screamed as well, backing up. They saw what had happened and weren't about to meet the same fate so easily. But something was chilling the area, and the three of them could feel the icy cold digging into their skin.

"What are they doing." Said Ned as he stepped backward, the chill had come so quickly it could not have been natural.

"Draining our mana, eating our soul." Sarik said. "You had better have an answer in that bag of yours boss."

She pulled out a long filament, like a ribbon but it must have been made of some strange material. Silver glints even in the strange lighting radiated from the ribbon. She handed it over to Sarik. "Wrap your weapon with it. It should let you fight ghosts too."

Sarik nodded before he began to wrap his dagger with the strange ribbon. While he did that Elaina brought out a clay jar. It was covered with strange writing. She unfastened the lid which was tightly strapped down to the jar.

There was immediately hissing sound from around it. She called out, "You too, deal with the remaining two ghosts as quickly as possible. This won't last too long." Then she flung open the top of the jar and the air all seemed to be

pulled toward the jar. The hissing became torrents of wind.

Not just normal wind because the ghosts seems to be effected by it too. They attempted to fly against the torrent pulled them to the jar but it was like swimming against a strong current. That opportunity gave Ned and Sarik time to run towards the ghosts.

They attempted to move in the air to avoid the attacks from them. Sarik's attack looked like it was evaded but it was just a feint and the second real swing caught the ghost in the middle of the air. Ned's attack was dodged by the ghost but Ned was reversed the sword and brought the sweep around again toward the ghost. Has the ghost been able to attack that would have left Ned open but the ghost was too busy escaping the pull of the jar.

The sword connected and the last ghost burst into flicking dots of purple light. The motes of light flew through the air and were pulled into the jar. As the last of the motes entered the jar Elaina sealed the jar. The wind immediately stopped. She held the jar tightly, latching the lid.

When that was finally done she breathed a sign of relief. "Sarik, the ribbon." She asked. Sarik unwrapped the ribbon from his dagger and handed it to her. She took it and wrapped it tightly around the jar. Then she practically collapsed to the ground breathing hard.

"Elaina, are you alright? The ghosts didn't get you did they?"

She grinned a bit, "I'm good. Mages are just more susceptible to the mana drawing power of ghosts. I needed to draw in local mana to activate the jar and to do that I had to use the icy mana of the ghosts. Not pleasant I assure you, but it has been resolved."

"You stored the ghosts." Said Sarik, "What do you plan on doing with them?"

"Pass them off to a Shepard. Handling ghosts is more of a cleric's job than a wizard. The Ghost Jar just traps them until that point. Hopefully there aren't any more ghosts. Until the jar is purified by a cleric I won't be able to use it again."

"There are unlikely to be more ghosts here." Said Sarik as he looked around. The area was still shrouded in strange darkness from the medallion but only the three of them were clearly visible.

Elaina nodded and put her amulet away, stuffing it into her satchel. The light

returned to the room letting them see the abandoned goblin home once again.

"Give me a bit to rest." Said Elaina, "Sarik, did you want to check out the upper floors now or wait until I am recovered."

"Since it was a ghost, there is very likely nothing else here that is a danger. I'll be back soon." He headed over the stairs and went up higher into the tower.

"It is amazing how much you have in that bag of yours." Said Ned. "You always seem to have the solution to whatever we need."

"The solutions are just experience. Visit enough dangerous ruins and you will eventually come across ghosts. Plus this satchel is enchanted, the inside is a bit bigger than the outside."

"Wow..." Said Ned impressed.

"Magic bags are so useful they are found all over the place. Most are pretty expensive though. This one I managed to get at a good discount. It requires constant maintenance from a mage so it isn't useful to a merchant. Plus it doesn't help much with the weight, I swear this bag is going to break my back some day."

"Still sounds very useful."

She nodded before laying on the cold stone floor for a minute. When she sat back up it was because Sarik was coming back down the stairs.

"Anything unusual up there?"

"Looks like the nest for some very large birds. Maybe the ghosts didn't care about them. But the birds are out and about. Whatever you want to see you had better go see before they come back to roost for the night."

"Alright. Hopefully it won't take long." She stood and they climbed up the stairs to the top of the tower." Ned nearly gasped as he looked out across the landscape.

"Indeed, pretty impressive. The Bowl of Sallantic." They looked out across the massive valley that made up the region. Surrounded by mountains on all sides the place formed a giant bowl. The large lake and marshland in the middle which was then surrounded by thick woodlands.

"From here you can see most of the region. Neelgred is there." She pointed to one edge of the valley. "And obviously that city there is Kringred." The much

closer city. "And finally Presgred on the far side of the lake."

Ned nodded, "Yeah, the three cities in the Bowl. Although there are plenty of smaller towns and villages dotted around." He was at least reasonably familiar with the region he was born and raised in.

Elaina fished in her bag before pulling out a spyglass. She looked down toward Kringred. "And it looks like we didn't leave the city a moment too soon. Soldiers are gathering outside the walls of Kringred." She passed the spyglass over to Ned to let him have a look.

"That is an awful lot of soldiers. How did Drestin get so many soldiers?"

Sarik has his own spyglass that he was using to observe the same force.

"Can't be more than three hundred soldiers. Hardly an army."

"Still, more than enough to take both Kringred and Presgred. Although he must have been planning this for a while to get that many soldiers so quickly. And I expect his army to grow with recruits from both those cities." Said Elaina as she took the skyglass back from Ned.

She continued "One he takes Kringred and Predgred he will want to station a force at both of the mountain passes. That way he can limit who comes in and out of the Bowl. A small force stations at either of those could stop a much larger force and let Drestin keep these lands."

"So what is the plan?" Asked Ned.

"Notice has already been sent to Presgred. Hopefully the extra time they get will help them figure out something about a defense. A letter was sent to the nobles but they won't be able to arrive in time, even if they do come. However there are two places that we should probably visit. The Sallantic Monastery sits near the lake in the swamp, the monastic order would pose a danger to Drestin. Revold's Vault is an old repository of wisdom, there are other mages there, perhaps even another Wizard, making sure they are informed and not siding with Drestin is paramount.

"Also... with Drestin busy assaulting Kringred and Presgred I want to pay a new visit to Neelgred. With his forces occupied the city should be lightly defended. I want to learn about the Vestage and perhaps about the full capabilities of Drestin's forces."

Sarik looked across the large area of the valley, "That is quite the journey you want to take us on. Do you really think we can visit those three places before Drestin can fishing taking Predgred?"

"Cross country is more dangerous but is certainly faster. We should be able to visit all three but whether we can convince them to oppose Drestin is another thing entirely. Visiting the Sallantic Monastery first is the best option I think, then we can take passage across the lake as a way to return to Neelgrad without crossing paths with Drestin. Finally go cross country toward Presgred, hopefully getting to Revold's Vault before the city falls to Drestin."

She drew her finger across the landscape in front of them as she spoke.

"When back in Neelgrad, can we check in on my parents?" Ask Ned, "I'm not certain what has happened to them or if Drestin has done anything to them."

Elaina nodded, "Sure, we will check in on them in Neelgred. Any other suggestions?"

"Taking one of the two forts would make it easier for the nobles to send reinforcements and would surely annoy Drestin. Perhaps you could use that as a way to force a confrontation?"

"Hmm... perhaps. One of those Forts is beyond Presgred. When were are done with the vault we can see if they have already taken the fort. If not that would be a good opportunity for us. The other would would be difficult. We are the closest to it as we will ever be and I expect Drestin to send forces there as soon as Kringred falls. Taking it and holding it would be difficult and Drestin would have free rein over the Monastery and the Vault."

She looked out some more before finally nodding, "Alright then. Plan made."

Chapter 6: Flow Like Water

Elaina encouraged them to keep going as they went down the mountain. Once Kringred fell to Drestin there would be more chances of them encountering soldiers. While the route they traveled did not directly cross path paths with the army that was only true if the army was not yet marching to Presgred.

Scouts however were still a serious risk. Mostly they were traveling by forest

but early on the second day they needed to cross the main road. Sarik went scouting to ensure that nobody would be meeting up with them, then they crossed and were back in the wild forests once more. An hour later they felt it was no longer a risk to be found by Drestin's scouts.

There was a road that lead from Kringred to the Sallantic Monastery but traveling on it would risk meeting people. Less of a risk than the road to Presgred but still a risk they did not want to take.

The forest was thick but navigable. However as they got closer and closer to the lake at the center of the valley their footing got more and more treacherous. The travel speed likewise slowed down. They spent the night camped on one of the dryer patches of the ground. The insects were also a complete nuisance at that point.

Elaina could have used her wind wand to keep them away but mages were particularly adroit at detecting the use of magic. Keeping her use of magic to the absolute minimum made it easier to travel without getting noticed.

The third day of travel was much much slower than the first two. Finally they were in the swamp around the lake proper. Only after several hours of slowing trekking through the thick mire did they have to give up going cross country. Taking the road the rest of the way would be more dangerous but they also couldn't afford to be too slow.

Arriving on the road turned out to be less exciting than expected. No signs of recent travel.

"Nothing passed through here since the storm." Said Sarik as he examined the path.

"That is good for us." Said Elaina, "The Sallantic monks apparently don't visit the city very often, although they do receive shipments of goods pretty regularly."

Ned groans, "We could have been taking the road this entire time then?"

"Perhaps, and perhaps not." Said Sarik, "There might have been scouts much earlier on the path, there to prevent anybody from using the road as an escape from the city. Who are these Sallantic monks anyways?"

Ned was the one who interjected, while he might not be wise about the rest of

the world, the Bowl of Sallantic was his home. "Sallantic is a God. While worship in the three cities is primarily Lightism, there are a lot of Sallantic worshippers as well. This region is considered to be a holy site to them, the bowl of which Sallantic drank when he ascended. There are sometimes large pilgrimages that come and visit the monastery. Although I don't see many of them myself since they don't pass through Neelgred."

He continued, "But they hold a festival in early spring when the snows melt and I have been to that many times. My father even say that he once saw Sallantic himself show up at one of the festivals, although that was before I was born."

"Really?" Asked Elaina intrigued, "The god himself showed up? That must have been quite the festival. Sallantic a minor god as religions go, most of his followers are at the Great Silver Sea area. It must be quite the journey for souls to get there."

Ned nodded, "Yes, when the pilgrims return home, there are those that carry back the Last Jars home with them. It is considered a big honor."

"As fascinating as that is, we should keep going. While there is nobody on the road now, shoe knows how long it will be until people show up."

Then began the walk down the road, deeper into the swamp lands.

"The Great Silver Sea, have you been there?" Asked Ned, "I've only heard stories about it but I've never left the Bowl."

Elaina nodded, "Yeah, it is a beautiful place. A sea is like a lake but bigger, impossibly bigger. Stretching on farther than you can see. There are many islands dotted out in the sea, going out until you reach the Lands Beyond. Although, I have never been to those."

"Hmm... surprised you liked it." Said Sarik, "Wizard's aren't much liked in there. Especially those directly working for the College."

Elaina shrugged before saying, "They were surprisingly accepting, at long as you don't try to insult the Bards." She looked over at Ned's confused look, "Ah, Bards are another kind of mage. There is a bit of conflict that has occurred between Wizards and Bards over the years. And the Bard's have their college in the Great Silver Sea."

"I think I see." Said Ned, "I've heard about all kinds of places but never had a chance to visit them and probably never will. So I like hearing stories about those that have visited them."

"I'm happy to keep talking," Said Elaina, "But... if there is something you want to do, you should do it. Otherwise, you might regret the life you lived."

Ned didn't know how to respond to the Wizard, she who had opportunity to travel. He was just a carpenter. He didn't know how to explain what he was feeling, instead he just listened to Elaina's stories about her visit to the Silver Sea and the trouble she had gotten into during the trip.

It was getting dark when they saw the monastery off in the distance. A building that sparkled blue in the last sparks of light coming from the sun. Water flowed around, and up it. The blue of the stone and the water made sparkling rainbows in the air. The monastery itself was also very large, bigger than many of the manor and the palace of the earl.

An entire community of people could, and did live here. There were even gardens setup outside the building that were being tended by people wearing dark blue robes. Many of them looked up at the three travelers approached, while there was some interest none of the people stopped their work.

The entrance to the building was large enough for a cart to go through and they were greeted by monk at the entrance.

"Greetings travelers." He looked over the three of them, "Are you followers of Sallantic, here on pilgrimage?"

Elaina shook her head.

He frowned, "While we are loathe to turn travelers away, this is a special resting place for the followers of Sallantic, not a place for random wanderers."

"We aren't wanderers" said Ned, "Bad things are happening in Kringred and we wanted to warn you."

The face of the monk turned concerned, "Bad things?"

Elaina nodded, "Yes, can we speak to the head of the order. There have been a noble rebellion and I fear soon it will involve you too."

The concern turned into outright worry, "Yes, the head, I will bring you to him."

They followed through the complex. There were many hallways and equally many people living inside the monastery. Along the way they saw a whole group of young monk practicing martial arts. Their movements ebbing and flowing like the water beside them.

"I have seen some of the Sallantic monks in towns before, but their martial arts, is it actually strong?" Whispered Ned to Elaina as they passed those practicing.

"Couldn't fully say, but I have heard stories. That the masters can walk on water and their movements can move the very waters themselves. Wizards have long speculated that sufficient specific training on your body can alter your internal mana such that you turn yourself into a Sorcerer allowing you to control mana freely. However the Sallantic monks refused to be checked so that hypothesis is untested."

Most of her words meant nothing to Ned but it all sounded very impressive.

Farther into the monastery they reached a double set of doors, carved with flowing water. Blocking the door was a very short man, with thick black hair and an equally thick beard. He wore the blue robes that the others wore but there were golden trimmings on the edges of the robes.

The people leading them leaned in to whisper to the man. He nodded, his eye turning grim. Then he looked at appraised each of the travelers. His eyes stopped long and hard when he stared at Sarik. He turned and opened the door into the inner chamber.

Then he said, "Those two can enter." He pointed toward Ned and Elaina.

Sarik was beginning to show annoyance on his face, "What, do you have a problem with me?"

"Those without honor are not allowed to see the Head." Said the beard with a gruff voice.

"We are not in dwarf lands but you would refuse me due to those traditions?" Said Sarik in an almost mocking tone, "I wouldn't say I am the one without honor here."

The other dwarf's features contorted with visible rage. The slashing of water sounds filled the silence between them. Finally the other dwarf managed to

control his anger and finally said "Very well, you may enter too. But know that my eyes are upon you."

Sarik slightly smirked as he passed the dwarf and stepped into the room along with the other two. Across the room, kneeling on large cloth was an old woman. While her blue robes were plain, almost like an acolyte there was something special about those robes.

Elaina took a kneeling position in front of the woman. She bowed slightly to show respect to the old woman. Ned followed along as did Sarik. The dwarves monk and the one that led them here knelt behind them.

"I heard you have something important to say." Said the old woman.

"Indeed. There has been a rebellion against the local Earl. General Drestin has raised soldiers and has already taken over the city of Neelgred, it is even possible that he controls the city of Kringred by now."

"Hmm.... Indeed." Said the old woman as she considered that. "But you brought this information to me for what reason? We at the Sallantic Monastery not not servants of the Earl. While a rebellion is indeed troubling, for what reason should we interfere?"

"A normal rebellion would not be something you should interfere with, however there is something different about this one. Drestin, has in his hands a Vestige, not just any Vestige either but one of Zeshalif's."

There was gasping from the two monks from behind them.

"You speak the truth?"

"Indeed, I am one of the Wizard College's retrievers."

"How could there have been one so close to us? Impossible." Said the gruff voice from behind them.

The old woman raised her hand and he silenced. "You tell us knowing that if this is true we can not let you retrieve one of Zeshalif's Vestige. We would see it destroyed."

"I have no opposition to that. Some wizards would want to use such a thing but it is the position of the College that Vestiges must be destroyed. They are too dangerous to risk using."

The old lady nodded, "Very well." She paused and considered, "But there is

one thing I must ask of you. You would have us interfere directly with politics, it puts us at risk. I would have you take Sallantic's Trial, to show us the truth and that Sallantic desires this outcome.

Ned had just been looking more confused as the conversation went on. He glanced at Elaina as she responded, "Very well, we shall take this trial so that Sallantic can see the truth."

"Good. Verog, see them to the trial. Ensure they take it properly."

"Yes Head, I will see it done." Said the gruff dwarf.

They stood followed the dwarf through the halls.

"Can you explain what just happened?" Asked Ned.

"Sallantic has a particular dislike of Dragons, and has a particular rivalry with the dragon named Zeshalif. And that dragon is the one who created the Vestige that I am seeking."

"Really? That seems pretty unlikely coincidence."

"I don't think it is, but without getting into the mind of a dragon I can't show that it is anything but a coincidence. However forcing Drestin into a conflict with the Sallantic Monastery which results in the monastery getting destroyed certainly sounds like something a Dragon would do."

There is an annoyed growl from in front of them, "To think Zeshalif would work against us so directly. How did he even get the Vestige here in the first place."

"I believe Drestin brought it back with him at the end of the Plague of Sorrow. This rebellion of Drestin's was probably a long time in coming."

"Wasn't that like 70 years ago? And he just had it hidden away all this time?" Asked Ned.

Elaina shrugged, "Probably. But without speaking to the dragon it would just be speculation and I hope to never talk to a dragon. But with the Vestige here it means that the conflict between the Sallantic Monastery and General Drestin's forces is going to happen, the question is when."

"Enough discussion. We are at the Cistern." The dwarf open up the door and revealed a large room. Water flowed in from all directions, going down into a

large hole in the ground. Stairs were placed along the edge of the hole.

"Each of you will go into the Cistern, one at a time. When you return we will know if Sallantic has blessed this meeting. Should it be blessed than we will see what use you are. Otherwise, we will face our own foes separately."

Elaina nodded, "Yes, of course. Are we allowed to bring our stuff?"

"Take whatever you would. Sallantic's will won't be determined but such petty concerns."

"Hmm... I see." She took off her satchel and handed it to the monk. "Then hold onto this while I am gone."

Ned and Sarik shared a confused look but before they could ask what Elaina was doing she stepped forward. The water slashed against her shoes which she also took off. Then she began walking down the steps to the bottom of the Cistern.

"Why did she do that? He just said that she could take her equipment?" Asked Ned.

