

Dark Becoming

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A book of days...
and hours

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by Marcus D. Mébes

based upon a concept by Marcus Mébes and Derek Block



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**Dedicated
to friends and family
and fans of dark fantasy**

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Jeff Rester for his assistance
in preparing this book
for publication**

Dark Becoming: A book of days... and hours

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Prologue:

urs was a wondrous, magical world, filled with elves, dwarves, dragons, faeries and their mystical, magical like. The beings dwelt in the lush green flora, bathed in the light of the sun. It was at this time that, in the verdant kingdom of Erz, Queen Senna, with the gift of foresight, set off to prevent the prophesized possibility of the divine Sphere of Knowledge falling into the hands of those that might do evil with it. The great Sphere had been kept sacred within protective hands for an indeterminable amount of time, yet its whereabouts had somehow been made known. This did not bode well with those for whom its secrecy was paramount. Several beings wished to gain control of it, to wield the power of the twelve gods who had died to create it. The fabled queen foresaw cataclysm befalling our world if the potential threat was not subdued before it became a reality. She found the Sphere through great effort and travail, burying it then deep within the hot sands of the Monshera Desert, never to be found...

She never returned to her kingdom. Her children, the noble Prince and Princess of Erz, set out to find their mother, but they too were lost in the shifting sands of the deadly desert.

The disappearance occurred so long ago that no one remembers much of how it truly happened, or—for some—even why. All that remains known is that cataclysmic destruction ensued phenomenally swiftly and

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for no apparent reason to those ignorant of Queen Senna's efforts, and the bright candle of our sky was snuffed out. *The Golden Age of Light* was no more. Our world became enshrouded in deep darkness, a veil of impenetrable secrets that no man knew the answer to. All that anyone truly knew was that it was growing colder, darker, and soon all would inevitably perish. Though no accomplished scientists testified to it, astronomers warned that without a sun, our solar system would spin off into oblivion. The common man knew nothing of gravity, only that night had fallen, and morning never arrived.

The sudden loss of sunlight threw our world into turmoil, producing an era of ice, as well as of *the Anger of Harlus*. Hollow mountains festered her surface, the blemishes spewing forth Harlus' boiling blood in vast flows of fire. The combination of cold and intense heat convulsed Harlus in pain, shaking her lands, deep fissures marring her vast visage, swallowing up entire cities and men alike. Sickesses came, bringing with them more death and destruction. It was all the mages could do to enshroud an atmosphere polluted with ash and debris with a protective layer of clouds. Unfortunately, these clouds, though a barrier to the harsh outer atmosphere and space, held in the moisture and combinations of heat and cold, rendering Harlus an eternally humid planet. Little did the population of Harlus know that an even deeper magic, one perilously close to losing its grip, was holding Harlus steady in an orbit around the remains of a sun. Though the shockwaves of its explosion had long since passed beyond our world, barely touching it, the damage already done was enough to cause everyone great distress. No one realized that we had escaped sure destruction, and ought to have been grateful for the magic that kept our planet alive.

All known vegetation began to wither and die. Men became savages who feasted unrelentingly upon those, human or otherwise, weaker than they. The air became thinner. People came to rely upon the overburdened mages for protection and life. Raised almost to the level of gods, those very mages who saved our world became ruthless autocrats obsessed with the power that events had bestowed upon them. They became the center of life. Cities and villages were erected around their high towers, the obelisks. There were housed the new masters, and there our masters were able to perform their duties in keeping the planet alive, festering and haggard though it may be.

The only light that our tiny world grasped was that produced by the stars above our heads, glancing through infrequent gaps in the clouds, no longer a reliable measurement of time and travel. As Harlus rotated on its axis, different constellations emerged from the astral patterns that could sometimes be seen, though none could confirm what they thought had been glimpsed. The withered remains of the sun hung dim and lifeless high above the clouds, adding only minuscule glow to their nebulous surface. Had any surviving peoples questioned the ability of a planet to revolved around a lifeless sun, minds would have staggered under the heavy weight of the incredible concept.

With only candles under their control, a small group of people began to question the possibilities of a different source of light. As the electrical storms roiled in the billows above, there came varying reports of light which seared the senses and lit the eternal night. *Flickering Light* they called it. Fire in the sky! This was no ordinary lightning—lightning which the people of Harlus were familiar with. This was immense searing surges of electricity, passing under the heavy layer of clouds and momentarily lighting up the planet's surface as if it were daylight.

With the people's growing familiarity with fire and flickering light, the mages were no longer needed and duly disposed of. After all, what use were those who claimed to produced fire when any being, with effort, could? Massive uprisings of the people toppled their reigns and brought an end to their tyranny. No thought was given to these mages' responsibility in holding the planet together, in keeping it spinning endlessly in an orbit that should no longer exist. How could they realize that their actions were severely damaging the fragile threads that tentatively kept Harlus alive?

All obelisks and their mages were toppled but one. Ullix, most powerful and ruthless of mage-kind held beck the valiant, though futile attacks of the people. With his army holed up within the confines of his Obelisk of Darkness, he stayed for more than a decade, growing ever more powerful even as he expended more effort than ever before in keeping the planet intact.

Sky fire was the main concern of Harlus people. They would do anything to have it, and kill to keep it. Many countless wars followed the *Era of Flickering Light*. Torches lined highways across the king-

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doms, illuminating the many paths between cities for travelers. Bonfires lit the centers of the townships, their lurid light creeping outward, silently caressing the stillness of the disturbing blackness. Bonfires that steadily burned up any remaining fuel that the fragile ecosystem could produce. The planet was dying, and its people were killing it.

A sphere of crystal lay embedded somewhere deep within the secrets of Harlus, where Senna is sure to be nearby. Within it, all knowledge that one could possess, including technology, a power to control light, all of life's secrets, could be answered with a simple touch. But if one's mind was not strong enough, the ultimate prize of knowledge and wisdom would be denied. Instead, insanity would be the gift to claim.

a book of days...

Chapter 1.

Senna had been captive in the dank dungeon for approximately four hundred years, by her reckoning. There had been so many years she had lost exact count. The years did not seem so important to her anymore, though. After the first five decades, time grew swifter and passed easier. Looking back upon everything she had done, thinking of all the enjoyment and laughter long lost into the oblivion of time, smiling to herself, she remembered what it was like to have sunlight dance across the features of one's face, be they harsh or defined, or soft and smooth like hers. The years did little to tarnish the physical youth Senna held onto so dearly. One day, one night, one moment... through the years she had a dream to believe in, to hold on to. One step, one goal, and perhaps one falter to a new world that she knew so much and so little of. Nothing could keep her from her journey. She had seen the vision of danger, and she had seen herself abort it. She saw many things, not all of which had come to actuality. She knew that she was the one to stop the wrongdoing that came about from her failure. But she had had that vision so long ago. Back when the sun was still in the sky.

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Captivity in the dungeon proved effective in dimming her memories of what life was like back then. Many of them blurred and blended together, and though she could keep some of them clear, many more were just a muddled mess. All she had to look at day after day, year after year, were the bleak walls of the small cave dungeon that she was locked in. There was no light—not even when the guards came by to leave her tray. Senna had seen many different guards come and go in her centuries of captivity. Not all of them chose to remember her food. Perhaps some of them considered it impossible for a person to survive so long, and thus chose to speed her demise by withholding what passed as food. But she grew accustomed to that. Just as she grew accustomed to the darkness around her. It was no longer a barrier to her vision. The roughly hewn walls, floor, and ceiling of her dungeon were dug from the rocky foundation of Ullix's castle. Actually, it was an obelisk, but it came to be known by many names. Oh, she was sure she did not know them all, but she knew many of them.

Senna walked from where she was standing in the center of the dungeon to the far wall. It was opposite the door, where a window might be. If ever a window could exist down there. She lay her hand softly on its surface, worn smooth by over four hundred years of her doing so. Senna would imagine that this window opened out upon the lush countryside of her kingdom, with its rolling hills and quiet farms. She could almost see, if she clenched here eyes hard enough, the sun peeking over the horizon, in either sunrise or set.

It would not work this time for her though. For some reason she was tired and... almost uneasy. Was this the time that *it* was supposed to happen? Oh, how she wished she could be sure. She tried hard to remember exactly how long she had been imprisoned in this dank hole. Maybe if she asked the guard the next time she got fed. Of course, that could be within the hour, or within the next one or two weeks. It seems that the guards had become more lax than usual, forgetting—or neglecting—to bring her food for days

on end. But she at least knew the time was close. Close enough to worry.

And thinking of that, when was the last time she had eaten something? Probably about three or four days ago. A bowl of something or other. Probably gruel made from crushed mushrooms and maybe even some bugs in it, too. Senna did not really care any more about that. Bugs. Not very ladylike. Not something the courtesans of her land would deign to consume. Nothing was able to physically harm her or make her ill. And the revulsion had long since passed. Still, it would be nice to have some real food for a change. Like roasted pheasant, with new potatoes and brown gravy, and green vegetables, too! But first she would have a fresh garden salad, with lettuce, leeks, onions, tomatoes, celery, carrots and thin slices of ham, all covered with a spicy dressing. And for dessert she would order the chef to bake a three-layered sweet cake, coated with sticky, citrus gel, with raspberry preserves spread between the layers. And of course, she would only have one piece, and give the rest to the castle servants.

She could also ask Broceliande or Garid. They were the two ghosts that lingered down in the dungeons. They were especial friends of Senna. She was the only one who had been there long enough to get to know them well. In fact, they were cell-mates with her at one time or another.

Garid had been a ghost for nearly twenty years.

Broceliande lived on as a disembodied spirit for over two-hundred. Senna could still remember the days when Broceliande was sharing the cell with her. She could remember cradling the despairing young woman in her arms as she cried... Cried over her lost parents and friends. Crying over her captivity. Senna could even remember the night Broceliande had been killed. She could recall the guards coming into their dungeon so late that winter night. Three of them, with no food to justify their entry. Two of them took off their armor immediately, while the third leered hungrily as they tore Broceliande's clothes off. Broceliande

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later understood why Senna had not tried to stop them. For some time after the event she was in no mood to realize that. But Senna recalled every moment of that horrid night. She could hear the screams. There had only been two. They then stuffed her ripped dress into her mouth. There were other noises, too. Goodness there were! Senna quickly put those thoughts out of her head. Those distasteful memories had crept into her unsuspecting thoughts many times before, and there was no need to further relive them.

Garid's was a tragic tale, too. Similar circumstances, as well, as she understood. Thankfully she did not see it happen. The guard had taken the poor lad to another dungeon. She had heard nothing either. She was rather gratefully for that. Garid showing up as a ghost a week or two later confirmed her suspicions. And as the boy was very anxious and vivid in his descriptions, it did not take long for Senna to formulate the entire scene in her mind, despite her gentle insistence that she did not care to know every lurid detail.

"Garid!" The call echoed through the lower hallways. The dulcet tone was answered by a few moans and other less pleasant sounds from the neighboring cells. "Broceliande! Where are you? Please come to me!" Senna returned to her stance in front of the door and waited patiently. Calling out like she did could just as easily have alerted guards and their less than honorable intentions, yet she felt no fear of that.

After only a few hours of waiting, she was promptly joined by two ethereal forms. Broceliande's form was white and wispy, while Garid was just a gossamer gray version of his original self.

"Dears," she said softly to both. Senna was particularly fond of calling Garid so, since she had practically been his second mother for nearly twenty-three years. "Could you possibly find out what day today is?" Without a word, the two ghosts drifted from the cell.

What were a few hours to wait to someone as old as Senna? It had taken the ghosts some time to get to her, and she was sure it would take the same amount of waiting, if

not longer, for them to return with the information she wanted. That was fine, since it was not *that* close to the time. And that certain special time was very important. Just as long as she had a few days, weeks, or months to prepare, she would be fine. But it would help if she knew what day today was. Then she could mark the days on the walls of her cell until the time when it would happen. She had been waiting for this to happen for nearly five hundred years now... Cocking her head, Senna realized that it could be a challenge discerning the passage of time, and breaking it apart into days. A pause, and she turned her head to regard her surroundings. Well, there was no help for it. She would simply have to put her ghostly friends to task on a daily basis, until she could grow accustomed to the passage of time again, and divide it into hours on her own. *If* it came to that.

How much time had elapsed since she sent the ghosts out? Senna had lost track of the time yet again. The years of seclusion did that to her. She could not be sure whether she had inadvertently slept on her feet or just forgotten how long it was between thoughts. But she knew that it had been at least an hour, or even two. Or perhaps it was just a few minutes? Senna treaded softly to her corner. Here the walls and floor were worn smooth from centuries of her touching, feeling, walking upon, sitting, and lying upon it. When she had first been cast into the sparse cave it was encrusted with animal droppings and dirt, roots of sorts, and rocks and hay. Rodents and bugs occasionally found their ways to her “home” and caused more discomfort. But Senna had taken care of everything like that. Now the dungeon was clean and tidy. All the refuse had been swept into the far side of the cell, into a large crevice that had broken into the wall some three hundred years ago. The years of her running her hands over the walls and pacing the floors brought a smoothness upon them. Only the ceiling remained harsh and rough. Senna’s cell was almost pretty to look at... except for its drab nothingness. No light, no furnishings, noth-

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ing. Perhaps it wasn't pretty. Perhaps it was just not as bad as it had once been.

Senna had no need for light once her eyes adjusted to the dark. She had no use for fancy clothing or furnishings, since barely anyone would see her. She had no real need for food, nor receptacles for certain bodily functions. Her two past cell-mates did, however. And she tidied up that, too. Mortals could be so messy sometimes. Oh, Broceliande did try to be clean, and Senna gave her privacy when she needed it. But she could not help but wish that all mortals could be like her. She could eat, and enjoyed it too, but her metabolism was something not known in others, and it was just a small part of what made her special.

Broceliande and Garid silently drifted up behind Senna as she contemplated the cold stone floor of the dungeon. "Today is Fourthday," whispered Broceliande.

"What year is it?" asked Senna, turning to the wraiths.

"Four-hundred ninety-five," answered Garid. "I asked a peasant out in the town. He told me that the Day of Reckoning was at hand. I think he was drunk. Then he put his hand through my head and got scared. Do you know what he meant?"

"Yes," replied Senna, reaching out her hand to lay it upon Garid's head, "I do." Unlike the peasant that the ghost had terrified outside the tower, her hand touched his head as if it were solid. "It means that I've been locked in this dungeon for four-hundred and ninety-five years, and four days. And it means that I'm going to leave it soon."

She draped her arm around the boy's shoulders, and held him closer. The serene look upon her face belied the turmoil churning within her soul. She smiled at her foster son, and kissed the top of his wispy head.

a book hidden...

Chapter 2.

Galden lived in the midst of the great Kaelmorde mushroom prairie with his mother and his uncle. His family owned a large farm, nearly five-hundred acres, of mushrooms and few other products. Originally, his father and his mother had bought the land from the previous owners, who were also farmers. Apparently the terrain was too harsh and growing anything was miserable work.

The two of them—and later three when Galden was born—lived there and farmed enough to maintain themselves. Then the rains came, making the ground more damp and moist, allowing for larger amounts of produce (when the languishing rot decayed), along with larger sizes of the individual products. Galden Senior's mushrooms came to be known as the best in Kaelmorde. They grew lush in the eternal blackness and the wet, nutrient-rich soil. Many centuries of dead and rotting animals and, long ago, plants, added to this soil only, leaving other fields to grow only the common varieties of fungi.

Of course, lingering magic had a lot to contribute to what little grew, but its presence had long since passed into legend and obscurity. The mushrooms grew, and that's all any-

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one needed or cared to know.

Galden Farms became a well-known name in the small township. Everything was going along quite nicely until Galden's father died. Then his uncle Pat moved in. Pat was not a very hospitable person, and soon the good name of Galden washed away like the water in a sieve. However, Galden and his family were still very wealthy in terms of their harvest. They at least did not, and were not going to, starve, no matter how many brawls were started by "Uncle Pat," nor how many virtues were lost to his craven thirst.

Outside, in the mushroom fields, Galden felt a sort of desolation creep through his young body. The great expanse of the horizon before him was made up of carefully cultivated fields of food-caliber mushrooms. The workers they employed certainly did a good job, but the mechanical precision of the acreage left nothing to the imagination. And imagination was something Galden reveled in... something he escaped to. His had been a life well cared for. He never went hungry, and all his needs were provided for. He lived all twenty years of his life in the comfort of Galden Farms, a well-known locale that bore his very own name. But now he wanted something different. He no longer was satisfied with his mundane farmer life, despite the benefits. He was bored. Galden stuck his hoe into the soft ground and leaned his weight against it. Stray wisps of hair fell across his eyes as he stared upward at the black, cloud-filled sky. What excitement it would be to get away from it all! To find some place where he could do something useful... Something that would benefit others, and make people happy. He wanted to do something that would help someone. Anything but this life. His imagination was limited, considering only the spectrum of what he was familiar with. Paramount was *escape*.