"She chose to face the challenge with only her mind and body." Said the monk.

"We are supposed to take this trial alone right?"

"Go down one at a time. After that things are in the hands of Sallantic."

Ned unstrapped his sword and handed it to the monk, "Then hold onto my sword. Can I go down now?"

The monk looked down the cistern, Elaina has disappeared into the depths. "Alright, you can go down now."

Ned took the steps down into the cistern.

That left just Sarik at the top with the dwarves monk. The monk turned and stared at Sarik, they were alone for the first time. "And what are you doing? I recommend giving up now. There is no way that Sallantic will accept you."

"Sallantic isn't a dwarven god." Said Sarik as he looked down into the cistern. "Makes me wonder why you are following him. As least I still follow the Stone Watchers." Sparks flew between the two of them.

"Still follow them do you... heh... what pointlessness. We both know that no matter how much you work on it you won't ever be accepted back in. I didn't

even get banished and still there was no place there for me. So I found a place that wanted me.”

“Whatever. Can I go down now?”

“Are you going to leave your tools behind like the others?” Asked the monk.

“No, I will be going with them. Whatever your fancy words were, I’m not going to leave behind my advantages.” He walked to the edge of the stairs and began going down.

There was no more words exchanged between them. They are already said everything they needed to say to each other. Sarik’s steps echoed as he went down the stairs one at a time. Soon the mist from the falling water obscured his view up and he was truly alone.

When he reached the bottom there was a thin layer of water and there were stone tunnels that stretched out branching and leading in all directions. There was no sign of Elaina nor Ned. With the water it would also be impossible for Sarik to track either of them.

He listened but all he heard was splashing water. The place really did make it practically impossible to find other people who had come down here. From what he thought of the trial, all he needed to do was find another way out of the Cistern. He reached down and put his fingers into the water at his feet.

There was a very slight flow of water. The water level was not rising so the water must be going somewhere. He walked along the passageways, occasionally reaching down and feeling which way the water was flowing.

He turned down a hallway and found thin barriers of water on either side of him. He continued along the path but could see forms on the other side of the barriers. “Boss, is that you?” He called out. Nobody responded. He continued walking but when one of the forms seemed to move in his peripheral sight.

He looked at the form which was obscured by the wall of water. It did not move. He passed through the barrier of water to find a statue. About as big as Sarik, carved of stone, and with a thick bushy beard. On his head was carved a stone crown which was embedded with a brilliant gemstone.

“One of the Stone Watchers... why is this down here?” He reached out, almost touching it before withdrawing his hand. “That other dwarf must have carved it

and put it here... but why would he do that if he left the Stone Watchers." He stared at the statue.

He turned to see another shape through one of the walls of water. When he stepped through that there was yet another statue of a dwarf. This one slightly different from the first.

"I see." He looked up at the ceiling, "This is my trial is it?" He reached down and once again felt the water. The flowing, it showed him what way he could go. Yet there he saw another form, off behind another wall of water. The cold water flowed around his hand. He knew from all of his experience that the water flow would lead him to the exit.

Instead he followed the statues. One after another, he saw them through the water. Each one different, yet, when he saw each one of them he knew the story of each one. The Smith, the Miner, the King, all Watchers that he remembered, their stories coming to his mind.

He continued to follow them. The dwarves of legend, memorialized for all time. All dwarves wanted to be one of them. But for a banished dwarf like him, that would never happen. Still, he followed them.

Then he turned a corner and saw at the far end another one of the statues. And a door, a door that was slowly lowering. He began to run. He could make it before the door closed but it would be close. He was almost there, almost past the closing door when he heard it.

"Help, somebody help me!" It was the voice of Elaina calling out to him. He could head it from the side, past those wall of water on his left.

However Sarik kept running. He got to the door before it was closed. He was about to slide under it when he saw the form on the other side. One of the Watchers.... The Bulwark. He wore thick armor, hiding his entire form.

Sarik stepped back. "Wait for me Bulwark. But I have a job." The door slide shut, separating him from the stone statue. Sarik turned and began walking in the direction that he had heard Elaina's voice. He saw no more statues.

He passed through another wall of water to find Elaina looking up toward the ceiling.

"You called?" Was all Sarik said.

"Oh, hey, Sarik, you managed to hear me." She pointed upwards, "There is a hole up there, I don't think I can get up there by myself. Do you think you can give me a lift."

Sarik looked up, there was indeed a hole in the ceiling, "Sure, I can give you a hand up. However..." He pulled off his backpack and pulled a rope out of it. "If you could find a place to tie this up there."

"Good thinking. I was wondering how we would both make it up there." Said Elaina as she grabbed the rope. Sarik stood underneath the hole and helped boost Elaina up into the hole. There she squeezed and contorted herself higher up.

"Alright, let's see, more passageway up here. No real good place to tie the rope but I decent place to brace myself." She called out from above. "I'm going to let it down. Try to climb up quickly. I don't know how long I'll be able to hold your weight."

The rope lowered. Sarik grabbed it and quickly used that to scale to the hole in the ceiling. From there he was able to use the sides to climb the rest of the way. The ceiling passageway turned slightly, narrowed and that is where Elaina was, wedging herself between to the two walls to support his weight.

With him up there they coiled up the ropes.

"Any sign of Ned?" Asked Elaina.

"Nope, just a bunch of statues. You see anything weird?"

She shrugged, "There was several riddles and puzzles that I had to get past but nothing to difficult. I'm worried that they might have been too tricky for Ned."

"Riddles? I guess the whole trial thing does take the person into account. I didn't see any riddles."

"Oh, well, I guess that old lady does know what she is doing."

"The old lady? Wouldn't it be Sallantic that is in charge of the trial?" Asked Sarik.

"Sallantic? Impossible, based off the linear magic divisor theorem..."

"Alright, alright, I trust you boss. It was the old lady who is hosting this trial."

Elaina looked a bit miffed. They were crawling through the narrow tunnel at this point. "Fine, if you don't want to hear about the theorem I won't tell you."

Ah, I think I see a light up there."

She moved forward and pushed open a grate above her. Then she rose to find herself in one of the gardens that was outside of the front of the monastery. Several of the monks looked up to watch the two of them climb out of the tunnels and into the dim light of the evening.

Elaina stretched, "Whew, that tunnel really was pretty cramped. I'm surprised you managed to fit through with all the stuff you are carrying with you. Wouldn't it have been easier with it?"

"Then we wouldn't have had a rope."

"Oh, good catch. I hope Ned managed to make it out of there safely. I wonder what he experienced." They walked to the entered of the Monastery before being welcomed in and brought to a resting area.

After a while Elaina was looking a bit more worried. "Ned is doing alright isn't he? We didn't just abandon him in those tunnels?"

"Your worry is unnecessary, this is being overseen by the head monk right? It isn't like there are monsters in those tunnels."

"I guess you are right, we just have to wait for him to finish."

They continued to wait but eventually their patience paid off. Ned arrived. His clothes were still moist from whatever his experience was and he looked much more tired than either of the other two had felt from their experience.

"You look like you went through several hells." Said Sarik with smirking grin.

"Uggg..." Was all Ned could muster as he took a seat next to them.

"I take it you didn't have to deal with puzzles." Said Elaina.

"I had to fight water monsters of some kind."

"Elementals?"

"I don't know, they were creatures of water. Since I had left my sword behind and I do use what I found down there. I didn't realize how much the sword was doing for me until then."

"The head monk must have formed them for you to fight against. But it looks like you managed to succeed?"

Ned's face contorted several times before he finally settled on tired, "Yeah, I

guess I did. I had to do a lot of running away though. Not certain that was 'doing well' but I was weak.... Too weak." He sounded frustrated.

"Ho ho ho" came the laughing voice of the old lady as she walked into the room with them. "Don't dismiss your success so easily. You fought marvelously and your trial was much more interesting than these too."

Her movements were slow but everybody kept their eyes on her until she took a seat. "The trails were not made to test your capabilities, but instead your will and determination. There are many who think they are determined but when their back is to a wall they break."

"I felt like I broke, I certainly spent a long time running."

"Running is not the same as giving up." Said the old woman sagely. "These two have also made those decisions before. There wasn't too much to test."

Sarik shrugged while Elaina just said, "Your puzzles were pretty fun. If you have more I would be happy to stop by before leaving the area and giving them a try."

"Ha, see, only somebody like that would like my puzzles. But enough of talking about the trial. You desired the aid of the Sallantic Monastery."

"Right." Said Elaina suddenly serious. "A direct confrontation with Drestin's forces is likely beyond us without the noble's aid. However that is not my primary intent. It is to break the rebellion to dealing with Drestin himself. Without a leader they would certainly collapse, or at least fall apart when the nobles finally come."

The head monk nodded, "Yes. While we might be able to handle his forces in the swamp, in the forests we lose some of our advantage."

"No water elementals?"

"Among other things. Those living here are very familiar with the surrounding terrain. Without a terrain advantage Drestin would have the numbers advantage on us."

"But.... Your monks could draw Drestin's attention. After he captures Presgred we will be seeking to reenforce the border forts. When I send you a paper messenger I want you to retake Kringred. That will bring his forces to you."

"We can not hold a city against his forces."

"I don't need you too. Just delay his forces."

"A dangerous plan, one that likely puts you in extreme danger as well." She paused and continued to consider the plan. "We can hold the city for a time. Long enough for his main force to be forced to arrive. That is all that I can give you, any more would put my people at too much risk. When the main army arrives we will flee back into the swamp."

"Understood, that is all that I need. Although... if you have some water aspected spell components I would love some of those. The city only really had weak ones."

"Wizards, every greedy. Very well, we can find a little to spare." She looked over to Ned, "And I'll find a little extra something for your inexperienced comrade."

Elaina gave a short bow, "I appreciate your aid. Although... there was something else we also wanted to ask for."

"Even more?" Said the old woman wryly.

"We wanted to borrow a boat. We are returning to Neelgred to look into Drestin and do some disruption. Taking a boat would be much faster than going through the forest again."

"Oh, well, out of all your extreme requests that is by far the most reasonable. I'll ensure a boat is ready for you by the morning. You are staying the night correct? Going across the lake in the night would be dangerous."

Ned was the first to nod, "Yes, we would love to stay the night."

"You have a bath right?" Asked Elaina.

"Of course. With warm water too. I'm sure you will all love it. There are pilgrims that have decided to stay here just for the baths." Said the old lady with a laugh. "Enjoy yourself." She looked over at Ned, "Remember to do it will you can. This might be your last change."

Ned shivered slightly before nodding.

They were let to the rooms where they got to spend the night.

In the middle of the night Sarik found himself sitting outside in one of the internal gardens. He was staring up at the stars in the sky.

"Staring at the stars is bad luck." Said a gruff voice from beside him. Sarik looked to see the other dwarf sitting there, also looking up at the stars.

"Says the pickaxe to the coal."

"Hrumph. I'm a follower of Sallantic now, I'm allowed to look at the stars all I want."

"And I'm an exile, nobody is going to stop me."

"Fine, your call. You managed the trial... so I guess I got to accept that you are worthy."

"Whatever."

"But you... you have got to make your choice. Choose what you are going to follow."

"The surface world make you chatty or something?"

"Just some advice. We both live our own life." The other dwarf stood and left Sarik alone in the night. He looked up at the stars for a little while longer. He didn't know if he like watching them.

Chapter 7: Leaving a Legacy

The boat rocked on the water and the three of them stepped into it. Sarik has a look of almost fear but he wouldn't ever voice such a thing so he kept his mouth shut and stepped into the boat. Ned looked a bit uncertain, he might never have been on a boat before.

Elaina didn't seem to notice and just got in the boat.

The old head monk handed Elaina a small wrapped package which Elaina squirreled away into her satchels of magical supplies. "And for you."

"A shield?" Asked Ned as he accepted the wrapped item from the old woman.

"Aye, a good warrior needs a good shield. This one is carved from coral and I enchanted it personally. Even should it break, just submerge it in water and it will heal."

Ned took it from her, "Thank you very much."

"But avoid leaving it in the sun and the heat too much. If it dries too much it will become brittle. Soak it when you can and leave it wrapped except when you

need it." Ned placed it at his feet.

Ned and Sarik took to the oars. Elaina waved goodbye to the monks before taking out her eyeglass to keep an eye on across the lake.

Ned huffed and puffed. "Don't you have that wind wand that you could use to blow us along?"

"Hmm.... Wouldn't work. First we would need a sail, hard to use wind to blow a boat without a sail. Second my wands is the source of the wind, you need a special kind of want to control the wind indirectly. It would be like pushing both forward and back on the boat at the same time."

"Oh... right... sail...." He didn't even bother commenting about the second part, he barely understood what the first part meant, the specifics of what magic could do was lost on him.

"Stop complaining and keep rowing." Said Sarik who wasn't showing as much signs of fatigue as Ned. It was hard work rowing a boat, especially for those unused to the activity. However Sarik just took it in stride, although he did remove some of his layers to aid in ventilation.

As they rowed across the lake even Elaina took a turn at the oars although she didn't last nearly as long as either them did. She lay panting across one of the benches while Ned took his place back at the oar.

After several hours of rowing, Elaina looked out across the lake. "Hold."

The two stopped rowing. "Over there, you can see Neelgred from here. Each of you should take a short break, then we will finish the trip. Over there." She pointed toward one shore of the lake, "That is far enough from the city that nobody should notice our approach.

While there were fisherman in the city, the city walls did not extend to the edge of the lake. Instead there were some huts near the edge of the lake that the fishermen used to store their supplies.

"No fisherman out today." Said Sarik as he looked out across the lake. "That should be unusual right?"

Ned nodded, "Yeah, there are usually boats out on the lake most of the day. Not having any, is a bit weird."

"I expect the city is still under martial law." Said Elaina "You don't want

people escaping over the lake to tell Presgred of the danger.”

“It also is a warning. He soldiers keeping people in line. Although he can’t keep them locked up for too much longer. People will start starving and that is when things get dangerous.”

They waited for a few more minutes before Ned gave the alls good. Then he and Sarik did the final push to the shoreline. The boat was pulled out of the water and dragged into the forest to hide it from prying eyes.

“Boss, I hope you have a plan for getting us into the city. All three of us are probably on the watchlist of entering the city.”

“I could get in but I don’t fancy being the only one inside the city. I do have a method for use to get over the walls but doing that during the day would be extremely risky. Ned, do you have any secret way you know how to get inside the city?”

“There are some caves that run underneath the city, I know a few entrances outside that we could use. While they aren’t typically guarded by the town guard they are usually sealed up and it is possible that with the lockdown somebody is actually guarding them.”

“Let’s give those a try, if it doesn’t work then we can try the night wall scaling. Lead the way.”

Ned lead them into the forest. Eventually they found the entrance to the caves. “This side is just empty caves. Probably no monsters but there might be wild animals.”

Elaina brought out her light wand and brightened up the cave as they went into it. There were some deer sleeping but nothing dangerous inside. “Bricked up.” She said as they reached the end and saw the wall of mortared stone.

“This definitely leads into the city though. When I was a kid this place hadn’t yet been sealed so we used this to sneak in and out of the city. But one day goblins discovered the tunnels and once they started stealing things the city had this entrance sealed and I haven’t used it since.”

Sarik examined the wall, “This is pretty shoddy work. We can probably break this down and this deep it is unlikely anybody would hear.” He unslung a hammer from his backpack and swung it at the wall. Cracks appeared almost

immediately.

"This would probably stop goblins or wild animals but against a dedicated person..." He swung again and again. After only a couple of minutes there was a large enough hole for any of them to fit through.

"Only one layer too." Said Sarik with a scoff. "Such a security risk and this is all they did."

"How much farther through the cave is it?" Asked Elaina.

"Not too much. Several basements were originally setup using this cave system. Old lady Maggey used to run a shop that used one of the basements. However when she died her children didn't continue the business. Now it is just storage. Not a lot of people going in and out, so that basement is the best bet."

After a short bit of walking they found the various basements. Another walled off section of the cave. Ned considered for a short bit before going to the right side, "It has been a while but I think this is where we came in from. We snuck into Maggey's shop and crawled through the crack in the wall. I think it was here."

"Wait..." Said Elaina before Sarik began to break down the wall. "Before we go through." She brought out several plain pieces of clothing from her satchel. "We are going to be walking around town, and in an effort to avoid seeming out of place I got us some clothes."

Sarik scratched his chin, "Not certain how much use that will be. Given you and me there will be a limit of how long we can wander around before people start asking questions and the soldiers come running."

"Still, the less people that ask questions the better. Avoid showing off your weapons as much as possible and stick to alleys. I even got a hat for myself." She went down the tunnel, out of sight, so that she could get changed. Ned didn't really have to do much. His chainmail was hidden under a tunic so noticing it was hard. His sword disguised in his backpack, it would make drawing it slower but attract less attention.

Sarik left his bow and most of his tools behind, keeping just some in a small pouch. His knife was plenty enough concealed. When Elaina came back she had

Sarik begin breaking a hole in the basement wall. He worked slower this time, avoiding more noise than on the first wall.

As soon as the break was big enough for Ned and him to get through he stopped and they began their infiltration. Elaina passed a small red ball to Ned, "Take this, it will draw a lot of attention to the area but it will let me and Sarik know that you are in trouble. Are you sure you are alright with going alone?"

"Yes, better just me to check in on my parents. I'll meet you at the Baron's estate assuming nothing goes wrong."

"Take care and avoid doing anything rash, we are in enemy territory." Ned nodded and he slipped out of the building. His departure was less conspicuous than Elaina and Sarik leaving a few minutes later.

Ned walked through the streets. Everything was so familiar, it has only been less than a ten-day since he had last been it. Yet there was a feeling of danger and uncertainty that he had never felt before. Perhaps it was just him but the people that still walked the streets seemed more muted and worried than before he had left.

He kept to the alleys and backstreets. Occasionally he would catch a glimpse of a soldier wearing red and yellow but they were very infrequent. No sign of any of the normal town guards either. When he arrived at the back of his family's carpentry shop it was dark and gloomy.

He prepared himself for the worst as he stepped up to the back door and used his own key to let himself into the place. The place was quiet, and cold. Things were like he remembered them. Pieces in the midst of production, lots of items pushed together to get them out of the rain. Shutters nailed shut, he remembered doing that himself.