"Galden!" The shout startled him out of his reverie. Stumbling a bit, but retaining his balance, Galden turned to face the farm house. His mother was standing in the door frame, a wash-cloth in her hands and an apron tied around

her waist. "Supper time! Bring yourself in! I've got a mushroom loaf on the table and some potatoes on the side."

"Are we having milk again?" called Galden to his mother as she was about to reenter the house. She turned back to him and nodded her head glumly. "At least it's *something* to drink," he mumbled to himself. Milk was not something people were too excited about. With only mushrooms and small animals to eat, the cows produced a bitter-tasting milk, a staple food for the majority of the population. People usually added spices and flavorings to it, or diluted it with water, but just the same, it was not a great favorite. On Galden Farm it was plentiful, and a shame to waste.

Galden started a slow gait towards the house, pausing shortly to gaze at the twenty-or-so cows that they owned. They were penned up in a corral, munching lazily upon a mixture of moss, mushrooms, and bone-meal. Galden noticed the fattest ones were already branded to be butchered. One, let alone three, would provide enough meat for weeks at the Galden household. It was a good thing they owned so many. They *used* to own more, though. That's where the bone-meal came from.

As Galden entered the side door of the house, his mother was setting the plates and utensils on the table. "Go downstairs and wash your hands," she ordered him, taking stock of his dirty appearance. Galden had been out in the fields all day inspecting the next season's harvest, and was covered with dirt. "Go on. Get your hands wet!" she remonstrated as he paused, staring at the food on the table. Mushroom loaf again, just like yesterday.

"When are we going to have some meat, Ma?" he asked, starting towards the cellar door.

"As soon as your uncle decides it's time to butcher one of those cows," came the curt reply. "We've already got them marked. All we need is someone to help with the cutting." Mrs. Galden bustled about the table, making sure everything was in place. "Pat!" she called out the kitchen window. "Dinner's ready!"

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Galden quickly sauntered down the stairs into the large basement. He quickly took off the soiled clothes and threw them into a large wicker basket. Grabbing a wash-cloth from the side of a large tub of water, he quickly wiped the dirt off his hands and face. He then grabbed some clean clothes, threw them on, and returned to the kitchen, where his mother and uncle were already at the table. Galden pulled one of the large oaken chairs from under it and promptly sat upon it. As soon as he was settled at the table, his mother stood up from her seat.

“Oh, Heavenly Fathers,” she said aloud, “we thank You for this dinner we share with You this day. We pray that You continue to make our harvest plentiful, and await the day when we can finally be with You all once again. Amen.” She then sat back down again, and scowled at her brother. “Why don’t you ever pray with us?” she whispered. She was answered by an angry grunt, and Pat dug into the food on his plate. She looked pleadingly at Galden, who smiled reassuringly at her. At least Pat had waited for her to finish.

That night, as Galden was preparing for bed, his mother knocked softly on the door to his room.

“Come in,” he answered, setting down his night-clothes on the bed. She entered silently, treading softly over the hardwood floor.

“Galden,” she started, almost in a whisper. “What have you been planning?” She looked at him squarely. She had a way of reading his thoughts, and although he had grown used to it, it never ceased to irk him.

“Nothing, mother,” he replied, looking into her blue eyes. He could tell she didn’t fully believe him when he said so, but he hoped she would not pry any further. Galden’s mother stood in front of him for a moment longer, then sighed and averted her eyes. “Whatever it is, don’t get your Uncle Pat angry. You know what he does when he gets angry.”

“I know, Mother,” replied Galden, averting his eyes from her gaze. She turned away from him and slowly left the

room. Galden did not move until he was sure he heard the click of the door behind her. Even then, he waited until he was sure she had gone upstairs to her lonely bedroom, and could hear the creaks her bed made as she got into it. His mother sleeping alone on that grand bed, where once his father shared it, was a sad notion. Galden knew he would not sleep that night. He wasn't the only lonely one in this house, and his heart ached for her.

Even when he was sure both his mother and his uncle were in their beds, Galden stayed under the covers for a few moments more. There might still be the chance that one or both might wake up and... Well, they would just notice that Galden was awake. He himself did not know what he was going to do. He just knew that he was going to and *had* to do something. Though he did not want to fall asleep, lying in his bed gave sleep the ammunition it need to ambush him. He closed his eyes and told himself he would not sleep. He would not. Not fall asleep. Just rest his eyes. His breathing slowed down, and his body relaxed. Wake up!

Slowly pulling the covers back and easing out of bed so as not to disturb the others, Galden set first one foot, then the other on the cold floor. Shaking the sleep from his head, and without making a single sound, he stood up and took off his night-clothes. He had conveniently set aside his clothes beside the bed, and these he put on immediately. He then glided over to the trunk that was kept at the foot of his bed. He had opened the chest earlier in the day, and conveniently neglected to close it. It was to this that Galden softly made his way, taking special care not to cause the floorboards to creak—no small task in a house as old as his. The moisture in the atmosphere infused everything, even the deepest-set rooms of huge old farmhouses. He reached softly into the wooden chest and removed a pair of leather breeches, a loose white shirt, and a vest. Putting these on over his lighter clothes, Galden noticed his favorite hat lying crumpled and stuffed into the side of the large chest. This he grabbed also, and headed out his bedroom door.

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Galden found himself standing in the hallway of the darkened farmhouse. He had no idea what he was doing or why, and no plans on how and when to do it. Standing there in the dim darkness of the candle that burned in the brazier, memories of his childhood flooded back into his mind. The candle was such a welcome beacon in that otherwise pitch black house, and it was to this that he would constantly make his way. Galden wrapped his fingers around the thin stem of the waxen rod and pulled it from its base. The flame flickered only lightly in his hand, but a drop of wax fell upon the skin of his hand. Stung by the sharp heat of the molten candle, Galden instantly recalled the time when he was only eight years old, and the same thing had happened to him. He remembered how he had run upstairs to the attic, unburying the ancient clothes to find the silken gown of some long-lost ancestor. He remembered how he feverishly wrapped the minor welt in the soothing gossamer fabric, remembered how the soft touch of the silk against his hand had felt. Holding the candle in his hand, Galden slowly and silently climbed up the ladder that led to the attic. He pushed tentatively on the trap door above his head, but it did not seem to want to budge. Galden again pressed his free hand against the wooden planks, and this time they moved a little, creaking heavily under the weight of the years. It had been over ten years since anyone had been up there, and Galden had his suspicions about what was causing the wooden door to hesitate. With a hard shove, Galden finally pushed the door upward, hailing a cloud of dust that fell down upon his face and the candle, almost extinguishing its flame. Galden coughed and brushed away the grey oldness, waving his hands in front of his face to deflect the settling dust. He shook his head to loosen the dust that had fallen in his hair, and clambered up the ladder into the darkness of the attic.

It did not take long at all for Galden's eyes to adjust to the total darkness of the attic. In fact, being raised in an entirely dark environment, Galden had no trouble seeing

in the dark. His mother always told him to eat up his roots, that they'd make him be able to see in the dark. Lucky thing for them that beets, carrots and turnips were among the few vegetables that were still able to grow in the lightless climate of their world without a sun. No wondering about why those and few other plants grew, but the majority of additional plantlife did not. They just did.

Galden saw and recognized all the wonderful peculiarities of the old attic... The old spinning wheel, various tools, a ladder, boxes of centuries-old family heirlooms which had long since been forgotten, chests full of clothes, books, and other oddities. Maybe this was where Galden was supposed to go to get away from it all. Maybe this old attic held the secret key to his escape. Up here he was able to be alone, living in a world of his own imagination, creating what he wanted to be reality. Galden located a box of old candles, lit the wicks of two of them from his slowly decreasing one, and set them on two copper dishes. These he set upon a large table in the center of the attic, and blew out the first candle. The small storage space was instantly lit with a cheery glow from the two flames, and Galden was able to see around him much better. Ah, how well he remembered the times when he would run up into this old attic to hide among the family's relics. Times when his Uncle Pat was being violent and angry, and abusive. The man would never follow Galden up into the dark room, too lazy to muster the energy to climb up the rickety ladder after him. Galden would sit alone among the musty artifacts, tuning out the boisterous ranting and ravings of his mother's brother.

Galden picked up a tattered and worn blanket that was lying among the dusty boxes. He slowly held the blanket up to his cheek, rubbing the familiar softness against his skin. How many times had this blanket kept him warm... All those times when he would spend the entire night cooped up in the attic, hiding away from Pat's unrelenting brutality, wondering—hoping that his mother had a similar escape. Galden folded the old blanket against his lap, and set it on top of

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one of the many boxes. Someday, he told himself, he'd have to explore the contents of all of these boxes. Someday... But *now* was the time. He had come here to escape, and had plenty time to sort through the myriad artifacts of a history unknown. Especially since he was wide awake, and not about to fall asleep in his excursion.

There were so many boxes to choose from, though. Which to choose first? All of them were the same kind of dusty, wooden crates, sealed against time and aging. Of course, Galden had opened one or two of them when he was younger, finding himself bored with sitting alone in the darkness. He found so many interesting things in those wondrous old chests. The books, the clothes, the ornamental brocaded tapestries. But he was too young at the time to realize any historical importance in them. He just enjoyed the softness of the silk, and the fantastical pictures in the books. It was to the chest with the book and the gown that Galden now went, locating it instantly, nestled away at the back of the attic, surrounded by the collected history of his lineage.

The soft silk dress felt just as smooth and cool in his hands as it had that day so long ago when he'd wrapped it around his burn. Galden lifted the gossamer dress to his face, letting it fall gently against his pale skin. It felt like the slender fingers of an elfin woman as it caressed his face. And an elfin woman—in his imagination— had hands of silk. Galden pressed it against his skin, rubbing it slowly down his face, enjoying the faint scuffle as it scraped against the fuzz that was growing on his chin. He shut his eyes, letting his mind see the lovely elf-maiden as she stood naked before him, her soft hands sliding over his skin, her soft breasts pressing against him as she trailed her hands from his face to his stomach. Galden unbuttoned his shirt with the other hand, and let it fall silently to the floor. He let the slick surface of the ancient garment slide down his neck and onto his chest, where he pressed the silk once more against his flesh. The feeling was ecstatic and thrilling, like

nothing he had ever quite felt before. Galden sat down upon the floor, sending up swirls of dust. He lay down on the musty boards that made the floor, and the silk floated softly down to join him as he did so. A smile crept onto his serene face, and the skin of his body prickled as thousands of tiny goosebumps wound their way up his stomach, onto his chest, and down his arms and his neck. He pulled the folds of cloth over his face, using it to shield himself from breathing in the dust. He closed his eyes, again swearing that he would not fall asleep. Stay awake, enjoy the feeling. Stay awake.

Galden did not realize how long he had been lying there with the silken gown covering his chest, but when he rose from the floor, a layer of dust stuck to his back and he felt the damp cold of the old wood creeping into his muscles. It was still night, that was certain, and he was sure he still had ample time to further explore the contents of the chest. Galden did his best to shake off the dust from his back, and put on the shirt and vest he had dropped before. He folded the dress and set it on the table with the candles—lower than they were earlier, but still high enough to let him know he had only dozed a few moments—making sure to wipe away the thick layer of dust before he let the fine cloth touch the hard surface. Galden did not bother to button his shirt up all the way, but stuffed the bottoms of it into his pants. He then tied up the top leather strings of his vest, and bent downward to further explore the chest.

The book had always been a pleasurable plaything for him. The pictures of the people were so quaint. They wore all manner of strange garments, and the drawings themselves were so realistic and colorful that Galden thought they must have been done by some great royal artist of a wealthy family. Now that Galden had learned to read and recognize the authenticity and value of the ancient tome, his mind reeled with the import of such a volume. The cover was deeply embossed with gold in the thick leather, with the words that amused him so much for their fanciful

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script, but which now intrigued him more for their meaning. The first words had been partially obliterated with age, but he could make out the words following them. "...et itur ad astra. Senna ni Rohmhain ni Galdenne." He had no idea what the phrases meant, but thankfully the inside was written in the common language of the people of his land. Certain letters, though, were formed differently and the language usage was a lot more formal than he was accustomed to, but he was still able to make sense of them.

Galden sat for what seemed like hours, reading of the family Galden. He read about how his ancestors had come to this land from across the ocean, settling it and reaping its rich harvests. He read of how the world was filled with bright light from a large, burning sphere in the sky called a "sun." The book described the mythical color green, which was all but unknown in his world. The plants all had green in them, even carrots and kohlrabi. The root-plants that grew around the farm had small, sickly leaves that were yellowish white at best.

Galden read of a Queen named Senna, who had the uncanny ability to see the future. He read about how she had sought out and discovered a magical sphere said to have been created by the pagan gods of those early eras; the gods that his mother still prayed to. He read how she had buried it deep within the burning sands of the Monshera desert, and how she had been captured and the sphere retrieved by an evil Mage. He had heard of Mages, but the stories were sketchy, and treated like myths.

*"Good night my dear,
now listen and you'll hear,
the story of the magic men who turned out all
the lights."*

The lullaby crept into his mind as he closed his eyes, if only for a moment. "No lullabyes," he said aloud.

The page facing the story of Senna and her quest and subsequent captivity held a lovely, painstakingly detailed drawing of the Queen Mother. He saw the long silken gown

she wore, and the bejeweled coronet upon her forehead... Galden set the book aside and glanced over at the table, at the silken dress he had folded and set upon it. He then returned his gaze to the illustration, and then once more to the dress on the table. Was that the same dress that the Queen Senna wore in this illustration? Galden stood up and walked to the table, taking the book with him. He set the tome onto the table and opened it to the page with the drawing. He then lifted the silk and let it fall in front of him, holding it up by the shoulders. Yes, it was the very same gown. Now Galden's interest was caught. This woman was definitely an ancestor of his, and he held in his very hands the royal gown she wore. What possibilities could this find hold for him? What did it mean? Galden set the dress back down upon the table and returned to the chest. The other items inside it were of similar tailoring, all of them being made from exotic cloths and embroidered with golden and silver designs. Galden lifted out various articles of clothing, documents, drawings, and odd metal items that were covered with colorful designs and archaic symbols. Examining each item for understanding proved fruitless, as he was unable to make out any significance in any of them. So he returned the items to the chest with great care, and resumed reading in the book. He discovered that his ancestor, the Queen Senna, had been lost in the desert, obviously captured by the Mage, that two of her children, a prince and a princess, had set out to find her, but were also lost in the storms of the arid expanse. The book gave no mention of them being captured by the Mage, however, and Galden assumed that he had captured them, too. Then there was a large section of script devoted to the mystical sphere that everyone had been longing for. This he just skimmed over. There seemed to be nothing of note, except that it was said—in overly poetic wording—to have been created by some god named Mannedor while some other gods were having a spat. The words seemed to go on and on... Until Galden's eyes were captured by a phrase that was writ-

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ten in italics, and in capital letters. “And all who took advantage of touching the orb were allowed the secrets of all life, the answers of all man’s questions, and the knowledge of things past and things to come!”

Galden stopped reading and pondered over the lines. *Such an object could help a lot of people*, he thought. *It could provide great power... But...* With a start, Galden realized that this orb was in the possession of the evil Mage he had read about, along with his ancestor. And he had proof that these old tales were authentic. The clothes and things in the trunk were real enough, and they corresponded with the drawings in the old book. But then, wouldn’t this Mage character have conquered the entire world, if he owned such a great power? Was his power limited? Why hadn’t he heard of him before? And if he existed, *where* did he exist? And did he still have this orb?

Galden ceased his musings and returned his attention to the book. There were a large amount of pages devoted to the various guardians of the orb, some pages about Senna, and the Mage, whom Galden discovered to be called Ullix. It had mentions of various episodes of people going to rescue the queen and restore the orb to her keeping, but each attempt was met with defeat. And there had been many of them in the past centuries. *How could there be so many searches over the years?* he wondered. *Wouldn’t she have died long ago?* And each time the tome mentioned that the queen and the Mage were still around and alive. And that could mean that they might still be around today. Galden closed the book and returned it to the chest. He closed the lid, and sat upon the strong wood.