It was easy for him to tell that nobody had been here in a while. The food that had been in the cupboards was going bad. No matter where he searched in the place, his parents could not be found. Nothing.

Ned was worried, he had been expecting this but expecting it was not the same as experiencing it. Worst case scenario his parents were already dead. As he crept back to the back door he stopped. There had been the sounds of somebody moving outside the back door. He drew the knife, the extra weapon that Elaina

had suggested he get.

He quickly threw open the back door, stepped forward, ready to attack whoever it was that was waiting for him. However before he stabbed with the knife he saw who it actually was that was there.

"Pete." Cowering in front of him was one of his oldest friends. Pete lived only a couple of doors down and was about the same age of Ned. "What are you... no, quickly come in." Ned motioned and Pete finally managed realize who it was in front of him.

"Ned... it really was you Ned." Pete nodded and went in. Ned shut the door and they stood there, out of sight of the back street.

"Hey Pete. Can you fill me in about what happened?"

"I was worried about you man. Things have been crazy, the guards are gone, soldiers all around. You disappeared. Thank the Light you are alright though."

"I know about the soldiers. But what happened to my parents?"

"Oh..." He voice quieted. "Those soldiers, they came by, about 7 days ago. They took your parents. Led them away. I think to the prison, but nobody has seen them since then. There have been a bunch of people brought to the prison, although nobody knows if any of them are alright or not. Where have you been? Have you been holed up with somebody?"

"That's a secret." Said Ned. "Thanks Pete, you helped me. Now don't tell anybody you saw me. Try to stay quiet and don't bother any of the soldiers. Hopefully people will come to save the city soon."

"Do you think the Earl is going to send soldiers? He will help us won't he."

Ned tried to fight off the emotions from showing on his face, perhaps he succeeded because Pete didn't show any indication. "Yes, I'm sure he will. But he must be waiting for reinforcements. Hopefully those will come soon. I'm going to head back to where I was previously hiding. Take care Pete."

"You too Ned." He dipped out from the house and disappeared along the streets. Ned waited a moment before he too stepped out, locked the door, and went back to skulking through the alleyways.

He moved through the city before he arrived in an alleyway near the jails. When he glanced out to see the jails he knew that this would be impossible alone.

There were many soldiers guarding the jails. If it had only been one or two he might have been able to handle it alone, but the jails were likely also functioning as the garrison for the soldiers that were still in the city.

Ned ground his teeth. He would very much have liked to go in there right now, but he knew he own limits. So he left, to go visit the Baron's home. Not wanting to try and break in while they were also inside Ned waited and watched from the outside. He worried about them, but things were silent. Since it was Sarik and Elaina inside, being silent meant that nothing had happened, if things went loud then something dangerous would have happened.

So he waited for them to arrive. Just as the waiting was getting too much for him to bare Sarik appeared in the alleyway. Ned turned his head, "Where is Elaina? Did you two get separated."

"Our fool boss is heading to General Drestin's home. Follow me and we will join her."

Ned nodded although he suppressed a groan. Going into the Generals home was likely to be even more dangerous than the Baron's. "So what did you find out?"

"Elaina confirmed that the Baron did indeed die. Not too surprising. The Baron's manor is basically completely cleared out. The general and the soldiers too basically everything of value, of if they didn't then the servants did afterward. What about you?"

"My parents were captured by the soldiers. If they are still alive they would be in the jail."

"Ah... yes, I am familiar with the place. Getting people out of that place will be tricky."

"Yeah, especially because they are using the place as a garrison."

"How many?"

"Maybe twenty... could be thirty."

"With the amount of soldiers in the army, there aren't likely more than forty soldiers in the whole city, maybe fifty at the most. They will probably all be at the garrison and the gates, had they enough to properly patrol the town we would have seen them, but there have been practically none around."

Ned nodded, it made sense.

As they got near the General's estate, Ned stopped as he looked up slightly to the second floor. "Please tell me you also see Elaina climbing up to the second story."

"That idiot boss.... Couldn't she wait for me."

"How is she even climbing that fast?"

"Her weight reduction wand, makes you practically weightless. She is using that to climb fast." He had brought out his spyglass which he passed over to Ned. She had the wand clutched in her teeth.

"And there are guards." Said Ned.

"Not a lot of them." Said Sarik, "But more than were at the Baron's place. That means there is still something here. But they are probably only at the main gate, so scaling the side is probably the correct choice. She should have waited for me though."

With her already that far ahead, it was best for them to just wait for her. They could only watch the guards at the front gate to make sure they weren't alerting to any dangers. Both of them took a sigh of relief when they saw Elaina emerge from the second floor window and jump down to the ground floor.

Not but a few minutes after that they met up with her.

"What did you find?" Asked Sarik.

"General Drestin has a daughter."

Ned looked confused, "How does that really help us?"

"What, the General is going to put his daughter as the new ruler of the bowl?"

"Most likely. She had been abroad for a long time but recently returned. She likely has ambitions of her own but without the military capabilities of the General."

"Seems risky." Said Sarik.

"It is..." Elaina consider things quietly for a few minutes, "There are a lot of factors to consider. The General likely have his own ambitions that might have been dulled by age. Perhaps a combination of his daughter returning, plus the Evil Eye lead him to choosing now. Or maybe this coop was long in the making. Likely both are true. And it all may or may not have been spurred on the

corrupting influence of the Vestige.”

“Did you learn what you needed to then?” Asked Ned.

Elaina nodded, “Yes, plenty. Did you find your parents.”

“Either in the jail or worse.” Was all he could say. However Sarik quickly filled in Elaina about the details.

“I see...” She said. “Did you want us to help stage a prison break?”

Ned nodded, “If my parents are still alive, there is still no guarantee they would remain alive.”

Elaina said. “I agree. And getting whoever we can out of the prison now would reduce any influence he might have to keeping those people prisoners. Although we will need to find a way to get the soldiers out of the barracks. You can leave that to me, and you two will go in and free the prisoners. There will likely be a few guards left you will need to handle as well. Bring them through the tunnels and out of the city. There they can hopefully live in the forest until Drestin’s armies fall. Dangerous, but less dangerous than being imprisoned.”

Sarik looked hesitant, “That sounds dangerous. You sure you will be alright? You can’t fight that many soldiers at a time can you? Once one of them gets in close it will be difficult to cast your magic.”

“That is why I won’t let them get close. This isn’t about me fighting them, just distracting them. And be warned. I don’t know how long they will be out chasing me, so be quick in there.”

Sarik signed, “Fine boss. Just don’t go dying on us. Come on Ned, let use find a place to watch the entrance to the barracks.”

Elaina disappeared down one of the streets to who knows where while Sarik and Ned headed toward the barracks. They watched from one of the nearest alleyways waiting. Neither of them really know what to expect from Elaina, she always gave technically explanations if asked so they had both decided to just let her do what she did.

They waited until finally they saw the soldier running up to the barracks. They were yelling out, “Monsters! Monsters are rising up from the lake!”

Ned and Sarik exchanged glances, neither of them really knew what she was

actually doing but monsters was a good a way as any to get soldiers busy. There was hustle and bustle at the barracks before a whole squad of soldiers left to go toward the lake.

"How many do you think are left over?" Asked Ned.

"Five maybe. Can you handle at least one?" Said Sarik. Ned nodded.

Once the squad was out of sight down the street they began to approach the building. It was from the side angle so the soldier guarding the front didn't notice them until they were almost upon the man. The Ned and Sarik rushed the man. He could barely draw his sword before Ned knocked it out of his hand with his own sword. Then Sarik stabbed the man in the throat, preventing the man from shouting for help.

"We didn't need to kill him." Said Ned.

"These people joined up with a rebellion. If you spare them they will just use that against you."

Ned wasn't sure he agreed fully but these weren't the regular city guard, these were Drestin's soldiers. Sarik peered through the door and into the building. "Nobody there, let's go."

The barracks was quiet, barely anybody there as they went through. Sarik has stayed here before so he lead the way down into the cell block. He stopped at the door, listening.

"Two or three guards beyond this door. Are you ready?"

Ned nodded.

"Alright, you go after the one farthest to the left, I'll handle everybody else. Three, two, one..." Then Sarik threw open the door and rushed forward. There were three guards who might have been playing cards before the monsters came. However they were already alert.

Ned had his sword ready as he went toward the one farthest to the left. A grizzled looking man with plenty of face scares. Ned didn't know if that meant the man had combat experience. The man drew his sword before Ned could reach him and their swords clashed.

After fighting without in the monastery, Ned really understood what the sword was capable of and appreciated it more. Previously he had just been going

with the flow, following what he had thought was good technique, but now he realized it was the sword that had been suggesting that technique to him.

Now he listened, not just following the orders from the sword, now he felt like they were fighting as partners. He could hear that the opponent was just making a feint and then Ned was able to take an advantage of it. Ned was strong, and was able to use that to his advantage. He pushed the sword away and was able to kick the man in the leg.

With that Ned was able to step forward which put the man at a disadvantage in the sword fight with Ned able to use his greater strength to force the man onto a defensive. The man tried to retreat but the small guard room didn't give him much space to maneuver.

As the man began to step to the side Ned could feel the weakness in the man's posture and brought the sword down exactly into the weakness in the defenses. The man tried to bring up his sword in time but Ned's thrust drove directly into the man's shoulder.

He screamed. Ned would have let him turn and flee but the man's battle frenzy has taken over. Now without heed of his own defenses the scarred man pushed forward. Attack after attack. Ned could have stabbed the man during any of those attacks but doing so would risk letting the man hit Ned with the attack.

Instead Ned stepped backward slowly, waiting for the perfect opportunity. The man screamed to deliver a powerful blow that Ned couldn't properly block and that was the hole. All Ned had to do was to point he sword forward and step toward the attack.

Only when the man began to choke on his blood did Ned realize it was over. His sword has pierced the man cleanly through the chest. Ned stepped back, pulling the sword from the man. He turned, to see what Sarik was doing.

Sarik was calmly cleaning his dagger. The two other men lay dead at his feet and no injuries were on Sarik. "Not bad Ned. You weren't keeping an eye on your sides but that comes with time and practice. But let us no linger on these. Who knows how long we actually have." Sarik reached down and pulled some keys from the waist of the man at his feet.

Ned nodded and followed Sarik into the jail section. The place was

remarkably crowded. Basically all the cells had two or three people in them and they were definitely made for only a single person.

"Alright everybody. This is a prison break. Anybody that doesn't like the rebel Drestin gets to go free." Called out Sarik loudly as he entered. Everybody looked up at him with surprise in their eyes.

There was some confused looks and then moments later everybody was scrambling and callout out to be freed.

"I'll let you out." Called Sarik, "But don't rush to run away. Drestin still controls this city and we are going to get you out of here. So stay orderly and follow us because we have the escape plan." He nudged Ned, "Go start unlocking people, I'll stay at the door."

Ned took the keys from Sarik and began unlocking the doors for different cells. He was keeping his eye out for his parents. Then he heard them calling out, "Ned, Ned, over here!" He turned and ran, recognizing the voices instantly.

"Mom, Dad, thank the Light you are alright." He quickly unlocked their cell. "We need to get you out of here."

"My boy, are you alright?" Asked his mother, "You aren't hurt? What have you been doing?"

His father looked solemn, "You have been taking after father, can't say that I'm surprised, but I worry for you as well.

"Grandfather's dead... killed by Drestin."

"Yes, we know... We are just glad that you managed to escape." Said he mother looking solemn.

"I need to unlock everybody else, just gather near my companion and we are going to get you out of here." They nodded and Ned went to go unlock everybody else who were getting rather annoyed that he was talking to his parents rather than freeing them.

There was a pretty large crowd of people by the time everybody has been released from the cells.

"Alright. You are still all wanted people. We have a secret way out of the city but everybody needs to follow me. Once we are outside and safe I will explain everything." Called Sarik loud. "If you see any soldiers shout and I will come

deal with them. We don't have too long before the main force arrives so hustle."

There was nodded and Sarik lead everybody. Ned followed from behind to ensure that everybody was going and that no soldiers came from behind. This time they traveled as a group through the main streets. Whatever Elaina was doing was an excellent distraction because there weren't any signs of soldier as walked through the streets as a large group.

Maybe there were soldiers but none that were courageous to fight a group of a couple dozen people along with both Sarik and Ned. There was some muttering of understanding among some members of the group as they got led to the permanently closed store.

They all funneled into the basement. Once Ned had confirmed that everybody was down in the basement and there were no soldiers in sight did he travel down into the basement himself. They gathered the gear they left in the basement and then headed through the tunnels out of town.

Once they had finally reached the forest and Sarik begin to lead them through the woods did Ned begin to breath again. Things could still go wrong but with them all out to safety they were out of reach of the soldiers at least.

"I know some good places out here." Said Ned, "Probably good places to hide."

"Hmm... perhaps, but we do need a place that the soldiers won't think to look. Have any special hidden locations like that?"

Ned thought about it. "There is a good hidden cave under a waterfall, not many know about it."

"Too trapped. If the soldiers come they won't be able to escape."

"Ah.... Right. There are some lumber camps out in the forest. Due to all the rain recently nobody would be using them. More know but there is shelter and ways to escape into the forest."

"Not optimal, but a good starting point. Give me directions." He listened to Ned explain the route. "Alright. You lead these people there. I'll go retrieve Elaina and bring her there. If we don't show up before nightfall, lead them farther into the forest, somewhere where nobody will find you."

"But..."

“Just a precaution. We will be there before nightfall. Now go.”

“Alright. Make sure to come back.”

They nodded at each other. Sarik disappeared into the forest and Ned lead the people through the forest. There were some older people in the group so they had to stop and take regular breaks. When they finally arrived at the logging camp they were all tired and sore.

There were some small structures and all the people quickly moved in. Ned kept watch. The wasn't likely soldiers following them but it was possible. But nobody came. Food and water was going to become an issue soon, so many of the people broke up into groups to go and search for those.

Ned continued to keep watch. He stop some with his parents, sharing some of what had happened to him over the days he had been gone. But soon the day had begun to pass and it was swiftly becoming night time.

Where were Elaina and Sarik. Had something bad happened to them, had they abandoned him. He could only wait and hope they would be returning soon. Even passed into actual night. He was becoming very anxious. Leading the people through the forest at night would be dangerous, so he would wait. If they weren't back by the morning, he would have to assume they would not be coming.

The escapees had made some fires and were cooking some of the game and other food they had gathered from the wilderness. Many citizens of Neelgred were well acquainted with forest gathering so there was that at least.

It was only as everybody was going to bed that Ned finally saw some lights in the distance of the forest. He waited, concerned for a minute. Then he saw the recognizable glow of Elaina's wand.

He breathed a deep sigh of relief before stepping up to the edge of the clearing and greeting them.

Elaina raised her hand in greeting at they saw Ned welcoming them. “Sorry it took longer to escape pursuit that we expected. We had to stay in our hiding spot for hours before they finally stop looking for us.”

“Boss had gotten herself practically surrounded by the time I arrived. Who

knows what would have happened to her if I hadn't gotten there."

"They sure did want to stop me. I thought they would be more overwhelmed by the water elementals but their military organization was much more than I had expected. I had only just gotten those magical supplies from the monks too. And how all their special reagents are gone."

"I'm just glad you made it back. Sarik told me to leave if you didn't but traveling with this group in the middle of the night would have been too dangerous."

Sarik nodded, "I expected as much, plus it wouldn't be too much trouble to follow a group this big through the forest even if you did leave. Didn't have any trouble I take it?"

"Some grumbling but they would rather be here than back in the jail. Neelgred people are pretty capable as well so there won't really be any trouble with food."

Sarik pondered before saying, "The main problem probably is if the soldiers come to recapture or kill them. My guess is that it won't be a high priority."

"Yeah," Said Elaina nodding, "Keeping the city occupied is probably difficult for a group that small. If we had several days of guerilla activity we might be able to retake the city. The place is much less secure than I expected. And if the city decided that it had enough, there aren't enough soldiers to stop the citizens, especially without hostages in the jail."

"So the people here will be alright?"

Elaina nodded, "Yeah, even if they did find this location, how many people could they afford to send out to deal with this camp. Until Drestin returns with the main force these people are probably safe."

She paused and considered, "But what do you want to do? Do you want to stay here and protect them? I'm sure me and Sarik can handle the rest by ourselves."

"I want to go with you. If Drestin isn't dealt with then these people only have a short time of being safe. I may not be the strongest but I want to do what I can."

Sarik nodded and Elaina grinned, "Excellent. Then make sure to say your goodbyes tonight. We will be heading toward Revold's Vault starting tomorrow

morning."

"Yeah, I will thanks. I'll be ready in the morning."

"I'll keep watch now." Said Sarik, "So get some rest."

Ned nodded, he went and joined his parents. He spent the night there with them. They were all worried about each other but his parents did not ask him to stay.

When the morning came around he was treated to his mother's cooking. The camp didn't have too much but that didn't matter. He happily ate.

"Are you going to be alright without me?" Ned asked.

"Oh, don't worry about it. Me and your father can handle a little bit of extended camping. I'm more worried about you. You will be fighting more soldiers are you?"

"Quite likely."

His father waggled a fork at him. "Well, you have your grandfather's sword don't you? You will be fine as long as you keep that with you."

"You recognize it?"

His father nodded, "Yeah, it brings me back. Father never really liked talking about the war, but he always kept his sword properly cared for. He said the sword was a loyal companion. It was only after you were born that he decided that he wouldn't need it anymore and put the sword away in his war trunk. But the old man was sentimental, he kept bringing it out, like he was checking on the sword."

Ned placed his hand on the sword, "I see. Thank you for telling me. Anything else you know about the sword?"

"As I said, he didn't talk about his time in the war. However..." His father paused thinking, "He did have a name for the sword, what was it again? Oh, right, Venra."

"Venra?" He could almost feel the sword shiver. "Thank you for telling me that. I'll be sure to come home. You too take care while I am gone. Goodbye."

They waved and Ned left them, joining Elaina and Sarik at the edge of the camp.

"Said your goodbyes?" Asked Elaina.

Ned nodded.

“Excellent. We have got to get going. We have a long walk ahead of us to get to Revold’s Vault and who knows how long it will be before Destin finishing taking Presgred. My initial estimate was that his forces should be arriving at the city tomorrow. That means we have at least three days to get to Revold’s Vault before he can even attempt to get there.”

Ned nodded, it was mostly backcountry to get from Neelgred to Presgred. They need to go around the lake in the direction opposite of Kringred. It was quite the trek and attempting to do the whole thing in three days was ambitious. Also the forest was largely uninhabited, which meant there could be monsters within it. Ned hadn’t heard any stories about monsters but that didn’t mean too much.

“Alright then. Best not to waste daylight.”

And the began the long walk through the forest.

Chapter 8: What Which Was Left Behind

The hike was long. They all knew it going it but once they had started it felt worse that they imagined. Ned vaguely knew the geography and Sarik was experienced in wilderness travel. By the time Sarik called a halt to the first days walk it had long been dark. But they needed to have kept that travel distance if they wanted to reach the destination in time.

Elaina was practically nodding off already when the tents were put up. She drew wards on the ground with one of her wands before disappearing into her tent to sleep. Ned wasn’t much better but keeping watch was important. Sarik would take the first watch, Ned the second, and then hopefully Elaina would have had enough sleep to wake and take the third watch.

The watches played out as expected. Elaina was grumpy but woke up for her watch.

“We are now going to be entering land far beyond Neelgred, today is the most likely day to encounter monsters. So everybody be on guard.” Said Sarik.

There was agreement and they began their extremely long hike through uncharted wilderness. Much as they stayed on guard throughout the day

nothing happened. However as day turned to night Sarik stopped.

"Claw marks on the tree. Territorial markings. Something big. Do we want to keep going?"

Elaina hesitated, "Will we be able to make it by tomorrow if we don't keep going today?"

Sarik shook his head, "We need maybe another four hours tonight. That can't just be added to tomorrow's workload assuming you actually want to explore the Vault the day after that."

"Alright, we keep going. Sarik, do you want me to reduce the light from my wand?"

"How is your night vision?"

"Terrible, think of my vision as a human."

"Then instead keep your light as bright as possible. That might keep away whatever monsters would attack us plus you and Ned can see whatever it is that is coming."

Elaina nodded and brought out her wand. It glowed brightly in the dark forest.

"You can see in the dark?" Asked Ned.

"It's a Dwarf thing. Still can't see in pitch blackness but just a little light goes a long way to letting me see. Even the starlight gives me enough to make my way through the forest."

Elaina added, "Elves can see in perfect darkness, but unfortunately I didn't get that particular ability."

"You get any useful elf abilities boss?"

"My magical affinity is high, can't tell if that is elf related or just because of my personal inclinations. Mostly I just age slower than a human."

"How old are you?" Asked Ned.

Elaina stopped and stared at him. He looked sheepish and turned away as he realized the extent of his question.

"Don't worry about it. But it is still a secret."

From then on they walked through the forest in silence. Mostly that was to pay attention to the forest as much as possible. The longer they have to react to

whatever was in the forest, the better.

The night wore on.

"Shush." Said Sarik. They stopped and held their breath listening.

"I don't hear anything." Ned finally said.

Sarik nodded, "Yeah, the other animals are also silent. Something is out there. Waiting."

They held there but nothing changed in the darkness. Sarik motioned and they began to walk again. Tension held in the air. Ned was instinctively holding his breath waiting.

Yet nothing. He was forced to let out the breath. That is when the creature struck. There was no sound of it. It glided in silently. Perhaps chance, perhaps training, but Sarik called out. "Behind us."

Then turned, drawing weapons. A massive form, much like a bear, was hurtling through the air at Ned who was in the rear. He could only dodge to the side, not avoiding the creature completely but avoid the razor sharp talons and beak.

He was thrown to the side by the remarkable mass of the creature. Sarik stepped forward getting in front of Elaina. Her wand flashed brightly in light. The creature screamed, the sounds shooting fear through their veins. Ned shook as he stood. He could feel the pain but inaction could kill.

Elaina was searching through her bag with her free hand while keeping her light wand raised to let Ned and her see the beast. A monstrosity large furred and feathered thing.

Sarik has drawn throwing knives and threw them at the beast, drawing blood. He ran to the side, keeping the thing's attention on him so that the others could recover and plan. Ned had pulled his shield off his back and was rushing to Elaina's side.

Not too soon either since the creature seemed to care not that Sarik had wounded it. Its eyes were trained on Elaina. Perhaps it hated the light or maybe saw her as the weakest target. But Ned managed to interject himself between the creature and Elaina just in time. Blocking its massive claw with his shield.

He still slide back a step from the impact of the attack. From behind him a bolt

of fire erupted from Elaina's wand, hitting the beast. It barely seemed to notice the attack.

"Old it off a little longer." She called, "I need to draw more mana."

Ned nodded, "Venra, let's go." He whispered to his sword. It was like the sword answered. At the new attack from the beast's claws he swung back, severing one of the large talons, finger and all. The beast shrieked again. It raised on on its hind legs, both arms trained on Ned.

As it did so Sarik leaped up onto its back, placing two knives into its back. It shrieked again but this time a bit too late. Ned was able to roll out of the way of its double clawed attack and strike at its side.

As he did so a blazing burst of fire shot from Elaina's wand, scorching a massive wound on the creature's flank. The pain must have driven it mad, it tore and scratched around it. Ned leaped backward and Sarik clung for his life on the back of the monster. However those must have been the beast's death throes for as quickly as the attacks began the attacks ended.

The creature fell. Sarik waited a moment to ensure that it was not moving again before he pulled his daggers from the creature's back and jumped off the back of the monster.

"Nasty thing." Said Sarik as he looked down at the furred yet beaked monstrosity.

"Wild areas often have all kinds of unusual mysterious monsters." Said Elaina. "All we can hope is that it is a solitary predator."

"And we had better leave now. Who knows what other attention those screams would have attracted." Said Sarik. "Better not to find out."

"Wait... one minute." Said Elaina as she knelt by the monster. She pulled out a knife and then with great effort used the knife to cut out of the beast's claws. She wrapped the claw up with a cloth before putting it into her satchel. "Alright, done. Strange monster materials can have some weird magical uses."

"And the claw has some use?" Ask Ned.

"Don't know yet. But particularly strange monsters can have strange effects. Even if it could be used for magic that doesn't mean I know any good uses for it.

If wizardry was easy anybody could do it is what the headmaster keeps saying. So I grab new stuff and see if I can do anything with it."

That was enough of an explanation for Ned. Now they needed to finish their late night hike. Once Sarik said that they had traveled enough and the local wildlife started appearing again it was time to setup camp.

Night watch was much the same as last time but Ned keep looked around in fear that another flying bear would attack their camp. But nothing happened.

The last day of travel was much more relaxing. They had begun to leave the deep wilderness. There still weren't lots of people but there were logging or hunting camps now.

"This Revold's Vault, what is it?" Asked Ned. "I can't say that I've really heard of it before."

"You are only asking this now?" Said Elaina. "No, that is probably on my for not properly explaining. I think I mentioned before that it's a repository of wisdom, more or less a library. Built on an old magical ruin. Plenty of magical research goes on there, particularly regarding the local environment of the Bowl.

"Mostly likely there is a wizard there managing a horde of apprentices who are studying magical properties of various local items. Back when I was learning I was sent off to spend time at one of those kinds of locations myself."

"Another wizard like you?" Asked Ned.

"Yes, although likely much more academic in nature. Wizards who have a dislike for politics usually have two different paths before them. One is the distantly located academics. They very rarely visit the College, provide useful learning, and mostly stay out of the way."

"What about the other path?"

"Those would be wizards like me. Those who go off on expeditions to do things."

Sarik interrupted, "Wandering wizards. Those are the dangerous ones in my opinion. They often have more combat experience than two dozen academics."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It was a compliment."

Elaina continued, "Right, so this Revold's Vault is overseen by a local wizard.

If the Earl didn't have a wizard on staff then this might be the only other wizard in the Bowl. So ensuring that Drestin doesn't do anything against the wizard is important. Plus who knows what kind of magical items are in the Vault."

"Wizards are your magical items." Said Sarik, "You just like making yourselves incredibly tempting targets for robbery."

"Shush, how about collecting some magic items of your own? I'm sure you have something in that bag of supplies."

"Nah, something about being put in jail."

"What nothing? Even Ned has magical items at this point. You should have told me sooner." Elaina fished around in her bag. "Let's see, I'm sure I have something in here you can use."

Sarik sighed "Your just carrying around random magical items you can't use? What are you going to do if you get robbed?"

"Burn down the thieves guild getting my stuff back." She said nonchalantly, although there was an air of certainty, like she had definitely done that in the past. Ned and Sarik exchanged glances. "Here we go." She pulled out a silver bangle with unusual gems that sparkled many different colors. "A prismatic bracelet."

He took it, "Sure, but what does it do boss? Also, this is a bonus not part of the standard payment plan."

"It distorts the air around you. It won't help protect you from attacks in melee but it makes it really hard for people to hit you with ranged weapons."

"And why aren't you using something so useful?"

"Works both ways, it also makes it hard for you to attack with ranged weapons, which includes magic. Plus the magical aura interferes with several of my favorite wands meaning I don't have a chance to use it very much."

"I do have a bow you know." Said Sarik.

"Then you had better use it wisely. Most magical items aren't perfect in all cases. They are often exchanges of usefulness. A Soul Forged sword might be powerful but it is also temperamental. Purely powerful magical items are the ones that cost fortunes."

"Your idea of not-a-fortune could feed people for multiple ten-days." Said Sarik, "But I do appreciate the item. I'll try to use it well." He placed the bangle

in his bag, it was not something he could use all the time.

Their walking has gotten easier even as they talked. There were trails in the forest and soon enough they reached something that could almost be called a road. As they slept for the last night they could see lights off in the darkness beyond.

"Those are likely from the city of Presgred. General Drestin is almost certainly there, attempting to take the city. Maybe it is a siege, who knows. But I believe we made the journey in time. Good job." Said Elaina although she yawned while she said it. "This is probably going to be one of the last safe things that we do, so I hope you are all prepared, after this there will likely be more encounters with Drestin's forces."

"Safe things? Boss, I think you must be confusing our activities. I don't think we have done anything safe. Or maybe you just get into much more trouble without me." Said Sarik, it was a sarcastic tone.

"Quiet you. Most of the time we have been traveling has been quite safe. Now I'm going to bed, wake me up when it is time for my watch." She drew her magical symbols once more before crawling into her tent to sleep.

"You too, sleep while you can." Said Sarik to Ned.

"Are you sure this is the place?" Asked Ned as he looked at the dilapidated ruin. "It certainly does not look like a bunch of mages live here."

"Yeah, this is certainly the place." Said Elaina, "The magic is practically tingling in the air. Any sign of habitation?"

Sarik was examining the ground, "Yeah, people definitely come through here and fairly recently. Not a whole lot of people but frequent comes and goings. The ruin does look very ruined though."

"As a ruin they probably spend their time underground. A place like this could be easily defended. At least that is the hope, I don't know if the researchers have ever put that into practice, and if our arrival is any indication they probably aren't on alert for Drestin at all." Said Elaina as she looked over the ruin.

"Come on" She continued, "Let's go visit. But still be alert and don't touch anything, you would be surprised what kinds of dangerous items wizards just

leave lying about.”

They entered the ruin to find a set of stairs leading underground. “Hello? Anybody there?” Called out Elaina in a loud voice but there was no response.

“We are coming down, please don’t blow anything up at us.”

“You don’t seem to trust them.” Said Ned.

Sarik scoffed, “These are mages, her distrust is probably well founded.”

They send down the stairs slowly. There were glowing gems embedded in the walls as they wend deeper. Eventually the stairs stopped at a large set of double doors. Elaina stepped up and loudly knocked on the doors.

No response.

“Ned, you knock. As loudly as you can.”

Ned nodded and stepped up. Then pounded on the door practically loud enough to wake the dead, hopefully not literally.

Not too much later they finally heard something, a voice from the other side, “We are busy, go away.”

“I’m Elaina, a Ranking Member of the College. Here on business.”

There was a practically yelping sound from the other side of the door. Then the doors were opened revealing a young bookish looking man in a robe. He had a pointed hat on and everything. “Please, come in, come in. We weren’t expecting anybody. But a Ranking Member of the College is certainly welcome. Please, just make yourself at home, I’ll go fetch the master.”

The boy ran off just leaving the door open.

“Alright, follow me. And remember, don’t touch anything.” Said Elaina. They stepped through the doorway, leaving it open behind them. The place was full of books, papers, strange objects. Just littered everywhere. Many of the books were piled in dangerous towers that seemed like could fall over at any minute.

People could be seen here and there at desks, writing things, reading books, and generally not paying attention at all to Elaina and the other guests.

“Actually, Sarik, shut the door. They will never remember to do it otherwise.”

Sarik nodded, stepping back to shut the door.

“This is worse than I thought.” Said Elaina as they picked their way through the books, she had a feeling of where she should be heading even though nobody

was leading them there.

"This place is certainly a mess." Said Ned with a look of awe on his face. He had never seen so many books in one place before. He has never seen this many books before in his life.

"Oh, not that, that part was expected. Wizards hate cleaning up, it makes you forget where you put everything. But the security, there is practically nothing. If somebody came here prepared it would be a slaughter. Pretty much the only defense is that door, and look how easily we got past it. I didn't even have to show that kid my identification."

Sarik grunted in understanding. People he hadn't experienced the kinds of things that needed security rarely thought about it until it was too late.

"Ah, there we go." Elaina pointed at a table that was filled with books. Distinct only that there were several chairs scattered around it. "Take a chair and we will wait here until the master comes back."

As they waited Elaina paused as she saw a girl staring at her. Her hair was white, pure white, and her skin paler than anybody else that was in the Bowl. The girl was Elaina staring before running and running away.

"That girl seemed awfully young to be in a place like this." Said Ned.

"Don't be so certain." Said Elaina, "She might have been older than you. You asked about them before, but that was an actual full blooded elf. Don't know what she is doing here though."

"Elves like magic don't they? Why is it surprising to see one here, certainly there must be elves in the College."

"Sure, some... but they are very rare. But an actual child elf, those are very rare in human lands. There is certainly a story behind her existence here at the Vault."

They waited, an annoyingly long about of time, before a man with a long beard and massive flowing robes walked into the room. He expertly weaved his way through the rows of books before he arrived.

Then he adjusted his spectacles, took them off, polished the slightly, then put them on again. "Oh dear me. How could I have been so rude. My apprentice said that there was a Ranking Member of the College here to visit, but somehow they

neglected to mention that it was you Elaina."

There was a moment of hesitation from Elaina before she said, "Loric?"

"Aye, it has been quite a few years hasn't it. I wasn't expecting to see you all the way out here. I would ask if you came to see me but it is plain that you didn't expect to find me here."

"Indeed, I did not expect you here but it is a nice surprise. Oh, let me introduce you, this is Sarik and Ned, companions that I am currently journeying with to deal with a certain issue, and this is Loric, he oversaw my wizard final exams back when I was just learning."

There were nods of greeting all around. "Your introduction is lacking a bit, you worked as my assistant for research for several years before I retired. Well, retired from a position on the Council, now I'm overseeing students who need extra hands on training."

Elaina smiled, "True enough, although I hadn't known you got sent the Bowl of Sallantic. You really must have tried to get as far away from the College as you could. Not that I really blame you, I've been working as their errand girl for a while now to avoid having to deal with politics."

The old man returned the grin, "Not far enough away if you are visiting. What sorts of problems is the college going to drag me into this time?"

"Want the good news or the bad news first?"

"That kind of visit huh? Let's go good first."

"The College doesn't have any specific instructions for you. I'm acting with minimal funding and am using my own discretion to figure out solutions to problems. From my perspective you being here is just a lucky coincidence."

"Oh boy, that was the good news huh? What terror are you about to unleash?"

"The bad news is that there is a local rebelling general with possession of a Vestige."

His brow furrowed, "A vestige, they put you on hunting down vestiges? Are they trying to get you killed?" He sounded almost angry. "How many good wizards do we need to lose?"

"I volunteered."

He threw up his hands, "Of course you did." He sighed and lower his hands, "Alright, alright, I understand, I was never capable of reasoning with you before, I can't start now." His smile returned, "The council must really have its hands full dealing with you. Now Elaina, fill me more in about this rebellion."

Elaina quickly went over the details of what had been happening and how it would only be a matter of time before Presdred fell and what might happen to the Vault after that.

"That... is a lot of different problems. But you are right that the Vault can't just stay out of it. Sooner or later this General Destin will pay us a visit. We had some standard agreements with the Earl but that has collapsed..." He paused and considered.

While the students had initially not paid attention to the guests, when Loric appeared they can began to hover and watch the proceedings.

"My students are not prepared for combat and I can not leave them to join you. There is also the separate problem of our own defense. The doors down here were once sealed with powerful magics and while those spells could be reactivated my students are not prepared to handle that task. If you could help me reactivate those spells we can seal up the vault once more, that way Drestin can not gain access. That would protect my students and leave me free to aid you."

"That would be greatly appreciated." Elaina nodded her head to Loric. "My companions can help gathering supplies and keeping watch while I help you resolve the door issue."

"Thank you. We appreciated it."

He turned and called out to his students, "You all hear that? We are sealing up the vault. Gather everything that might be outside and do an inventory of our supplies. And bring all the notes that we have on the main door here."

"This will be a challenge though." Said Elaina, "If you don't already know how to reactivate the magic then it could take who knows how long to figure it out."

"Most of my theory is sound, but it will require more than one caster. Leaving

it to my students could result in permanently sealing the Vault which is something I wanted to avoid doing. Still you are correct in the sense that the spell is just theoretical."

"Alright, Ned, Sarik, you heard what you need to do. Make sure this place is ready for a lockdown. The students are probably not very experienced in dealing with this kind of thing so do your best to help figure out what they are going to need. They might need to stay locked up for two to three ten-days so keep that in mind when gathering supplies."

"Yes boss, we will get them ready. And I'll keep an eye out for any signs of Drestin's forces approaching." He and Ned went off to aid the students.

"Alright, let's go examine this door." Elaina stood and together with Loric they walked through the place back to the door. It was open again, "These students" she said shaking her head.

"You were just like them too."

"Sarik would probably say that I am still like them." She ran her hands over the door. While it would normally be considered cool she could feel the warmth of mana running through it. "The spells are certainly still active, that is good. Re-enchanting the entire place would be beyond the timescale we have."