Pressing his hands together, Galden thought to himself, *What would Baringer think if he saw me rolling around in the dust with a centuries-old dress? Especially...* No, he did not want to think that. Imagining a dress was an elf-maiden that he was making love to. No, that was something that would lay buried in his mind for a long time. It was curious, though, that he would find such interesting artifacts up in

his attic. Maybe he could get famous and rich if he sold the junk. Or even better, he could rescue this ancestor, kill this Ullix person, and own that wondrous orb. Well now! He could have his pick of women! He could line them up and pick and choose to his heart's content! Of course, he would choose the most beautiful one, the one with the best legs and breasts and loveliest face.

Galden sat on the chest and thought about these things for quite some time before he decided to let his best friend Baringer in on the deal. Baringer and Galden had been best friends since childhood, and when Galden was not hiding in the attic, he was with his friend exploring the ruins of the old obelisk in the town square, or making up fanciful daydreams and playing them out. Yes, that was what Galden was going to do. He gathered the book under his arm, extinguished the candles, and climbed down the ladder. As he closed the trap-door above him, the dust settled softly on the old chest, alone in the darkness.

Galden was in his room packing spare clothes and a few other items in a satchel when he heard the scratching at his window. Dropping the sack, Galden froze where he stood, motionless in the darkness. There it was. He heard it again. Someone was scratching at his window. But his room was on the second floor of the antiquated house. No one he knew would be dumb enough to climb... But then he remembered Baringer's pet raven. If Baringer ever wanted to contact Galden, he would always send Po to get him. Galden's uncle did not like Baringer overmuch, and this way he avoided any unnecessary confrontations.

"I was just on my way to Baringer's," whispered the young man as he opened the window to admit the bird. He snickered as he thought about what caused both him and his friend to be awake at this hour and wanting to contact each other. But then, they were always staying up late and getting into trouble. Po jumped inside the room and hopped about the floor, settling his feathers back. Galden smiled as he watched the odd bird quietly jump around, always

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under the impression that the message he carried was of some great importance. Why, he could remember the time that Baringer had caught a rabbit, and Po acted as if some life-threatening emergency required Galden to go to Baringer's hut immediately. Baringer lived alone in a small hut on the outskirts of the town, not far from where the Galden farm was located. Baringer had lived alone there since his was ten years old, his parents abandoning the boy there with his pet unicorn and raven. That hut had become like a second home to Galden, and he was anxious to get there so he could find out what Baringer wanted.

Galden tied the straps together around his satchel and slung it over his shoulder. He could feel the weight of the book as it struck his back, but it caused him no discomfort. "Quietly, Po," he whispered as he held out his arm for the bird to hop on. Po deftly jumped up and landed on his shoulder with only a minor fluttering of his wings, which he instantaneously settled. Galden was used to this, for many a time had it been that the old raven would act as a harbinger for Baringer. Galden scanned his room, noting nothing that he needed to take along that wasn't in his satchel, and silently exited his room.

The trek down the stairs seemed to last for decades. Nearly every one of the steps had their own personality. The top one was coy and demure, murmuring only softly as Galden pressed his weight upon it. But the second one was loud and boisterous, and did not appreciate anyone standing upon its surface. It was easy enough to step over the angry ones, but towards the middle, there were four steps that all groaned together when someone walked upon them, and it took some time for Galden to silently pass over these loud sentinels. He eventually made it to the base of the steps and the front door. Po had remained silent during the entire journey, not even fluttering his wings. The bird would only turn his head at times to cock an eye at some particularly interesting object, then at some other. As soon as Galden opened the door, Po sailed off his shoulder into the

air. Finally free of the confines of the farmhouse, Po decided it was now acceptable to caw as loud as he felt, and fly all over the place.

“Hush! Quiet, you stupid bird!” Galden called to Po in a harsh whisper. He vainly tried to silence the raven, and almost lost his footing in the mud trying to chase after him. “Just watch my mother and Pat wake up from this noise!” he mumbled under his breath, running lightly across the field to catch the bird. “Come down here at once!” he ordered. Po ceased his calls and fluttered down to rest upon Galden’s outstretched arm once more. “Now be quiet!” he whispered to the bird. Galden got down on one knee and pulled a sheet of paper and a pencil from his satchel.

Scribbling hastily upon it, he wrote a note to his mother explaining that he would be gone for quite some time, and to look for him at Baringer’s house would prove unsuccessful. He hoped that the mention of his friend’s home did not seem overly conspicuous. He folded the note, and shoved it underneath the front door of the house, to which he had slowly crept back. He then took up a hasty gait and dashed across the mushroom fields, on his way to Baringer’s place. Oblivious of his mother sadly peering out of her window at his flight.

Po flew overhead, guiding Galden on his way, though he knew it by heart. As he ran, the heavy book in the satchel banged up and down on his back, rattling and poking him in places. At least he was sure that it was still in there. At times he felt like reaching into the satchel to reassure himself that it was still there, and still in one piece, but he did not want to risk the chance of his mother, or even worse yet, his uncle seeing him. So he kept up the pace, and after about ten minutes of running, came upon the small hut of his best friend. It was a welcoming sight, ramshackle and old as it was. It was nestled at the base of a gigantic mushroom, whose cap served partially as a roof for the small house and with a stem as thick around as a horse. There was an even smaller lean-to built onto the back of it, where

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Baringer kept Speedwell, his unicorn.

As Galden neared the dilapidated domicile, he could see his old friend standing in the doorway waiting for him.

“Hey! Galden!” whispered Baringer in the darkness. “What’s going on?”

“You’re the one to answer that,” replied Galden as he strode forward to Baringer. “You’re the one who sent for me.”

Po fluttered down from the air and perched on Baringer’s large shoulder. Baringer was a large individual. He was overly proud of his physique, and did much to flaunt it to others. His build was well-defined, and he worked hard to keep it that way. In his excitement, he failed to flaunt it in front of Galden, who would not have noticed anyway—or cared. “I want to show you something,” he informed Galden as he emerged, leading him around to the back of the hut. Galden followed him, and the two young men rounded the corner of Speedwell’s manger. Galden peered inside the doorway of it, and was surprised to see that the unicorn was not inside.

“She’s been out in the field all night,” spoke Baringer, noting Galden’s perplexed glance. “She’s with that thing I dug up. I think it’s important to her.”

“What is it?” questioned Galden, trotting a bit to catch up with Baringer’s long strides.

“Wait and see,” answered the other mysteriously, smiling confidently at his friend. He tried to grab his friend’s satchel from him and toss it on the floor of his hut, but Galden resisted, and held on.

Shrugging, Baringer led him away, and toward a field of large mushrooms. Presently, the two of them came upon the mushroom patch that Baringer had indicated. Speedwell was snorting and traipsing around what looked like a stone carving, angrily poking her snout at it.

“I suppose she remembers it from some time ago,” mused Baringer. He did not know exactly how old the unicorn was, but he assumed that she was at least four... or

even five-hundred years old. At least. "I dug it up just about half an-hour ago," said Baringer to Galden.

"You told me she was running around all night," responded Galden, watching the unicorn prance around in an agitated manner.

"It was sticking up out of the ground," answered Baringer, ignoring the question. "Didn't want anyone tripping over it." As he advanced toward the object, Speedwell backed off, allowing her master to present it to his friend.

"Take a look," he said, pointing at the object's top. The thing was definitely carved from stone. It was approximately three feet in height, and had a fairly thin stem. The base of it was a square block of the stone, and a slender, round rod rose from the block's surface forming the stem. Atop the rod was a flat round disk, and this was the most interesting feature of the thing. At the exact center of the perfect circle rose a fin-like protrusion. Spaced at equal intervals on the circumference of the disk were what appeared to be letters, or numbers... Some kind of unknown and archaic scripture. These symbols were carved deeply into the stone, the carver apparently taking the time to ornately clarify each. Freed of the dirt that it had been buried in, Galden could see that the rim of the disk was also encrusted with designs. The stone had been carved to form the shapes of leaves and branches of those mythical plants that all the children's mothers had told them about when they were young. Galden was enrapt.

"What do you suppose it is?" queried Baringer, noticing Galden's slack jaw. "You look like you've just seen a ghost." He glared questioningly at Galden, narrowing his eyes in concern. He could tell that Galden was on to something. He was always on to something.

"I have," whispered Galden in return. He diverted his gaze from the object to his friend's face. "I mean, I've seen something like this before. In fact, I was going to come over here to show you..." He stumbled across the words. "Here," he said, dropping the satchel to the ground and squatting

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to remove the book from within, “take a look at this. I found it not so long ago either.” He opened the book to the illustration of Senna, and pointed to a rendition of the same stone oddity. The drawing presented the queen-mother in the foreground, while the landscape behind her was that of a lush green meadow, the object standing plainly behind her. “See?”

Galden related the entire story of Senna and the orb—as much of it as he could recall—to Baringer, as his friend had never learned to read, nor had the desire to. He explained to him how he had discovered the volume along with the old clothing and other artifacts in the chest in his attic, and how he planned to discover his ancestor, and reap the rewards of his quest. Baringer noticed Galden grow red when he spoke of the gown, and squinted in curiosity at him. When Galden was done explaining, Baringer spoke.

“Now just wait a moment here,” he said. Baringer, though uneducated and poor was nevertheless quite wise for his age, and was able to better and more clearly formulate thoughts than his brash companion. “First, tell me this. Where exactly are you going to look for this woman? And how do you expect to get there? Alone? Got any way to pay for this trip? How are you going to do it?”

“You’re going to come with me!” replied Galden eagerly, raising his eyes to look up at his friend. He stood up and slapped Baringer on the shoulder. “You always do things with me. Why, you even introduced me to Glera, and...”

“And you never did do anything with her,” concluded Baringer, before Galden could stumble over a sentence they both knew he couldn’t satisfactorily finish. That was one of the differences between him and Galden. Where he was always willing to take—and purposely looking for—risks, Galden would unfailingly defer. Of course he had been with many women, human and elfin, but every time he tried to introduce Galden to one of his “friends,” Galden would get nervous and shy off. And it was for that very reason that Baringer’s interest was piqued. It was usually *he* who sug-

gested such ventures, and not the younger man. And the various strange and ancient objects that they had so conveniently found on the same night did lend an ambiance that beckoned alluringly to them. It might be worthwhile.

“Why not!” agreed Baringer nonchalantly. With a toss of his head, he picked up the stone object as if it were a simple piece of mushroom and lugged it back to his hut. Galden, Po and Speedwell followed. Baringer propped the stone thing in front of his house, and stepped quickly inside. Before Galden could join him, the other had already exited, holding a crumbled piece of paper in his hands. “Would you write something for me?” he asked of Galden.

A noise startled them, and they turned to see two cloaked figures hurrying along the highway not far from Baringer’s hut in the mushroom field. At this late hour, they only expected themselves to be awake, and though it was not unheard of, travelers out in this part of the country—this late—were few and far between.

“Of course,” he agreed, taking the paper from his hands. He looked nervously at the stalking figures, noting that they strode in the general direction of Galden Farms. Breathing deeply, he shook any worries from his head and allowed himself to forget about them. After all, they didn’t notice the noisy group—or at least didn’t care to. He withdrew a pencil from his satchel and smoothed out the wrinkled paper. Using the book as a table, he stooped, ready to write.

“Ready?” asked Baringer. Galden nodded, and Baringer continued. “Good, then. This is what I want you to write for me. ‘All ye who venture near this hut beware...’ You know how to spell that right?” he asked. Galden rolled his eyes but nodded his head affirmatively, and Baringer spoke again. “‘...for the man that once lived within is now under my power, and if ye should come within, ye shall meet the same fate!’ There, that ought to do it!”

His head shaking in annoyance, Galden glared at his friend, believing that this note was pure foolishness, and that no one would pay any mind to it. “I don’t know why

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you need this,” he said as he handed the note over. “It’s not as if anyone will want to go inside your hut anyway.”

“Ah, but there’s where you are wrong, my friend,” spoke Baringer, winking. “You and I know that, but the townspeople and folks like them don’t!” He peered off in the distance at the travelers, who had all but disappeared in the darkened distance. His merriment subdued, he peered off in the darkness for some time. “And besides, you know that those foolish people are so scared that they’ll believe the note. They’ll make something up.”

“Maybe,” said Galden sarcastically, nodding his head. He had been staring with Baringer at the distant travelers, now nothing more than a small spot of blackness nearly indistinguishable from the landscape.

“Well, then,” sang Baringer cheerfully. “Let’s go!”

“But what about supplies... and clothes...?” wondered Galden. “*You* said...”

“You’re taking care of that,” replied Baringer. And Galden was quite pleased with the fact that he had remembered to secrete some gold coins in his satchel. Uncle Pat wouldn’t be too pleased when he found out, but that did not bother him. What bothered him was that Uncle Pat might take it out on his mother... until she made him stop. And she was one powerful woman; quite good at making her brother stop his foolish antics. Galden gathered his book into the satchel, tied up the ends, and caught up with Baringer and his animals. “I’m glad you’re coming,” he said.

Baringer smiled at his friend. “That’s what friends are for,” said he. The small entourage was heading the opposite direction of the travelers; as good a way as any. For one, it was *away* from Galden Farm. For another... well, they couldn’t come up with a valid reason. It just felt right.

He took one last backward glance at the note he had stuck on the door of Baringer’s hut, and then returned his attention to the journey, swearing that he was not tired, and that if they stopped to rest somewhere, that he would not close his eyes. Especially if Speedwell let him ride.

depths

Chapter 3

The silence was not unwelcome to Senna. In fact, she had grown quite accustomed to it. Silence was her friend when solitude forced itself upon her. Maybe she should sit. She had been standing for a couple of days, now, and her legs were beginning to get tired. Senna never got fatigued, but her joints and muscles *did* ache from time to time if she did not move much. At least, she *thought* that they must. Senna closed and opened her eyes blankly, barely moving as she did so. She stood like this for a moment or an hour more, and then with a sudden, unexpected movement, sat cross-legged on the floor, like a toppled tower deprived of its foundation, crumbling down in ruin.

Senna was completely out of thoughts, and she had already remembered events from her past many times, blurred though some might be. She stared for a long time at a stone that was situated in the corner of her cell. It was a simple, grey stone; no special features on it. Probably about two centimeters in diameter. Askew oblong shape. Senna stopped thinking. She sat on the floor for an entire day. Doing nothing. Thinking nothing. Regarding the stone.

“Senna,” whispered the ghostly voice of Broceliande. It

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was not that she was obliged to whisper so as not to disturb or alarm anyone, but simply because she was able to employ no other means of speaking. The transparent figure flowed into the dark dungeon like a fog, trailing wisps of ghostliness behind her.

“Good greetings, Broceliande,” spoke Senna cheerfully. She gestured to the ghost with one of her hands. “Come,” she said, “sit with me.” Broceliande drifted lightly to a sitting position in front of her. Broceliande respectfully waited in silence, glancing at her friend from time to time. After some time, she spoke. “What brings you here at this time, my friend?” asked Senna of the ghost.

“I bring news to you, my lady,” she answered softly. “Word has been spreading throughout the Obelisk that Ullix is preparing to use the sphere...”

“What?” gasped Senna suddenly. She put one hand to her breast and began to breathe slowly again. She shook her head from side to side, as if shaking loose cobwebs that had gathered in time. “I apologize,” she spoke again, nervously blinking her eyes. She could see that Broceliande had more to tell her, and asked, “What news do you have to tell me?”

“Just that the Mage intends to touch the orb sometime soon, and that he is going to make some of the prisoners touch it, first. He wants to see what effects it will have on an ordinary mortal before he tries it upon himself.”

“But he has forced several people to touch the orb throughout the years. I wonder what he is up to,” Senna mused. She knew that his was the one hand that tenuously held the planet together, and that there were more factors than most cared—or needed—to know about his place in the world. She put her hand to her chin and thought momentarily. “Whom do you suppose he will use?” she asked.

“Word is that he plans for *you* to touch it,” replied Broceliande. She drifted closer to the woman. “I hope and pray that it is not you who shall be used. I dread to think what will happen.” Ethereal tears welled in her eyes, float-

ing off and dissipating in the dank dungeon air.

Blinking, the other smoothed the folds of her dress about her knees and ankles nervously. “Don’t you worry about me, my dear,” whispered Senna softly, looking at the floor through narrowed eyes. “I can protect myself if need be.” She looked up at the somber face of the young girl. “Thank you, though,” she said, noting the look of concern on the ghost’s face. “I appreciate your help. I know I can rely on you to keep me informed. You’ve done well.”

“Yes, absolutely my lady,” breathed Broceliande, rising slightly from the floor. An innate attitude of subservience gave way to gratitude, as the ghost enjoyed being of use. “I will always be here for you.” Broceliande returned to her sitting position in front of Senna, and held out her slender hand. Senna, knowing that the girl was ethereal and therefore unable to touch too substantially, extended her hand to her, and Broceliande lay hers within it. Unlike Garid, who had been a ghost only a fraction of the years Broceliande had, there was little resistance if she raised her own flesh-and-blood hand. She had learned to be as still as the grave; an easy task.