She felt the flow of mana. This was a talent that all wizards spent countless hours honing, feeling the flowing of mana through things. Rudimentary mages could feel mana gathering but knowing what kind of mana and what it was doing was something entirely more difficult.

"This is non-native magic. A pretty large construction. How big is this Vault?"

"It extends pretty deep into the ground. We only use a small portion of it, many of the other doors are still shut with this kind of magic. Parsing this spell and attempting to both reproduce and unravel it is the purpose of me being here." Said Loric.

Elaina's eyes were closed as she continued to feel. "You have had some luck then?"

"Just a little. However the mana accumulation is deep in the Vault. We managed to crack another one of the doors but there are golems down there, makes it difficult to progress deeper."

"Let me guess you asked for additional resources from the College and they refused?"

"Oh they approved it... but I'm still 39th on the funding waiting list last time I heard. Something about being a low priority project. But they still send students to me to train." He shrugged. "So I think I figured out some of the mana flows and put together a resealing spell, but I need somebody else to check over it for errors. I've been with it so long all I see is what I know."

"Sure..." She continued to feel the mana.

"Ah, excuse me." Came a quiet voice.

Elaina opened her eyes to see the elven girl standing there. She was holding a pile of notes and books. "Oh, are you here delivering Loric's notes?"

She nodded.

Elaina reached out and took them, "Thanks."

"Are... are you an elf too?" Asked the girl.

"Ah..." Elaina stopped, looking at the girl for a bit. "I'm a half elf, well quarter elf, my grandmother was an elf."

"Oh..." The girl sounded disappointed.

"Sorry."

"No, you have nothing to be sorry for."

Elaina smiled, "Well, thank you for that." She pulled open the notebook and glanced through it. "I suspect as much but this is Helio-period construction. Hey, do you think you could find us something to eat and drink? We are likely to be here a while, and if there is any runic chalk can you bring that as well?"

The girl nodded and left.

Once she was gone Elaina asked, "How did she end up in your care? I can't imagine an elf would just leave a child like that in a human's care."

"Orphan I am pretty sure. She was just found in a human town. Nobody wanted to take care of her so she kinda just ended up in the Vault's care. If she knows what happened to her parents then she isn't talking. We tried sending a message to the Night's Fort, but no response from any elves there. So she just has just been here since then. I've taken a liking to her and the students seem to treat her like a junior apprentice."

"You know she is probably older than most of your other apprentices."

"Sure, but she doesn't act like it, she still acts like a kid."

"Fair enough, elves do mature slower. But..." She shook her head, "She is going to have a hard time dealing with life among humans."

"Speak from experience?"

"Not really. I'm close enough to human myself that I don't worry about it too much. But for a full blooded elf. It will be harder for her to make new connections after she outlives everybody around her."

"True enough.... But I don't have anyway to help her with that. All I can do is help teach her about the world and about magic." Something quite crept into his voice, a worry for the girl.

"Well, I'm sure it will turn out fine. Now quickly explain the fundamentals about this magic. I've been glancing over the book but I need the best technical explanation you can provide."

It would be five hours later when Ned came down the stairs to find Elaina and Loric engrossed in conversation over a bunch of tomes.

"Uh... how is the magic coming along? Supplies have all be counted and me and Sarik are going out for some foraging. Getting through three ten-days with the current supplies is going to be difficult for them. Sarik says that today is the safest day to go leave this place alone."

Elaina only waved him off.

"Alright, alright. We will be back later. But do try to actually eat something." He glanced over at the plate of food that had been placed next to the two of them. It was untouched, and totally cool at this point.

"Will do." She called out, although Ned was pretty certain she hadn't paid attention at all.

He glanced over at the elf girl who was watching from nearby. "If they come to, tell them what I actually said. Can you do that for me."

The girl nodded.

Sarik passed by, joining Ned, "And try to get those idiots to eat something. Wouldn't want to them collapse from hunger."

With that the two of them were gone.

It was only hours later that Elaina cried out, "Ah, this is it. Your connections between modern and ancient magics. This should let you reestablish flow through the magical circuits." She reached out to her satchel and fumbled inside it.

"My warding wand contains the necessary modern versions of the spell. If you connect it at the..." She continued, speaking magical jargon that Ned would have trouble following and even Loric could keep up with.

He nodded, "Yes, that kind of interaction should work. That would allow us to reseal the door. But you need to make sure to include the ideas of how to reopen it. We need to make sure we can reopen it but prevent Drestin from finding any ways of opening it up himself."

"Oh... yeah, that would be more complicated. The easiest way would be to see the mana stone running this whole sealing endeavor. But you said it was guarded by golems..." She paused, made some humming sounds.

"No... no... I see what you are wanting to do. But you can't get past the golems. Especially not alone."

"How dangerous would you say this golems are?"

"I said no. If you absolutely must insist then you will wait until your two companions rejoin you. I am not letting you into there without at least them."

"Fine... although, how did you manage to open the doors deeper anyways. If we could reproduce that then everything would be easier."

"Unfortunately the standard method we would use is not easily reproducible. We waited until winter, then I had the apprentices slowly draw mana out of the door over a period of multiple ten-days. That weakened the mana enough that the seal loosened."

"Winter huh. I guess that the disturbances in mana during winter would be enough that the seal could not properly replenish the source of mana. So its conversion mechanisms are very outdated if that is true." Said Elaina.

"Ancient magics had much worse conversions than modern wands. One of the reasons they build massive structures like this."

"Yeah, having to wait until winter would be annoying. We probably can't

collect enough supplies to keep all of your students good until then. Without that or a God it would difficult to change ambient mana enough to break the doors open using that method. Sounds like the golems are the only option.”

“I was hoping you would find some special method of disabling the seal without having to do that. I’ve been stuck on that particular problem for quite some time.”

Elaina shook her head, “Nope, I didn’t see anything. There might be a flaw in the spell but it looks like the magic was correctly designed. A sealing spell isn’t of much use if it was easily broken. The fact that a flaw in the spell was found at all is a testament to how much you have worked on learning about this magic. All the notes lead me to the same idea, the proper way to open the seal is to have access to the spell’s core. So dealing with golems it is.”

“Stop” it was the quiet voice of the elven girl. She pointed to the food that was still waiting for them. “Eat first. Do not make me be the adult.”

Elaina looked rather sheepish, if Loric did it was hidden behind his beard.

“Yes, of course.” He said. “You must eat before we attempt it.”

“And...” Said the girl. “The other two are not likely to return until late this evening. They are off gathering supplies. So you are to wait until then before doing anything about the golems.”

“Ah, that makes sense. Let us take a break then.” Elaina stretched, she was more sore than she had thought. The journey through the forest had been more tiring than she had anticipated. Once she was done eating what was prepared she yawned, “Actually. Do you have a place I could nap? Things are going to be busy for me, so taking a short break would help make things easier.”

“Of course. Follow me” Said Loric as he lead through the main chamber of the Vault. Everybody was hustling and bustling, making sure everything was ready in time. There was another small chamber where a bunch of beds were placed around both walls. “I hope a dormitory is not an issue for you?”

“Better than the ground.” Said Elaina. Remarkably the place was pretty empty of books or scrolls. Likely the public area meant you could have lights on when people were sleeping. “Which one should I take?”

“Whichever one looks fine for you. Nobody really seems to have decided

permanent spots. The ones in the front are most used since they are closer to the door. The back ones will have more quietness."

"Sure." Elaina yawned again, things were catching up with her and now she really was feeling exhausted. She laid down on the bed and was soon asleep. Loric left her along, returning to the main room.

There the elven girl stood beside him, "Who is she? She seems different."

"A Ranking Member of the College, that means she exceeds all the requirements of being a wizard and have provided significant advancements to the field of wizardry."

"Like you?" Asked the girl.

The old man laughed, "I suppose so. I guess I still qualify as a ranking member although I'm no longer involved in the main running of the college so people probably forget about that. But even among ranking members Elaina is special, she is a wanderer. She is probably more well traveled than the entire council of wizards combined. There are of course other wizard who travel a lot, but most of them are only technically still associated with the College, former graduates. But Elaina stays as a Ranking Member, doing the dirty work that nobody else wants to do."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Extremely. Plenty of other wizards have died doing her same kinds of jobs. I had thought recovering Vestiges was an abandoned job that nobody took, but here Elaina is doing it." He shook his head, "But I guess that is just what kind of person she is."

The elven girl considered things. "Perhaps she does it to stay connected."

"Aye, perhaps she does. She is only a quarter elf but even those live far beyond a human's lifespan. She looks basically the same as when I taught her but then... I was a much younger man."

The girl looked down, she was still young but certain thoughts still lingered in her mind.

Loric placed his hand on the girl's head, "Listen Nim, if you need anything you can come to me. But at some point you should go to her instead, she wouldn't say no if you asked her for something."

"Thanks." Said Nim, "I'll let you know when she wakes up."

Loric left her behind. He has plenty more to do as well and he had already spent too much time researching with Elaina.

—

When Ned and Sarik returned it was much later in the night. They have brought with them some of the more physically endowed apprentices. Those apprentices were huffing and puffing carrying the game that had been caught by Sarik.

Sarik quickly had them working on starting to smoke as much of the meat as they could while everybody else took the baskets of forgables into the Vault. What they have brought was a bunch of food but even it wouldn't be fully enough to last.

"Really hope that Drestin have to take time to gain control of Presgred." Grumbled Sarik, "If they start sending soldiers here tomorrow that won't be enough time to get everything they need. Water is going to be a big issue as well, they will need to get many barrels of the stuff to keep in the vault."

"Excuse me." Said the quiet voice of Nim.

"Oh." Sarik stopped talking. Looked down at the little girl and asked, "Hello there. What is it?"

"Elaina is currently resting so I've been instructed to tell you to do that too. She is planning on fighting golems when she wakes up to get access to the Vault's core. And Loric has instructed her that she is not allowed to do that without you two joining her."

"At least he isn't a complete fool." Said Sarik, "You head that Ned."

"Yup."

"Alright. We will get resting soon. But I need to finishing rising the smoking instructions to these mages. If I just left it to them they would burn things very badly. Hopefully we can at least make it edible with my guidance."

He ran over to shout more instructions at the apprentices.

"Golems... aren't those as hard as stone?" Said Ned, mostly to himself. He was uncertain how useful a sword would be against a monster like that.

"Usually they are made out of clay." Said the quiet voice of Nim, "At least

that is what Loric says. But that won't make them easy. So try to be careful."

"I will thanks. Now where was the best place to also take a nap?"

"I'll lead you there."

When Sarik eventually returned he found both Ned and Elaina sleeping in the dormitory. He could feel the fatigue as well but he could last longer if needed. Still, if a fight against Golems was coming up he would need his rest to. He sat against the wall and leaned back to rest. Soft beds never much suited him.

In the morning the place was quiet as Elaina awoke and stretched. The beds were full of exhausted apprentices who must have been working through the night. She picked her way through the dormitory until she was back in the main hall. The place was quiet.

However Sarik was there keeping watch.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping too?" Asked Elaina.

"Alright had a short nap. That was good enough for me. Get enough beauty sleep boss?"

"Good enough. We are going to need to get past some golems today so I hope you are ready."

"I head about that... what are we expecting?"

"At least two... probably much more. The two they saw were at the entrance. Not certain how much security is actually going to exist beyond that but I am expecting more."

"Do you know how the golems are constructed?"

"Pretty sure standard ancient techniques."

"Please elaborate and do not assume I know what 'standard ancient techniques' are."

"Oh, right. I'll keep it simple though. Think of them as magical suits of armor. Their outsides are tough but insides are weak. Like a suit of plate they are reinforced most places, metal or stone usually. But the joints are made of more weaker and more malleable materials. Clay is standard. Fighting a golem is a lot like fighting a knight although they are often larger than humans. Break the joints to disable their limbs and they are practically useless after that... assuming they don't break your skull in while you are attempting it. My recommendation is to

avoid blocking or parrying their attacks, doing so might break your limbs.”

A yawning voice came from behind Elaina, Ned has woken up and joined them. “Oh boy. That sounds great. At least they have some weakness.”

“Their biggest weakness is that golems are not very smart. Golem control is very difficult so autonomous golems are very predictable. That also doesn’t stop them from breaking your skull in. They prioritize strength over technique since they don’t have any of the second.”

“Any other weaknesses?” Asked Sarik.

“Not really. Extremely destructive blows to critical magical sections of the golem can disable it instantly but that is more of a consideration for larger golems and siege weaponry. People don’t usually deliberately give their magically defense forces weaknesses and indeed strive to remove those weaknesses. There are some extremely dangerous golems which counter some of their only weaknesses but given the age of this structure I’m not expecting any of those.”

“Great.” Said Sarik. “Alright. Get some food both of you and then we will see what these golems are actually made of.”

Not too much later they were gathered near passageway. Boxes had been placed over the passageway to prevent people from going down it. There were even magic runes setup to alert people if anybody used the passageway. Elaina quickly disabled the simple wards that were setup to stop curious students while Ned moved the boxes out of the way.

“Would the boxes really be enough to stop the golems?” He asked as he moved them.

“No, but golems strictly follow orders. If they were told to remain someplace that is where they would remain. So they will never come down here until a higher priority order forced them to.” The walls still had glowing gems embedded in them.

They moved down the tunnel quietly.

“Shush... there.” Said Sarik as he stopped them and pointed forward. The next room had the two golems in question. Very statue looking. One on either side of the doorway a little bit into the room. They were modeled like soldiers

although the armor style seemed unfamiliar to them.

“Yes, those meet most of my expectations of the golems. Stone armor, vulnerable joints. Although they are well made so those joints are smaller than I would have hoped. Under the armpits is probably their biggest weak point. That or inside the thighs.”

“You never mentioned your part.” Said Sairk, “Do you have any wands that would be good against such an enemy.”

“There are plenty of spells I could use but I think I’m just going to hold my breath. That is probably more useful than actually engaging.”

“Uhh... that doesn’t sound useful.” Said Ned.

“Right, right, wizard jargon. I’m going to use anti-wizard techniques. Gathering local mana and holding it. Normally when casting spells your mana goes back into the environment for reuse. However if you just gather the mana and never use it then you stop other wizards from using it. Draw enough mana and it can weaken or stop other mages.”

“And that will help against the golems?”

“Golems are magical constructions. They draw mana from the environment to work. It won’t stop then initially but they use and recycle mana. So if I keep drawing that in they will have less to work with and eventually will go dormant. Alone I wouldn’t be able to do it since they would just kill me but if you keep them busy I can suck out all the mana and weaken them so that you can beat them.”

“Ok... that sounds pretty useful.” Said Ned, “But somehow I feel like there is a catch to it.”

“Normally you need about three or four wizards to suck the mana out of an area, even one this small. Doing it alone will be challenging but due to the current situation I can manage it. Just keep them busy. Once they start moving slower finish them off.”

Ned and Sarik drew their weapons.

“Once I start gathering mana I am sure they will activate. I’ll tell you just before I begin.”

She took a deep breath. "Three. Two. One. Now." She called out. Ned and Sarik rushed forward. The golems immediately began to move, their rocky limbs dangerously heavy. Ned didn't use the shield this time instead dodging their attacks. The attacks were slow and lumbering but golems did not normally get tired. Eventually their opponent would make a mistake and get hit.

Elaina took the second breath, gathering mana. It was a simple task, one she did before casting any spell. Like breathing in she could draw the mana toward herself, gathering it. Normally she would use a wand or other item to convert the mana. Even now she had one. The claw of the monster they had fought.

It wasn't a precise instrument like a wand but she didn't need it to be. She needs to make sure the local mana was as synchronized with regional mana as much as possible. For now the ambient mana was the same but soon that would change. She then placed her hand on the wall. She could feel the thumbing of the place. The magic inside it that warded the doors and made the vault a vault.

One of the feature of the place was to draw in mana to keep the wards running. So she gave it mana. It was designed to use the local mana so it soaked in the mana readily enough. This was the exact technique that she and Loric had gone over to seal the doors. But this time there was no door to seal.

But the wall gave her a place to dispose of local mana. Sure everything would eventually equalize again but for a structure this large that would take time. Even so she was growing light headed, the mana flowing around her. Like being caught in a massive flowing river. Let go from her focus and she might drown in the mana.

She could not watch the golems, just hope that Ned and Sarik were handling them. She could already feel the weakening of local mana. She had no idea how long she had been doing this, seconds, minutes, longer? But with weakening of mana she could feel the changes, the golem's mana seeping back into the air. They too recycle mana, releasing their converted energies and drawing in new mana. It worked like all magic.

It was that converted mana which is why she needed the claw. It was a monster of the Bowl, close to the local energies. Not carved or prepared as a proper wand, a make-shift tool. But in Elania's hands that was good enough.

The mana shifted as it passed over it, changing back to local aspected, letting the wall absorb it as well. At this point one might think the task would grow easier. Weaker ambient mana meant less mana gathering. But even as she weakened the local mana it attempted to equalize. If she stopped for very long all her efforts would be quickly reversed.

So her load actually got harder. Not only did she need to gather the mana she also needed to convert it all. And the amount she needed to gather was only getting higher as more equalization happened.

While she stood there, arm against the wall, lights and flashes sparkling around her, Ned and Sarik were fighting. The golems were strong... too strong. Had the walls also not been ward their strikes would have crushed the stone of the walls.

Mostly Ned was just dodging, he knew attempting to parry would risk damage to even a sword like Venra. The attacks were clumsy but calling them slow would be a lie, the golems moved with frightening speed for their mass and keeping away from them was much harder than he thought. He was already starting to breathe heavily.

Sarik was in about the same state. He moved much slower than Ned since he read the attacks of the golems with remarkable ease. However he couldn't move quite as fast as Ned so he had to rely on his observations to properly avoid every attack. He had attempted a few attacks at the elbow of one of the golems. Where there scratches and cuts in the claw of the joint but he hadn't been able to get a solid hit against them.

"Do you feel it." Sarik called out, "They are slowing, boss' technique is working." The slowness was not really noticeable to Ned but Sarik could tell that each movement was just ever so slightly slower than the last.

And that had just made a difference for Sarik. He saw an opening. At their faster speeds he would not have been able to dodge and still have time to slip in but now he had those extra moments where he could keep up with the golem. So he stepped forward, under the slam of one of the golems and thrust his dagger up into one armpit of the golem. He pushed and pulled quickly. He still didn't have time to ensure a critical injury, at least that is what he thought.

But what he had done was enough. The golem's right arm dropped, no longer animated by magical force. The rest of the golem didn't seem to care though and it just kept attacking with its left arm. With only one arm however Sarik was able to avoid it much more easily. Then moments later he saw another opening, his dagger flickered and the other arm no longer moved.

Even that was not enough for the golem to stop attacking. I could still use its body to slam into Sarik. But it clearly wasn't designed for that kind of attacks so he was able to easily dodge it and get his dagger up beneath its legs. With that the golem fell. No amount of continued desire for destruction could keep it moving with one leg.

Sarik was about to come to Ned's aid when he stopped and looked down the hallway. "Oh... Ned, you had better hurry and finish your golem. I won't be able to deal with this one by myself." There, coming down the hallway was a much bigger golem, this one with four arms each with some terrifying weapon at the end. A spiked ball and chain, a giant sword, a several rotating smaller blades, and a crossbow.

Sarik quickly dodged to the side avoiding the crossbow bolt that would have pieced his chest. Then the arm of the golem began to automatically reload itself using what must have been extra ammunition inside the body of the golem.

Ned could barely receive the message from Sarik. Sure the golem was moving slower but he still didn't have enough time to properly adjust to its attacks.

"Venra, we need you. Please, this is our only opportunity."

Then he made his move. Perhaps it was just the right time, maybe Venra listened. But Ned's sword moved and deflected the golem's arm. A perfect angle to avoid damaging the sword and send the arm off to one side. That gave Ned the perfect opportunity to bring the sword into the armpit. He had expected to pull it out but the sword slide in, through, and out of the far side. Then with a swing the entire arm was dismembered.

Caught in the flow he sword spun, he twisted and turned bringing the sword down and then up through the legs of the golem. The sword barely slowed moving straight through the leg and the golem fell. It still might be able to move but Ned didn't give it heed, Sarik has called for his aid. He stepped forward to

Sarik' side.

Even Ned almost cowered before the many armed golem. Certainly this would be the primary guard of the vault, the boss of the golems come to deal with the intruders.

But then both Sarik and Ned were surprised. The golem stepped forward and swung with its giant sword arm but the golem was so slow, each movement lethargic. Ned had no trouble dodging the attack and the second arm coming in for a pincer attack was equally just as slow. While Ned dodged the attack Sarik moved in.

It was only a short cuts but the golem barely reacted. Only falling to the ground, its legs disabled almost immediately.

"That... was almost disappointing."

"Stop yapping and cut off the arms." Shouted Sarik. "Boss isn't safe to stop until we do that."

"Right." Ned went for a set of arms and between the two of them they swiftly removed the arms of the giant golem. Once it was completely harmless they returned to the only partially destroyed smaller golems and removed the last limbs from them.

One when that was done did Sarik stopped, listened for a moment, and then when over to Elaina. He placed his hand on her shoulder and called out loudly, "It is over boss. The golems are dealt with.

Her eyes flickered back to them. The sparkling around her vanished. "Oh... good..." Then Elaina fell over. Sarik caught her before she hit the floor.

He lifted her up. "Ned, watch my back. We are bringing her back to the main room."

Ned nodded and followed, watching for more golems as they left the deeper parts of the vault.

As they got back to the mages they got quite the crowd of apprentices who had begun to wake up at this point. They were watching with concern.

While Sarik was putting Elaina into the bed, Loric arrived. "Is everything alright? She wasn't hurt was she?"

"Nah, she is fine." Said Sarik, not really feeling like providing an explanation.

Ned however did provide an explanation. "She did some strange anti-magic technique to weaken the golems while me and Sarik destroyed them. However whatever it was that she did must have been tiring because she collapsed as soon as it was over.

"What? What kind of crazy fool does anti-magic solo? And against golems? Was she crazy?"

"I worked didn't it." Said Sarik.

Loric let out his breath, "Alright, you are right. If it worked and nobody was hurt so I guess it might have been a good plan. But it must have been tiring on her if she just collapsed like that. I'll grab some stamina potions, hopefully that will let her recover faster."

As he left Ned asked, "Do you think we will need to do that again when Elaina wakes up? Will there be more golems."

Sarik shrugged, "Maybe, but I doubt there are more of that big golem. If you could make a bunch of those why even bother with the small ones."

"I don't know. It looked pretty intimidating but it went down pretty quickly."

"Don't be an idiot. By that time boss' anti magic was getting pretty strong. How we fought that without that magic I'm not certain if we could beat it. It was controlling all four of its arms simultaneously. Had it moved at full speed I wouldn't have been able to risk going in for the kill."

Ned considered, he hadn't been able to find an opening either with the smaller golem to begin with but it was hard to know since the bigger golem showed up later.

There was a groan from nearby, Elaina's eyes were fluttering open, "Big golems need even more mana than smaller golems. So it would have been effected even more strongly by the anti-magic."

"No... no magical explanation. You will do what you need to recover boss." Said Sarik. "Loric will be back soon with a stamina potion."

"Ah... good... I could use something to drink."

It was not that much longer that Sarik came back with the stamina potions. He offered them to Elaina who took one and slowly began to drink it.

"I hope I don't need to explain how dangerous what you did was?" Said Sarik.

"Yup... pretty dangerous." Elaina said acknowledging his concerns. "But the structure functioned as a great mana sink so I couldn't resist making an attempt. And there was apparently a greater golem, even if we could have defeated the other golems using standard techniques I am not certain about a greater golem."

"Ugg... your incorrigible. Fine, but if you are going to do anti-magic again at least ask me for aid. I might not be a powerful combat mage but I can at least aid with that."

"Sure. I'll ask you if we need to fight more golems." Elaina finished the stamina potion. "Ah, I think that is all I needed." She began to leave the bed.

"Nope." Said Sarik. "An hour. I'll let you out in an hour. Until then take this and entertain yourself." He handed her some random book he had grabbed from a pile in the main room.

Elaina huffed but said, "Fine, one hour. Can you check the vault and see if there are any more golems while I rest? If there aren't any more golems then I won't have to worry about resting too much."

Sarik looked over at Ned, "Make sure she stays in the bed until I return."

"She will."

"Good. I'll go check the golems. But I will return as soon as I see one. We don't want any of them following me back to the apprentices." said Sarik as he left the room.

Elaina had already opened up the book. "Hypothesis of Undead Reanimations. Should be interesting."

She continued to have her nose in the book until Sarik eventually returned. She glanced up to see him trudging in. "What is the place looking like?"

"Not perfectly clear, but I'm pretty certain that big golem was guarding the main room. Big crystal seems completely unguarded but I didn't enter the room just in case there was more defenses. There are some side rooms that are also guarded by some of the smaller golems but there is a route to the crystal room that doesn't pass by any of them."

"Good enough." She closed the book and set it to one side, only mildly

regretfully that she wouldn't be able to finish it. She would need to find a copy of her own to add to her collection. "I'm feeling a fair bit better now. So let us go check it out."

She was able to stand without any issues. Mana overload did fortunately recover fairly quickly assuming nothing broke. They returned back to the deeper sections of the Vault, passing by the destroyed golems.

Sarik led them through several hallways, passing by some sealed doors and other unsealed doors.

"Hmm..." said Elaina. "They should probably all be sealed. Maybe the ebb and flow of changing mana left the place low on mana at times, perhaps during winter, and some of the doors broke open naturally over the course of time." It was just speculation, perhaps the doors were never sealed by the original owners when the place was abandoned.

"Here it is." Said Sarik as he motioned toward the doorway. It too was open.

Elaina glanced in, there was indeed a massive crystal floating in the center of the room. She brought out her wand that was covered in strange runes. She waved it through the air. "I'm not feeling any magical security measures. But be warned that doesn't mean there aren't any. Well hidden magical security can be very difficult to detect."

They stepped forward in to the room. No signs of alarm or anything else. Elaina nodded before saying, "I didn't expect anything really. With the golems and the greater golem, I think we already got past the primary defensive system. But keep an eye out anyways."

Ned and Sarik nodded. Elaina stepped forward, she examined the crystal visually at first. It was being held up by magical energies. This kind of crystal controls was an old magical system but something she had seen before.

She reached out and touched the crystal, feeling the magic within it. "Hmmm.... Lots of magical flows going out in many directions. This is definitely the control room for the doors. You can probably use this place to open or close some of the doors, assuming you can figure out which flow associates with each door. We don't have time to figure that out for all the doors. But if we just want one door I can probably watch the flows and find which one we need to use."

Her eyes glazed over as she felt the mana.

Eventually her eyes flickered back to normal. "Sarik... we need to mark all the safe and dangerous paths so that Loric and his apprentices can find this location." She pulled out a normal piece of chalk from her satchel and threw it to Sarik. "Mark those routes, I need to go back and trace the main door magical flow. Ned, follow me."

She and Ned returned back to the main entrance. "Ned, I need you to watch where I am going. If I start heading down any strange passageways I need you to stop me."

"Your magic perceptions make you more obvious to the physical world right?" He asked.

She nodded, "Yes, that is the short of it. Although mostly it is a matter of attention." She reached out and touched the edge of the door. She felt the mana flowing through the walls. It took her a moment to pick out the right flow. The door seal. They had already figured out that flow, reactivating the sealed door from here was possible but it would be difficult to cut the mana flow.

The mana was thin, since the door was currently in an opened state. She followed the mana through the main chamber. Ned shooed off the mages who were interested in what she was doing. It was still too dangerous for them to take the route deeper.

As they got to the inner parts of the Vault, Elaina pretty much immediately veered off into unexplored territory. Ned stopped her and then was sent off to find Sarik. When Sarik went door the tunnel to scout some extra. Elaina soon followed afterward.

She went through the tunnels let by Sarik and Ned. There was a pretty close pass-by of golems at one point but they didn't leave there area so it didn't turn into a combat. Then they were back in the main crystal room again.

Elaina nodded and she reached the crystal. "I see which one now. Give me a moment." She drew out another piece of chalk and then drew some instructions on the floor near the crystal. "Alright. Now we just need to do some experiments. Ned, how has the supplies gathering been going?"

"Good. Right now they are probably good enough but after today they should

have extras in case they need to last the full three ten-days.”

“Excellent. Sarik, once you are done marking the tunnels you are on watch duty. Make sure that none of Destin’s people arrive without our knowledge. Ned, you make sure all the preparations get done as quickly as possible, and I’ll finish up getting the experiments up and running. We need to make sure one of the apprentice can reopen the doors once we are all gone.”

They all split up to do their tasks. As night began to fall Sarik was still gone. That was probably good. With everybody joining back into the Vault it was time to test the sealing and unsealing. The first time it was Elaina and Loric.

Closing and sealing the main door was extremely easy. Just shut the door and with a little bit of magic they watched the magic glyphs light up and the door sealed shut. Some attempts were made to open the door but when those failed they moved on into the depths of the vault.

It was Elaina, Loric, and two of his best apprentices. They were to watch the first attempt while Elaina and Loric explained what was happening. Elaina explained which magical flow was the correct one and explained how her notes described it. Then she disabled the magical flow in front of the apprentices.

Then came the moment of truth. As they all returned back to the main door. If this didn’t work it was possible they could be sealed in here for who knows how long. But it has been successful. The door had been unsealed and then they could push it open once more. Finally they had to repeat the exact same task, multiple times. However with those times it was the apprentices attempting to do it, instructed by both Elaina and Loric. This took longer and as the apprentices fumbled through activating the magic and getting the door both sealed and unsealed.

Not content with having them doing it only once Loric had them repeat the entire process three times. Only then was he satisfied that they would be able to open and close the door without his aid. After that all that was left was his continued instruction about what they should do while he was gone.

Only once that was all done did they finally get a chance to relax. Elaina pretty much retired to bed immediately. She was still tired from performing the anti-magic and she would need a good rest before whatever would come

tomorrow.

Ned stayed up a bit longer. Supplies needed processing and moving and he was by far the most capable of doing it. Mages are not well known for their physical stamina. Even Elaina who could hike for most of a day didn't have the same level of stamina as Ned did.

Everything had been put away, inside the vault as night came. A guard was set so that the door could be sealed if soldiers showed up randomly. However nobody showed up during the night. Sarik was still gone and Elaina could only trust that he was out there watching for Drestin's men.

When the morning came, so did Sarik.

"I hope you have everything figured out, because Presgred is now completely under General Drestin' control."

"Just under the wire." Said Elaina. "How long do you think we have?"

"Don't know precisely. There was a group of soldiers heading here and a pretty well armed group as well. Got a few hours at least but more than that is uncertain."

"Ned, go get our stuff. I'll ring the bell." Ned ran off and Elaina went to ring the alarm bell. All the apprentices began to gather, along with Loric and Nim.

It was Loric who took charge, "Alright everybody, it is time. We are going to be closing up the doors. If there is anything you somehow managed to forget it is too late now. Everybody get in. And remember to keep the place closed. Unless it is me or Elaina this door had better stay closed."

He got agreements from his apprentices. As he finished Nim came forward, "You have better come back. I'll miss you if you don't."

"I'll be back." said Sarik and he placed his hand on the girl's head. "Make sure to take care of everybody while I'm gone. You know they can get a bit obsessed about things without somebody to keep an eye on them."

"Are you also talking about yourself?" Said Nim.

Loric coughed. "Well, I supposed I need your help sometimes too."

Nim then looked at Elaina, "Can you come back too? I want to hear some of your stories about your travels. Loric said you have been to all kinds of places

and I want to hear about them.”

Elaina smiled back, “Absolutely. I have plenty of stories that I can tell and I still have some books that I need to finish reading.” She reached out and ruffled the kid’s hair.

As people waved goodbye the door was closed. The magic runes glowed upon the surface of the door and then the Vault was sealed.

Chapter 9: General Drestin

“Where next boss?” Asked Sarik, “And what is the plan with the old wizard? He doesn’t seem much like a combatant.”

Loric harrumphed but Elaina explained, “With Presgred claimed the next to places of interest for Drestin are the two valley forts. Once those are taken he can start consolidating his power in the region and it will be difficult to retake the Bowl. To stop that we need to stop Drestin himself. However he is surrounded by an army.”

Elaina continued, “His army is too many regardless of what kind of plan I have. So the first step is to split up his army. That is what the Sallantic Monastery is for. Their retaking of Kringred will divert some of his forces, but he still needs to take the nearby fort. My expectations is that he will split his force to accomplish both tasks at the same time.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Asked Ned.

“Then it will be our job to reinforce one of the forts and make sure it stays standing until noble reinforcements arrived. Not impossible but worse than the alternative. Now returning to the main plan. With the forced divided I plan diverting even more forces using some large scale magic that I’ll be able to perform with the aid of Loric. Finally while he is maintaining that, the three of us will sneak into Drestin’s command. The Vestige is my primary objective but I expect him to not part with that easily. Then we flee and hope that Drestin’s forces dissolve from lack of leadership.”

“That plans seems pretty.... How should I say it... uncertain.” Said Sarik, “We have some allies and information but just hoping that Drestin acts like you

expects is pretty poor planning. However I certainly don't have a better plan for dealing with a whole army so I guess I will have to trust you boss."

"I agree." Said Ned. "I'm not certain if it will actually work but it might give us a chance at getting access to General Drestin so I say we go for it."

"Excellent, then to the sunward fort we go. We should probably reach it before Drestin's forces, although that is much more uncertain than my other timings." She glanced around, they had been walking for a while, "Although this is a good time for the other piece of it."

She drew out a gold flecked piece of paper, wrote a bunch of words on it, and then lifted it into the sky. It then flew away, born by the air currents and mana. "And there is the instruction to the Monastery to begin their part. Now let's go quickly."

After a fair bit of walking Loric was beginning to show signs of fatigue, he was not used to the long exertions that everybody else was. However Elaina pulled out a stamina potion from her bag. Loric grimaced but drank the potion.

They continued and as the night began they just kept walking. The best way to get to the fort before Drestin was to keep going as long as possible. However when the stamina potion wore off on Loric it was time to stop.

"Loric. I've explained the overview of the plan but I need you to study the spell we will be performing together. I have all the necessary tools and supplies for it but you will need a brief primer." She reached into her bag and pulled out a wrapped book. She unwrapped the waterproof wrapping revealed the large book. The black leather of the book also seemed to reflect the glimmers of light from the campfire.

"That... is a Grimoire. Are you sure it is alright for me to look at it?" Said Loric. He hesitantly reached out for it. Elaina let him take it from her hands.

"The bookmark has the location of the spell. You have tonight to read it and figure it out to the best of your ability. It is complicated but I'm sure you will be able to manage it."

"I'll take care of your Grimoire." Then he retreated to the tent where he could read the book.

"What is a Grimoire?" Asked Ned. "Some kind of book on magic?"

"Regular books can describe magic." Said Elaina, "A Grimoire is an enchanted book."

Sarik hissed, "You had a Grimoire this whole time? Boss... how have you managed to avoid getting robbed this whole time? That thing must be worth a fortune."

"I pity the fool that tries to steal and pawn my Grimoire. And somebody who charges 50 marks per day shouldn't talk about how expensive things are. Now Ned, for your information a Grimoire is a type of spell book made with magical paper and inks. It is used to hold magical formula in their purest state. A normal spell book holds an explanation of magic, a description intended to explain how it works to the reader. A grimoire actually holds the magic formula as magic."

"That still doesn't really explain what that book is in a way I can understand."

"I suppose the easiest explanation is that a normal spell book can be wrong or lie, a grimoire can not. As such they can be a dangerous source of knowledge, especially for powerful spells.

"And as I said they can be very expensive. I clearly underestimated what a Ranking Wizard was capable of doing. How many more tricks do you have in that bag of yours?"

She reached and stroked the outside of her satchel, "Oh, plenty. But I'm sure they are things you haven't mentioned to use either. Maybe I should tell Ned about abyss-t..."

"Alright, you made your point boss. I'll let you keep your secrets. Just make sure to bring them out when they are important." Said Sarik as he held up his hands.

"Am I the only one without secrets here?" Asked Ned.

"Give it time kid, give it time. Soon enough you will have plenty of secrets of your own to hoard." Said Sarik as he patted Ned on the shoulder, a lot like Loric has patted Nim on the head.