Thus the two old friends spent the next several hours in quiet conversation, recalling the times when trees grew and flowers bloomed in the sunlight. They spoke of what things would be like for them if the sun had never left, of what they would have done with their lives, and what they would be like. They did not speak, however, of things beyond Broceliande’s grasp—of science, of catastrophic stellar events and dire consequence, of gravity’s force, or of magic and undeath.

Garid joined the two silently whispering figures presently. His presence did not go undetected by the other ghost and the queen. Time had allowed Senna the ability to sense when her friends were near, and Broceliande, being one of Garid’s own kind, did not need to know of his coming, for she knew it already.

The little boy ghost joined them in their conversation,

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adding a more vivid and sprightly life to their imaginings, amusing them with his droll ideas and playful antics. Though the boy suffered eternally as a disembodied spirit, his childlike nature was still within him, and greatly apparent. Soon the three of them were laughing merrily, an unusual and oft-times frightening thing to be heard in the Obelisk dungeons. Other prisoners, frightened into believing that the laughter was that of the Obelisk guards or soul-hungry demons, huddled tightly in the darkest corners of their cells, frightened of what doom might befall them.

Presently their fears were confirmed with the loud footsteps of several guards. Senna and the ghosts could hear them—at least five they thought—struggling with some unlucky captive who apparently was trying his best to break free from their grasp. The prisoners could hear the grunts and cussing of the men, and could hear the wild, almost animal-like cries of the captive. They knew that it was a male, and from the sound of his voice and the cracking of it as he cried out—as foreign as it was to their ears—they could deduce that he was young. What a shame. Without turning her head from the door, Senna glanced quickly at Garid, her eyes darting back almost immediately. If she could help it, Garid would be the last of his kind.

As Senna, Garid, and Broceliande were beginning to talk again, murmuring nervously, they were confronted with the ever-increasing plaintive cries of the young captive. They easily understood what had happened and what was probably going to befall the poor boy. Broceliande and Garid rose swiftly from the floor and glided to the door. Though their existence was a lonely one, they knew enough of compassion to fear their fate befalling another.

“Go see what is happening,” ordered Senna in a whisper as she stood, anger whipping her spirit into resolution. The two ghosts immediately dissolved and vanished from sight, and Senna knew that they were already spying on the situation.

But Senna did not stray from her position. She was statu-

esquely standing in the center of her cell when the door was jarringly unlocked and thrown open.

“’Ere y’are, witch!” yelled one of the burly guards, admitting the struggling mass of the other guards. “Got company for ye!” He laughed boisterously, and was joined by two other guards who stood out in the hallway. The guards abruptly thrust the thin form of a young boy forward. He stood facing Senna as she clutched the wall behind her, a ragged youth with wild, unkempt hair and tattered remains of trousers about his waist. For a single moment he stood motionless, enrapt by Senna’s ageless beauty. A shared vision passed between them, capturing both like flies in amber. And then a heavy gauntleted fist came smashing down upon his neck, sending him flying into Senna’s waiting arms.

Time passed. Slowly one eye fluttered open as Senna watched. She had his head cradled in her lap, and had brushed all the stray wisps of hair from his face. Even unconscious, his hand gripped her arm tightly, almost painfully; though she did nothing to pull herself free. Broceliande and Garid had rejoined her, and both had kept strict watch over the two.

The woman was beautiful, and he felt almost safe with her. That was something he very rarely felt. But the two other beings frightened him, even though one was lovely beyond all comparison and the other was but a small boy. He struggled to sit up, but two strong, gentle hands held him down.

“Be at peace here, child,” whispered a soothing voice. He looked up once again to see that the pretty woman was speaking to him. He wished he could understand what she said. Oh how he wished it! He wanted so much to trust her, but that was something he just could not, and would not do. In his fevered pain and exhaustion, he allowed himself to rest, but remained wary.

Senna could feel his apprehension at the two other figures in the cell. “Garid, Broceliande. Please leave us,” she whispered to them. She did not want to startle the boy so

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she made no gestures to them, and spoke barely above a whisper. Her statement was sufficient enough. The two of them left hastily, casting backward glances at Senna. She nodded reassuringly at them, and they dispersed.

“What is your name?” she asked gently, still cradling the boy’s head. His long hair felt slick and sweaty beneath her touch, and his youth was enviable to her. She was not entirely sure, but she thought she sensed innocence in her fellow captive. That, along with mottled fear and trust. She looked upon him with a mother’s eyes, seeing what only a practiser of matronly wisdom and love could see. “I won’t hurt you,” she reassured him in dulcet tones, hoping that if he did not understand her speech, then at least her voice could soothe his fears. She looked deep into his eyes, searching for something she did not know of. She stared long and hard into the hazel depths of his soul, delving deep within him with her gaze.

What she saw in those myriad depths caused her to feel a flush of empathy with the boy. She saw no real joy. Only sadness, fear, and apprehension. It was as if he was an animal, living by instinct, unable to trust, self-reliant. Not a child, for lack of a childhood.

He seemed to feel more at ease as Senna searched his eyes with her own, and gently caressed his head. He, too, could sense things from her. He felt her protectiveness and compassion. He felt he could trust her, no matter what his instincts might say. He was hurting and confused anyway. What good had his instincts done him when he allowed himself to be captured? He wanted so much to trust her. Maybe he could try. As long as he could fall asleep and rest.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” asked Senna gently of him. He tried hard to understand her, wrinkling his brow in concentration. The back of his head still ached from the blow he had received. It had been totally unexpected. He would never have allowed himself to be caught unaware like that. If he had, he would have been knocked out long ago already, by many different fists, for many dif-

ferent reasons. Suddenly his fear returned, and he reached back to touch his neck, trying awkwardly to rise.

“Don’t fret yourself, child,” smiled Senna. She gently brushed her fingertips over his eyelids. Relaxing, he allowed her to close his eyes for him, basking in the soft gentleness of her touch. Hers was the first soothing touch he had ever felt in such a long time. Longer than he could remember. And he already felt a sort of bond to this motherly figure. He relaxed his taut muscles and lay his head in her lap. Yes, he would trust her. Who else could he?

“I hope you don’t mind if I give you a name,” whispered Senna, although she suspected he was already oblivious of her talk. She realized the importance of speaking, and that though he might not understand her words, he certainly understood the tone. Even asleep. “You are so different from everyone else. So lost and innocent in this world.” She paused, her motherly instincts reasserting themselves after so long a time. Breathing slowly, she adjusted her position so she would be more comfortable, never letting go of her newest charge. “I will call you ‘Valza’in’. The innocent one. In my time, in my... home, from so long ago, we had many different words, different languages, and people shared and enriched each other with our cultures.” She closed her eyes against the onslaught of memory. “‘Valza’in’,” she repeated softly, gently stroking his head. It had been so long since she had last had a son, or at least someone to call a son. Garid had been with her so briefly before he was taken from her. She hoped with all her might that her newest son would not be taken from her too.

Bending over gently so as not to wake his sleeping form, she kissed him lightly on the forehead. Although her touch was not enough to wake him, Valza’in curled up his legs and arms to his body, nestling himself closer to Senna’s loving warmth.

Over the next few days, Valza’in grew to trust Senna more and gradually became accustomed to his surroundings. Even the two ghosts no longer posed a threat to him,

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and he grew to enjoy the company he kept, even though the cell was quite depressing. Now that Senna had Valza'in in the dungeon with her, she, along with him, got fed on a regular basis. It took some time to get Valza'in to eat the gruel they were served, but with time that obstacle too was overcome. Senna, took advantage of the situation, re-learning how to become more active and alert, and to be more aware of herself and her surroundings. In a way, his presence in the dungeon was welcome in more ways than readily apparent.

And Valza'in was young. He had enough time to get accustomed to his new home. Senna presumed him to be at least eleven or twelve. She was immeasurably pleased to become Valza'in's new foster-mother. She held him close every night as he slept, and cared for his every need. Whenever the guards would fail to bring him his food, Senna would raise a tremendous noise until he got it. At other times, when Senna could sense that the guards were in no mood to be harassed, she would give him her own meals that she had saved for him. Valza'in grew closer to Senna everyday, and she to him. Little did either of them realize how dangerous affection was in the dark tower's dungeons.