"Great... I'm going to be. Normal watches?" He only waited for Sarik and Elaina to nod before he went to his own tent.

"You going to sleep too?" Asked Sarik.

"Not yet... I need to prepare for the large scale spell. That isn't something you

can just do like when I use wands. And if large scale magic goes wrong who knows what could happen..." She hesitated, "I know... I know what could go wrong which is why I need to make sure that the spell does not go wrong."

She began pulling out items from her satchel, lining them up, and checking each of them. Small statues, various monster horns and claws, bottles of unusual ingredients. A large scale spell was a major endeavor. It would be bigger than anything she had cast in a while and it needed to be perfect.

It was only when she had double and triple checked her supplies that she packed everything back up again. The fuzziness has begun to creep into her mind which told her it was time for bed. She slide into her tent and in what felt like minutes she was shook awake by Ned who was the middle watch.

She yawned and stretched. "Anything happened during the night?"

"No, although I think Loric stayed up pretty late. There was light in his tent during the start of my shift. Hopefully he got enough sleep. But I guess he isn't doing a watch so he will probably be fine."

"We can hope." Elaina took over. She watched into the dark forest. She did keep watch but she was also thinking. Sarik had been worried about her plan and she was too. It mostly all hinged on whether Drestin did in fact split up his force but also on whether the spell was successful. If she had to do it along she wasn't certain if it would succeed but with another experienced wizard like Loric she was pretty confident... pretty confident.

When the light of the sun began to appear in the sky she knew it was time. She shook Sarik and Ned awake, letting Loric sleep as long as possible.

Today was the moment of truth, the Sallantic Monastery should be attempting to retake Kringred this morning. Hopefully a fast rider will have reached Drestin by evening. Then they will learn what he was going to do with his forces.

When Loric was eventually woken up for breakfast he was looking particularly grumpy, although he did not mention anything about it.

"Do you think you can successfully aid me in casting the spell?" Asked Elaina.

"Your choice of magic is a bold move. You said you had the materials for such a spell but I'm hesitant to ask how you managed to acquire them." He held up

his hand to stop Elaina from actually explaining, "I can cast it. I've aided plenty of large scale magic done by the council. Compared to some of those spells this isn't that bad. But I'm not certain how long I can hold the spell running alone, I give you four hours."

Elaina nodded, "If we can't deal with Drestin within those four hours then we would probably be toast anyways. I'll leave it to you then."

Loric passed back over the Grimoire to Elaina who wrapped it back up and put into her satchel.

"What kind of spell is it?" Asked Ned, "You haven't really explained that part of the plan."

"Yes, I'll let you. At its base it is a storm calling spell. Weather control can be tricky but this should create a storm on the scale of the one during the Evil Eye. However that isn't the entirety of the spell, using some extra tricks that I picked up from the Sallantic Monastery there will be illusions spread throughout the rain and the mists. That will give us the cover needed to pass into Drestin's camp and prevent anybody from realizing that we are fighting Drestin, or at least that is the hope."

"Illusion?" Said Sarik with an annoyed tone, "Can't say I'm fond of those kinds of things."

"Mostly just muffling and silencing. Turning a rainy night into a quiet bore. And they won't realize it isn't true until too late. Now let's get going. We still need to reach the fort before evening. And we will hopefully know Drestin's actions before too long."

—

General Drestin looked at the fort with disdain. The last of the Earl's soldiers were there. The coward had fled, leaving what soldiers he had scattered behind him to slow down Drestin's forces. They had succeeded. But Drestin cared naught about preventing the Earl from escaping. Soon the entire Bowl would be his.

The siege of the fort would take a day or two and his command tent had been setup in a position to let him oversee the siege. There was the clear view of the

fort. It was nestled in the canyon, blocking travel except through its entrance.

A small force could use it to hold out against a much bigger force. Even the Earl's token defense could prevent the general's armies from simply claiming it with numbers. But their numbers were too small, eventually Drestin's forces would take the fort.

Drestin used the wait to rest. His body was not as young and tough as it used to be. When he was in combat he could feel himself humming with power but the rest of the time the aches and soreness crept in. But this was something he could not show to the soldiers, only when his tent was setup and he was alone could he sit and relax.

However even that time was short lived. The gong outside his tent was struck once to inform him that there was a messenger. He stood, composed himself and said, "Enter."

The young messenger stepped in, flanked by a pair of Drestin's elite soldiers. Behind the messenger was Dresden's lieutenants stepping forward to accept Drestin's orders as soon as he was ready to give them.

He knelt before Drestin, waiting for him give the command.

"Speak."

"My Lord. The Sallantic Monastery has declared you their enemy and as retaken Kringred."

Drestin froze and there was a dangerous fear in the air. His lieutenants waited for his response.

"I see. One of those annoying escapees must have told them. It was only a matter of time before they attempted something. This was just sooner than I expected. What happened to the forces I had stationed in Kringred?"

"We lost the gate guards but once we realized we were outnumbered the remaining retreated. They are stationed on the road outside of Kringred. They are ready to move on your orders."

"How many monks did they bring?"

"There are perhaps 50 of them. Our estimates are that ten of them are strong combatants with the other forty being about as strong as your soldiers."

"Hexxal, take half the army. Bring them to Kringred, and teach the Monastery

that it was a mistake to go against me.”

“Yes sir.” Said the man who stepped forward, “But do we really need to take so many? Don’t you need them here?”

“No need. There are still plenty soldiers here to take the fort. And the numbers aren’t just to retake Kringred. Follow them back to their Monastery and put the place to the torch. Make any examples as needed.”

“Yes sir.”

“Palanda.”

The woman stepped forward, “Yes father?”

“You will go with him. Learn from Hexxal. You will also be the face of my army when making the needed examples.”

She saluted, “Yes father. I will see it done.”

“Leave tonight. Send a messenger when you have good news.”

They turned and left the command tent. Once everybody had left him again he sat down on his chair once more.

“Some mice are moving behind the scene. That wizard is proving to be much more of an annoyance that I thought.” He had also received a messenger from the force that had gone to Revold’s Vault, the place had been sealed up tight with magic. He couldn’t think of anybody else that would be capable of doing such a thing.

He would need to put some effort into dealing with the wizard. The bounty hunter must have either failed for betrayed him. Either way it would be a great deal of effort to find an locate a mage who was wandering the forest.

And he was feeling so very tired. He need to finish. To claim the fortresses quickly. Palanda wasn’t yet ready but he had almost finishing paving the way for her. He was confident that his other lieutenants would obey her assuming he properly managed to secure the border forts and pass on his relic properly.

For now he rested. His soldiers were right now busy setting up the battering ram that would let them break into the fort. Until that was done he would rest. The light pitter patter of the rain on the tent helped sooth him to sleep.

He didn’t know how long he slept but he woke sharply. Nothing immediately stood out to him about why he had awoken. Something though told him that he

needed to be awake. The rain was thick, falling in waves on the tent. The siege was planned for tomorrow when the sun rose.

But now he knew something was wrong. He couldn't pinpoint what it was that was wrong but he felt it in his bones. He rose. He called in his squire and together they began to put on his armor. Once that was done he asked his squire to go and fetch any of his lieutenants he could find but not to ring the alert bell.

Then he stood there and waited.

—

Elaina, Ned, Sarik, and Loric had set up their new camp a fair bit away from where they could see General Drestin's army. They did not start a fire this time however, remaining undetected by their army was their primary goal.

Elaina and Loric were clearing a large area of ground for them to complete the ritual. It had to be as flat and smooth as they could get it.

Ned was on watch and Sarik was on scouting duty. He was off discovering when (or if) Drestin's forces split up.

"Good news boss." Said Sarik when he finally returned to the camp, "It looks like your guess on what he was doing is correct. He sent a very large contingent back toward Presgred, and I presume Kringred. Still his forces here are quite large, around 150 soldiers. And they have begun setting up a battering ram to siege the fort. If it lasts through tomorrow I would be surprised."

"Then it looks like tonight is our change." Said Elaina. "Does everything look good for you Loric?"

"As good as they will ever be. All the ingredients have been accounted for and the mana chalk lines have been drawn. All we need to do is start the ritual. Although once we start we will have to finish it. Not enough shark teeth for a second attempt."

"Alright then, get to your position. Ned, Sarik, make sure not to interfere. I don't think anybody will interrupt but if they try stop them." They both nodded.

Elaina stepped over the ring of mana chalk into the large diagram they had spent the last several hours drawing. There were items dotted about the diagram. All the materials she had brought that would be needed for the ritual. In the center there was a brazier. She finished dropping the pearls into it and then lit the

brazier.

Then she took her position across from Sarik. Like all magic there was four parts to it. The first was gathering the mana. The amount of mana needed for a large scale spell like this was enormous. The outer ring of items was for drawing in the mana. Those were locally sourced items, items that were in turn with local mana. They would aid in drawing in enough mana.

The second part was the mana conversion. Changing local mana to the aspects needed for the spell they were casting. The water elements in the Bowl were close enough so the second ring was lightly populated. Many of the items were things she had been given by the Sallantic Monastery or have brought from the Great Silver Sea.

The third part of the spell was manipulating the mana into the correct form. Without a specific magical device designed for this they had to use the next best thing, Wizards. This was a wizard's bread and butter, weaving mana into spells. Both Elaina and Sarik were in charge of handling this.

Those were the primary three parts of any spell had to have. But a large area spell needed a fourth part. A means of dispersal. A smaller spell could just apply the magic locally or be thrown at a target, simple means of dispersal. But a bigger spell like this needed a method to cover a much larger area.

Thus the brazier. It was there to send the spell up into the sky. Most large area spells would also need secondary ritual sites to draw the mana to them but a weather spell like they were doing just needed to have mana sent into the sky.

That description made it sound simple but it was anything but. Finding the correct items to do all the processes was difficult as was weaving the mana. But both Elaina and Loric were highly trained wizards.

They breathed and the mana came to them. Pulled in waved to the ritual circle they had setup. As the newly converted mana reached the two wizards they began working the mana into the spell. As the newly released mana started reaching in the sky the change began to happen. Clouds began to form in the night.

Soon enough raindrops began dropping all across the area. The rain began to grow thicker and thicker. As the rain began to become extremely thick Elaina

called out, "Now for the second part of the spell. Began."

Then they began to add the illusion magic to the spell. The weave of the spell changed and lights began to sparkle in the air that was raising from the center of the ritual. The strange glow grew and sparkled.

Once it has reached its peak Elaina nodded to Loric. "You good for taking over."

The man grimaced but said, "I can handle it. But be as quick as you can. I can only manage alone for a few hours. Now go."

Elaina nodded. She slowly relinquished control to Loric. Then very very carefully she stepped outside of the ritual circle.

She looked over at Ned and Sarik, "I hope you two are ready now because it is time for us to go."

"I'm ready whenever." Said Ned.

"Boss, I am always ready." Said Sarik.

"Then let's go." The turned and headed down toward the army encampment. The water beat against their cloaks as they passed through the forest.

"Remember to stay focused. If you focus breaks the rain might leave you standing around doing nothing. Don't pay attention to any strange flickering in your peripheral vision either, it might just be your mind distracting you."

"Boss, your magic is scary. Remember what I said about a wizard with mind control?"

"Yes, I remember. This is an illusion not mind control. Mind control is very difficult and not something I've had particular interest in learning."

The walked through the forest in the dark until they saw the lights of the camp in front of them.

"Alright. Keep with me. I have one last trick to get us into the camp." She pulled out the little box. Her last piece of mushroom. "Now keep track of what I'm going to look like." She took the mushroom out and chewed it.

Moments later she had shifted and changed. Her body grew slightly and now she was a taller human woman, wearing the red and yellow uniform of the soldiers that Dresden used.

"Just let me do the talking." She said as she lead them toward the camp.

The army watchguards called out to Elaina as she got closer. She approached, "I've been out scouting that area. Has everything still been good here?"

She might not be meeting the standards of the soldiers but because the drowning rain and perhaps the magic seeped within the soldiers simply accepted her explanation.

The guard grunted, "I'm not certain this weather can be called good. Hopefully it clears up by the morning."

"We can only hope." responded Guard Elaina, "I need to go and report. Try to avoid getting too wet." Her sympathies were accepted by the man and she and her companions went by without being further questioned.

As they moved farther into the camp Sarik moved closer to Elaina, "I'm surprised they accepted that. Their security really leaves something to be desired."

"I'm pretty sure most of these people aren't career mercenaries or soldiers. Just regular people allured by ideas or money. The General might be clever but raising a small army without attracting attention means it is difficult to properly train them all. And you can't expect those soldiers to know all three hundred of the other soldiers. Plus who would he be expecting to show up, nobody else in the area would try to enter the camp."

"Still bad security."

"Their mistake, our advantage. Do you see anything around? The general likely has a command tent somewhere around here."

Ned glanced around as much as he could, "I can't see much through the rain and haze. It any better for either of you?"

Sarik shook his head, "Nah, can barely see a few feet. This rain really is something."

"It should be in the center somewhere and likely the biggest tent in the area."

Now that they has pass through the parameter nobody gave them any mind. There were plenty of soldiers around but most were huddled in tents or near fires, attempting to stave off the rain and the chill as much as possible.

"There." Said Sarik after a minute, "That tent must be it. Nobody other than

the general would have a tent that big. Surprisingly lightly guarded though. Just the one guard out front."

"The general likely doesn't need protection, or so he thinks. Sarik, you think you can dispose of the guard silently?"

"Just the one? No problem. But other people might see."

"No problem, leave that part to me." She reached into her satchel to find her wind wand. Controlling the falling rain was easy with the power of wind. As they approached the guard turbulence blew through the air causing sprays of water everywhere. Any that would be watching wouldn't be able to see what was happening.

A knife and just a few seconds brought the guard down. The guard had barely questioned what they were doing here before he was down. Then Ned and Sarik grabbed him and dragged the body out of sight of any would be watchers.

Then they gathered out front of the command tent. By this point Elaina's magical disguise was fading. She size had shifted back and the soldier uniform was flickering in and out of existence. They wouldn't be able to use it to pretend like they belonged anymore.

Elaina said, "Everybody ready? Doing this quickly is important but things will escalate very quickly." She had already brought out another wand and warded the ground while speaking, "This will help prevent us from being interrupted but it only has some much effect is things go badly."

"I'm ready boss" Said Sarik.

"We stop him now." Said Ned, his eyes filled with determination.

With that they stepped through the tent flap into General Drestin's tent. Ned and Sarik first with Elaina a moment after them.

General Drestin was there, sitting in a chair watching the door. As they entered he stood, drawing his sword. In the dim oil lantern lit room his left arm was only slightly noticeable. It could be confused with a stylized armored gauntlet. But it was not, it was a red scaled arm. The rest of his body was covered in plate armor, concealing his face and expression.

"I was right... there was something unnatural going on." He said. His voice was dark and menacing.

"We have come to put an end to your evils." Said Ned.

"That Vestige you have." Said Elaina. "Surrender and give it to me. If you do so I will see you get a fair trial."

He voice was sarcastic, "A fair trail from the King? I can't imagine anything other than execution would be chosen. No, the Bowl is now mine. And you Sarik, you so easily betrayed me. You could have gotten paid well instead you joined a group like the College of Wizards, how pointless."

Sarik growled, "I just don't like being threatened. Boss here was able to break your curse so I have no reason to want to follow you."

"And you.... Ned wasn't it. I'm sorry to see you here like this. Your grandfather could have joined me but instead he chose death. Are you going to follow the same path? Even you three against me is nothing. I fought in the Plague of Sorrow, this kingdom is broken and needs new leadership, you could help me with that."

"I think grandpa chose right. Plus you killed him. I can't let you get away with that."

"How tragic." Said Drestin. "Now little wizard. You came for the Vestige. How about you take it now." He held up his left hand. "If you can that is."

Elaina already had her fire wand out. She took the invitation that was offered. Mana gathered and the fire shot out toward Drestin. A normal man in plate armor would need to dodge such an attack, the heat and fire might roast them inside their armor. However Drestin simple brought his left hand out to block the flames.

The firey bolt broke into sparks as Drestin crushed it in his hand.

Then he stepped forward. Ned had already drawn his sword and unslung his shield. It was unwrapped and made of a faint blue material. He stepped forward with his sword, going face to face with Drestin. Their swords clashed. Ned might have Venra and he heard the whispers of the sword but against an actual sword master like Drestin he was at a disadvantage.

Drestin parried his blade effortlessly and brought his sword in. Had Ned not had a shield his lift would have ended there. Blue sparked flickered in the air. Sarik might have been able to join the conflict with his knives but against a foe

like Drestin the range of a sword put Sarik at a disadvantage, plus Sarik would conflict with Ned.

So Sarik used his bow. He ran to the side. The tent was not a huge battleground but it was large enough to get a small amount of distance from Drestin. He fired arrow after arrow. Destin ignored him. The arrows hit harmlessly of the plate mail that Drestin wore. Regular arrows would not penetrate such armor with just a normal bow.

Drestin might have used that moment to dispatch Ned using his superior techniques except another bolt of fire came from Elaina. He once against needed to reach up with his arm and break the spell.

Elaina knew what that meant. Drestin was not immune to her magic. If she managed to hit his armor with a solid flame bolt the fire and heat would warp the metal and overheat him. She just needed to prevent him from grabbing her spell.

Ned swung in again keeping Drestin focused on him. He might not have the skill to win against Drestin but he was just good enough that Drestin couldn't just trivially beat him. Each moment of hesitation that Elaina or Sarik gave Drestin was just enough for Ned to survive and continue to fight.

Elaina had drawn a second wand from her satchel. While controlling two different spells simultaneously in combat was beyond even her skill she could alternate between them giving her more versatility. Her second wand was her black twisted wand.

The shadows shifted and attempted to grab Drestin, restraining his movement. The grabbed his legs, attempting to pin him down. He stopped initially but after one of the parries he used against Ned he reached down with he red clawed hand and snapped the shadowy hands. The spell unraveled and Drestin could move once more.

He dodged under Ned sword and managed to get his sword past the shield. The angle was bad but the blade ran across Neds chest. Ned stepped back, his chainmail had stopped the blow from drawing blood but the force of the strike still caused him pain.

Sarik shot several arrows at that moment. They didn't harm Drestin but it was

enough for him to be distracted slightly, just enough for Ned to recover, raising his shield and sword once more.

They saw the glowing red embers in the confines of Drestin's helmet. Only Elaina really knew what that entailed. "Be prepared everybody. He is drawing more power from the Vestige."

Drestin raised his sword once more. Ned raised his shield to block it. The force of the blow was immense, much more than he had expected. The sword left a large nick in the edge of the coral shield. Ned took a step backward from the blow. But Drestin followed up, stepping forward and reaching out with his red scaled hand toward Ned's head.

An arrow his the arm as it reached out. The arrow deflected off the scales but the force of the arrow sent the arm off to the side, missing Ned's head. Ned also used the opportunity to bring up his own sword into the arm. He sword also glanced off the arm, although unlike the arrow a thin line of red blood dripped to the ground from where his sword hit the arm.

Drestin stepped backward. He had spoken before but now he was eerily silent.

Elaina tried to capitalize on the moment. She had been holding onto some mana and sent out a fire bolt followed by another fire bolt. He reached up to block the first bolt. The second bolt was just off from the second so he moved his hand to block the second. But Sarik has been watching and one of his arrows hit the arm, sending it off to the side preventing the arm from properly blocking the bolt.

Drestin was no amateur and as soon as he realized what was happening he dove to the side. That turned a full body hit into a shoulder graze. The metal of his pauldron warped under the immense heat.

His head turned toward Sarik. His hand also moved to and pointed toward Sarik. His hand crackled with red and black energies. Then pure magic cracked through the air at Sarik. Sarik attempted to dodge and roll but the magic was too fast and an explosion of energy rocked that side of the tent. The tent fell and rain fell in obscuring the area.

"Sarik!" Yelled Elaina. She could not see him at all. No form moved in the

crumpled section of the tent.

Drestin did not wait. He raised his sword to bring it against Ned. But something had also changed with Ned. He might not have been friends with Sarik but they had traveled together. They were companions at this point.

“Venra. Let’s stop this monster.” He whispered. His sword swung and parried Drestin’s sword. This time it was Drestin’s sword that was sent backward. Ned stepped forward gaining the the momentum of the attack to swing in again. Drestin was able to raise his arm to block the second blow, catching the sword.

But Elaina was waiting. Her fire bolt went out at that time, smashing into the armor of Drestin’s chest. The fire burnt and smoldered turning the armor red hot.

Drestin reacted to the heat quickly and efficiently. He reached up with his scaled arm and tore at his metal chestplate. Like it was made of paper the claws cut through the metal and he torn the hot metal away from him. The shards clattered on the floor.

Energies crackled around his scaled arms. The blade and red energies caused Ned to take a step backward. Whatever magics he through would have to be dodged. However Elaina was more prepared. She had swapped out her fire wand for the metal rod wand.

She had used to weaken the curse on Sarik but that was because the wand was one of order. Dragon magic was the opposite of that, pure chaos. And the Vestige that Drestin was using used that very chaos magic. She couldn’t counter the chaos magic with just her wand but she could deflect it.

The bolt of chaotic magic flew to one side bursting through the wall of the tent with explosive force. Somebody screamed outside, although for what reason Elaina couldn’t tell since she needed to remain focused on Drestin.

Then with her other hand she activated the shadows. Drestin might be able to break through the shadows but it would take him time and effort. She attempted to entrap his sword arm. He reached to break the shadows but was not able to complete the action.

That was because Ned was there, he brought in his sword toward the now exposed chest area. The ripped plate armor had saved Drestin from more

burning but it left the front of his chest a vulnerable area. He had to grab Ned's sword with his clawed hand while he struggled to free his sword arm from the shadow tendrils.

Then there was a whoosh and thwack. An arrow erupted from the center of Drestin's chest. Standing in pile of ruined tent was Sarik. There were scorch marks all across his body and burns and boils covering the flesh that was visible, but he was alive.

Drestin coughed slightly. A second arrow entered his chest right next to the first one. Ned did not waste a moment, he brought his sword back and thrust it directly into Drestin's chest. The General twitched a couple of times, then his arms dropped.

"Ned, grab Sarik, you will need to carry him out of here." Called out Elaina. She then ran forward. The General fell off Ned's sword and dropped to the ground. After he hit the ground Elaina reached him. She had her metal wand out, she waved it over him. Her face strained and then the red scaled arm shifted and morphed returning to that of a human arm.

One his wrist was a golden bejeweled bracelet. She brought out a metal box from her bag. It was covered in arcane runes. She gingerly removed the bracelet from his arm and placed it in the box. She closed it carefully before waving her metal rod over the scene once more to clean up any potential draconic corruption. Then the box went into her satchel.

She looked over to see Ned supporting Sarik.

"Let's go out of here quickly."

The moved through the camp. The place was now a mess of sound and confusion. The explosions have disturbed people and the illusion spell was beginning to unravel. The ducked behind a tent and a group of soldiers ran past them toward the command tent. Luckily the rain was still extremely thick making it hard to see too far in the darkness.

But security was just as bad leaving as it was going in. The watchers on the edge of the group had been called away to help with searching the camp. So Ned carried Sarik past the edge of the camp with Elaina keeping up.

It was only after they had gotten away and were in the forest did Elaina

finally get a chance to look at Sarik. His wounds were bad but he had somehow avoided taking a direct hit from the chaos magic bolt. She waved her metal wand over him, removing what lingering chaotic magic was still hanging around him.

She began pulling out potions from her bag, she had one good healing potion but that might not be enough so all her extra potions that might help were also joining it. "I'm glad you survived. I thought that bolt had it you straight on." She said as she forced him to drink the good potion.

When he finished drinking it he gave a wry smile, "You saved me boss." He raised his arm, jangling the bracelet that she had given him. "I think he thought he got me dead on too." He coughed a couple of times. Elaina gave him the second, less effective potion, that he also drank.

"But by the gods that still didn't miss me by enough. It hurt bad just being caught in the explosion. Got him to let his guard down, good job getting him to break his own armor."

"Stop talking more drinking." Said Elaina in a chiding tone.

"Yes boss." He finished what potions she had. With all of them consumed he was looking almost reasonable again. The burns had mostly closed. He still had trouble walking but Ned was able to continue to help him.

"Let's get Loric and get out of here before we are found." Said Elaina. They moved through the forest, slower than on the way in. Loric was found practically collapsed in the center of the ritual circle.

"Humph." Said Sarik, "Didn't try as hard as me."

Loric looked up, exhaustion was clearly evident on his face. "Dying isn't a contest."

"I don't think I can carry both of them while moving at any decent pace." Said Ned.

Elaina had finished placing all the various tools back into her satchel.

"I'll handle this." Said Elaina. She brought out her thin thick wand. She pressed it against Loric. It changed his weight enough that she was able to lift him up. She was able to put him onto her shoulders. She did need to keep the wand out and continue to keep his weight light as all time, the spell didn't last very long.

With everybody gathered they were able to flee off into the depths of the woods.

Chapter 10: Another Road

Elaina, Ned, and Sarik looked out across the road. There were no soldiers to be found. Loric had long since been returned to the Vault. Now they were returning to the Sallantic Monastery. They had worried that the other half of General Drestin's army would still be here attempting to stop the monks. But they found nothing.

When they arrived at the monastery they found everything was still on high alert. However when the monks saw that it was them that was approaching they were welcomed into the monastery where they were taken to the head monk.

"You have returned. Given everything that happened I can only assume that you were successful." Said the head monk. She welcomed them in to sit.

"Yes, the General has been dealt with. There is no sign of his army here, what happened?"

"They had come to retake the city from us. We held for a little while before retreated back to the monastery. They initially followed us but then turned around. They must have received the news of the General's fall."

"I'm glad you didn't have too much trouble. Your distraction certainly made a difference. It made sneaking in and out of the camp easier. Also I couldn't have cast my weather spell without the supplies you gave me."

"Hopefully this will be the end of it." She then looked deeply at Elaina, "And the Vestige?"

Elaina brought out the metal box from her satchel. "It is here. Destroying a Vestige is a tricky task. The college has the tools but I would need to bring it back there to destroy it. However if you want to take over its disposal then I will leave it in your hands."

"Thank you." The old monk woman took the box. "I will see to it that the Vistage is destroyed."

Elaina watched the box for a moment, it was very dangerous, but the Sallantic Monastery would be a safe place to leave it. "Just... don't let that fall into the

hands of somebody that is temptable. I only touched it for seconds and could already feel its influence. Maybe without my magic that counters chaos it might not have made its way here."

"I will make sure it never leaves that box until it is destroyed."

"Good. Thank you."

"You can stay here if you want to wait until the whole rebellion thing blows over."

"I appreciate the offer," Elaina looked over at Ned, "But we have some other people we need to check on." They all bid farewell to the monks.

"Thanks for the shield." Said Ned, "It really helped."

Everybody waved and left.

Their next stop was traveling back to Neelgred. Ned's parents were still out there in the forest nearby and he wanted to check in on them. The three of them stayed pretty close to the road this time. They still kept an eye out for the army or soldiers along the way but it they never encountered them along the way.

Neelgred was quiet when they arrived. No soldiers guarding the main entrance, just normal town guards. They approached cautiously to make sure everything was normal again. The guards greeted them, welcoming them to the town.

Ned spoke with them casually for a few minutes before telling the others that it looked like all of General Drestin's forces were gone.

"Odd... his armies seems to have up and vanished. I wonder where they all went." Said Elaina in a pondering tone.

"Some of them probably abandoned post, discarded their uniforms, and rejoined the towns." Said Sarik, "But clearly something happened to his lieutenants and his more elite soldiers."

"Yeah..." said Elaina. It wasn't really her problem now. She had dealt with the Vestige and ensured that Ned's city was free from the influence of the General.

They went out into the forest to check in with those that escaped the jail. Ned was happy to meet back up with his parents again. All of those that had been living out in the forest were happy to return back to their homes in Neelgred. Even Ned was happy to return to his home where he got to stay for the night.

The next day Elaina, Ned, and Sarik meetup again in the the tavern. The place was still pretty empty but it was open once again. They had some food and drinks, enjoying themselves.

“So... Ned... what is your plan from now on?” Asked Elaina. “I’m going to visit the other cities and figure out what happened to Drestin’s armies. Once I passed that information on to the nobles I plan on heading back to the Wizard’s College.”

Ned looked conflicted. He reached down and touched the handle of his sword. He didn’t know what he wanted to do. He was a carpenter, that was all that he had been. At least that was true until recently. Now he had fought monsters, went on a journey, heard stories from Elaina and others. Did he just want to go back to his life like it has all never happened.

Uncertainty played across his face.

“I’m planning on continuing on hiring Sarik as a bodyguard, at least until I return to the College. Things are dangerous out in the wilds so I could use a second bodyguard if you also want to come along.” Said Elaina.

“Give me some time to think about it.” He said.

“Sure. We will leaving the Bowl in around 15 days. If you want to join us then meet us in Presgred on the morning of the 16th day. If not then I’m glad to have meet you. I don’t think I could have recovered the Vestige without both you and Sarik. I hope that the recovery of Neelgred goes well.”

At the end of the meal they parted ways. Ned returning home while Elaina and Sarik left the city. Ned needed to help his parents move back into their home. They needed to clean everything up and set the store back up again.

When he carried furniture back outside he stared up at the sun, slightly shading his eyes. He had seen combat, violence, death. But they have been interesting things too. He might never have seen the inside of the Sallantic Monastery or Revold’s Vault without that journey.

He reached down and touched the handle of Venra. His grandfather put Venra away in a chest in the attic. Would Ned do that now...

He didn’t know.

The journey back to Kringred and then to the nearby fort was a quick trip for Elaina and Sarik. They stood on the walls and looked out into the canyon. The place was abandoned. The normal guards who would have been stationed here were gone.

"Yeah, there are signs of travel from a bunch of people through here." Said Sarik as he looked out at the road into the distance.

"So the remainder of the army fled through here. How many people do you think it was?" Asked Elaina.

"A hundred or so. I'd guess that all the rest of the army either returned to their homes or are now hiding in the woods ready to start a life of banditry. A hundred is still a fair bit of a force though. Who knows what they are going to be doing out there."

"I'll pass the message along to the nobles. There was also no signs of General Drestin's daughter. I can only assume she is with that force, maybe leading it, who knows." She said.

"Not really your business any more right boss?" Asked Sarik.

"Pretty much. Really dealing with an army was never something I was supposed to be doing in the first place. Why does recovering Vestiges always have to be such a pain anyways?" She sighed. "Well, I guess that question is resolved. I don't need to keep worrying about running into a giant army who wants to kill me while traveling the Bowl."

"Anything else you still need to do? We still have a while before we depart."

She nodded. "Just one more important stop before we can take a break in Presgred. Any by take a break I mean write reports, lots of them."

"No rest of bureaucracy. I would recommend being a mercenary or bounty hunter instead. They don't have to do a lot of paperwork."

"Ha ha." Complained Elaina as she left the wall and returned to their travels.

A few days later they had arrived back at Revold's Vault. The place was locked up but Elaina could send vibrations through the mana of the door informing those inside of her arrival. While the danger was past Loric was

keeping the place sealed until it was certain that no roving soldiers would attack them.

She got brought in by the apprentices. Loric had tea made for her and she got to relax in the Vault. Elaina finally had some time to share her stories of the world with Nim who listened eagerly. Actually, a lot of the apprentices gathered to listen to Elaina's stories of the broader world.

They stayed there through the night and the following day. Loric wanted Elaina to stay until his finishing writing the entire description of how the sealing magic worked however Elaina couldn't stay that long so she had to bid everybody goodbye.

"When will I see you again?" Asked Nim.

"Then next time I pass by the area I'll make sure to stop on by. Although I travel a bunch so I don't know the next time I will be here. Maybe you can convince Loric to pay a visit to the Wizard's College. I'm very often passing by there and if you give me advance notice of your arrival I can make sure to be there when you stop by."

"Yeah, we will do that." She said.

"Good girl. I'll see you again later than." Elaina gave them all a farewell before they left once more. She had managed to finish the book she had started last time during their time here so she was in a good mood.

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Finally the last spot on their tour was just an Inn in the city of Presgred. She found her trunk of books there waiting for her. She practically hugged the trunk, she had missed those books. Before they had traveled back to Neelgred with Ned she had sent out a message to have her trunk sent back to her. She was glad everything had returned undamaged and in good condition.

Still as happy as she was to have the books back she was also unhappy that she would need to write reports. The Wizard's College would be expecting a full write-up of what happened, how she had spent her money, and the results of everything. They wouldn't be happy that she left the Vestige in the hands of the Sallantic Monastery but she could probably assuage their uncertainties about that inconvenience.

Sarik left her to her writings. He finally got some time to himself. His wounds were healing well but there were still some nasty scars on his face that he wasn't certain would go away. But he considered the scars more of a badge of honor.

He got to use his free time to eat and drink and take a well needed break. He had been in jail for quite a while and then had immediately got put into life or death struggles and long hiking trips. Finally did he have a moment to kick back and relax for a while.

The days pasts and finally Elaina got to lay back and said, "Its done. The report is finished. They will still probably complain about something but this is the best that they are going to get from me. Sarik, let's go have a party."

"Sure boss." Was his response. He was certainly not going to complain about having a party.

It was a kind of lonely party in Elaina's opinion however. There was just the two of them and she had already drank the good bottle of wine that she previously had. However Presdred had some pretty good mead. The forest made for some good bee keeping so their mead was high quality.

Elaina made sure to bad a few extra bottles of the stuff so that she could keep some for a later date. After a long evening, Sarik had to carry her one more up to her inn room where he placed her onto her bed.

In the morning Elaina was grumpy, she had drunk too much and her head hurt badly. Now there was just a couple of days remaining until they were to leave Presgred and the Sallantic's Bowl.

She got to have a day of rest and relaxation which mostly involved her visiting various stores in the city looking for books and potential magical components. By the time she had finished her stopping she was disappointed to find that her coin purse was running low on funds. The payments for Sarik's hiring had not been cheap and she still hadn't received the package with the extra money that the College had said they would send her to fund the recovery of the Vestige.

Still she had enough money for the return journey to the college and Sarik had already been pre-paid for so everything should work out. Still it was disappointing, he trunk did have space for a few more books and she could

probably pack in a little extra into her satchel.

Alas she would have to make do with what she had. And she didn't really feel like doing extra work to make some extra money spending money. So her shopping ended and she returned back to the inn for the last night of relaxation.

Tomorrow she would be leaving the Bowl. Returning to the college, and then likely going off on another adventure. She had another relax dinner before retiring to the inn room. She didn't really worry about whether Ned would show up or not. If it was something he wanted to do then he would be there. If it was not then they had already said goodbye.

In the morning she didn't see anybody but Sarik. They gathered their equipment and prepared everything they needed for the long journey. Unlike wondering through the forests they wouldn't need too much food, there were plenty of towns and villages along the way.

"It doesn't look like he is coming." Said Sarik. "Do you want to wait a little bit longer just in case?"

She shook her head, "No, we don't need to wait. His choice is only his to make."

Sarik nodded and they finally left the inn they had been staying at. They passed through the city, to the edge of the city. There they passed through the gates. They were heading toward the fort near where they had had the final confrontations with General Drestin.

As they got to the edge of the forest Elaina stopped. There, leaning up against one of the trees was Ned. He raised a hand, "Hey, need another companion?"

Elaina chuckled, "Sure, more people on the road makes for light traveling time."

Ned lifted his bag which was packed to the brim with supplies and placed it on his back.

"See, he was waiting for us." Said Elaina as they continued their journey.

"Not content with your life as a carpenter are you?" Said Sarik.

Ned laughed, "Actually, I like carpentry. But I just saw so much just traveling in the Bowl here, places that I could have visited before but never did. I think I want to see some more, travel a bit, enjoy the world. Only after that do I think I

want to go home. Maybe I can even learn some secret carpentry tricks along the way."

"Maybe you will." Said Elaina. "But I have to warn you. Traveling has an odd way of infecting people. Once you have seen a few places you might have trouble going back to your old way of life, you just want to keep seeing more new things."

"Yeah, wouldn't want you to become like this Wizard here." Said Sarik with a wry grin.

They all laughed. They were beginning a new journey. To a far distant place that Ned has never need. He didn't know what he was going to find there, but he was looking forward to it.

The End. Or Perhaps the Beginning.