But there was one thing Senna promised herself and Valza'in on the very first night. She swore that she would not try to teach him how to speak, or be like her, or adapt in any way to what she so distastefully spoke of as civilization. She treasured so much his innocence that she felt she did not have it in herself to stoop so low as to hurt him so much. His innocence was to be cherished by her, and envied by others. But, oh, how she wished sometimes that they could communicate in words. Their non-vocal communication would have to suffice.

Valza'in the Innocent became a great favorite of ghosts Broceliande and Garid. No longer was Senna their only friend. Now they had two people that called them friends. Valza'in not in so many words, but nevertheless, they knew it was so. Val, as they called him, was delighted by their

differences. He often attempted to run his fingers through Broceliande's flowing blonde hair, and every time his fingers passed through her transparent body, the others would laugh in delight. Garid, on the other hand, was more substantial, and could surprise the boy by apparating behind him and tapping his back when he least expected it. He was quite willing to daringly fetch morsels of food from the guards' very own plates, and carrying those small treasures through fissures in the rock wall into the dungeon.

One morning, the entire dungeon was rudely awakened by a garish clatter from the guard room, as Garid roguishly upset a pitcher of malt beer that a guard had been drinking from. The guard, fearful of demons but brusque and pompous nonetheless, insisted it was the other guard who had done it, and the two brawled noisily until other guards came to relieve them.

Garid and Broceliande spent much more time than they usually did with Senna visiting Valza'in. Although he was unable to understand what they said, Valza'in delighted in listening to their fanciful stories. And Senna, vicariously, was herself delighted by Val's happiness. Feelings of motherly pride swept through her every time her two friends would play with her new son. Here she had adopted a wild, frightened young boy, and taught him how to trust again.

At night, while Val slept, Senna fought her own private battles, suppressing her precognitive ability, and confusing it with the mad worries and dreams her troubled mind concocted. Visions of Broceliande and Garid were joined by visions of Val as a ghost, haunting her as the two already did. And haunting was not what a soul was meant to do. Haunting meant that the soul had not crossed over, that something was holding it back in this plane of existence. And for what reason? Was it she who was holding them back? Certainly there was trauma—significant trauma—in their deaths. Trauma on that level would certainly confuse a spirit, and create havoc with its progress beyond this world. She did not want to see Valza'in as a ghost, tied to

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this world and its accompanying misery by his affection for her. Or by her affection for him. What was it that kept Broceliande and Garid trapped in-between? Was her love and her need to have their company tormenting them? Certainly her own two children had passed on with no trouble, or at least so she hoped. Thankfully she was able to suppress the anguish and grief of so many years ago, at the realization that she had outlived her own children.

Never once did Val try to impose himself on anyone, being of a stubborn and self-reliant nature. Having another person after the longest time who truly needed to eat, Senna steadily cleared away the garbage that filled the crevice in the far corner of the dungeon and taught Valza'in how to be discreet. Luckily the crack ran quite deep into the rock foundation of the Obelisk, even though the fissure was only about a foot in width. Such details! How will a mother's work ever be done? Garid was a great help, dissipating his essence enough to pass through the smallest fissure, yet retaining enough substance to push away anything foul or obstructive.

And Senna enjoyed fussing over someone again. She enjoyed being a mother again. Her family was growing, and that gave joy and hope to the conquered queen. Perhaps it might grow even more after her release... if she could ever hope for it.

a matter of minutes, of hours, and of days...

Chapter 4

Baringer and Galden had ample time to talk and to think along the way. The roads they ambled along were desolate, infrequently used dirt trails that wound through muddy fens, rocky outcroppings from the surface, and vast mushroom forests. Ever a farmer, or raised as one, Galden couldn't help but wonder if any of the mushrooms were food-stock, or if they were of a more common—or even poisonous—variety.

Ordinarily, common mushrooms on Harlus were the small, bite-size variety. But with the condition that befell the dark planet so long ago and reigned prevalent, the fungi evolved into greater size and mass, no doubt infused with remnants of the very same arcane and obscure magic that held a tenuous grasp on the planet as a whole. Where what used to be the husks of dead trees long felled, new and different forests sprung. The wild, inedible mushrooms grew to enormous proportions. Their stems became huge trunks, and their caps spread across at least one hundred paces on the largest. These huge sporadocytes proved quite useful in shielding Harlus' people from the heavy rains that poured incessantly during the first hundred years of darkness. It

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was a wonder that the inhabitants survived such conditions at all. But with no sun to evaporate the water that fell from the clouds, and no solar heat, the water remained on the surface of the planet. But there were still clouds in the sky above them. In fact, the sky was filled with them. These clouds were swirling with the atomized dust from the scattered debris of what used to be Harlus' twelve moons. When the sun had exploded nearly five hundred years ago, the dozen satellites proved in a small way effective in deflecting a small portion of the devastation, though the lunar conflagration was only a momentary respite for the harrowed mages. The moons were destroyed, and the majority of the debris remained in the atmosphere, where it created vast thunderheads, letting loose frequently with bolts of lightning and unsettling roars of thunder. But a large amount of the moons' surfaces fell to the planet's own surface, bringing about further devastation, injury and even mutations. In the five centuries that had passed since that time, only now was the dark planet healing its wounds. No sun evaporated the water to send it back up into the atmosphere. Magic and atmosphere kept everything on the surface, with occasional rains to refresh. An ideal climate for the mushrooms.

Baringer looked carefully at Galden often when the two would silence their talk. He often felt sympathy for his younger friend. Galden was always doing something embarrassing; though only to himself. He had been that way every since their childhood. Baringer wondered what Galden saw in him as a friend. Galden treated him like a superior, deferring to him and admiring his every action, and aspiring to be as much like him as he possibly could. Why, Baringer came as close to a rogue as anyone possibly could be in the small township they lived in. While Galden conformed with the rest of his society by wearing the traditional horsehair shirt, vest, breeches and boots, Baringer tried his hardest to be different. He acknowledged his appearance, and flaunted his appeal to everyone he came

across. He wore no shirt at all, being quite used to the cool climate. He wore a brightly colored leather vest of blue and purple, vividly lavender and rose gloves, tight blue knee-breeches, leather sandals, and an outlandish hat with a large feather stuck in it. He also took great care to keep his body in peak physical condition, allowing his vest to hang unlaced on his shoulders, exposing his admirable physique to those who would admire it or envy him for it. He even went so far as to tie bright strips of cloth around his biceps when he wanted to be particularly garish, drawing attention to himself in welcome and unwelcome ways. He felt himself to be as far from a role model as anyone could be. It was a mystery to him why Galden looked up to him. Perhaps it was his superior skill with the women, and his great appeal with them. Galden could not boast of such prowess.

He gave Speedwell, his unicorn, a slap on the rear flank. "Go get that deserter back here for me," he ordered the steed as he fell further behind his traveling companion. Speedwell responded with a brusque neigh and trotted a bit faster forward to where Galden had wandered. Lost in his thoughts, the young farmer had left his friend and the animals behind, paying attention to the road and his own musings.

Speedwell nudged Galden's shoulder with her soft muzzle. He turned his attention on the white steed, patting her affectionately on her forehead just below the base of the horn. He turned back to look at Baringer, with Po sitting on his shoulder, apparently asleep. Galden wrinkled his nose in distaste, seeing that the bird had no qualms about where it deposited its waste, and knowing Baringer's own apathy. How the other could stand having a large bird's sharp talons on skin shielded only by a leather vest he did not know. "How far do you suppose we've gotten?" he asked of Baringer.

"Well, considering the fact that we've been walking now for about... fifty hours, with about... ten, twelve hours of sleep in the past three cycles, I'd say we've covered about..."

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He paused, touching the fingers of his left hand to his chin. Pursing his lips, he looked skyward as if expecting an answer from the few stars he could make out through the cloudy canopy. "Maybe... Two-hundred and fifty miles. Maybe three hundred. Then again, maybe a *lot* less. I'm no better than you are at calculating things like that."

"And it's over two thousand miles to Erz, according to dearest Uncle Pat," added Galden glumly, wrinkling his brow. "And Erz might not even exist anymore. And if it does, how would we know if it's the right place to find Senna and Ullix?"

"Don't ask me, friend. I'm only along for the adventure. It was your idea to set out on this quest in the first place." Baringer slapped Galden hard on the back, knocking the wind out of him and causing him to stumble forward. "I hope you're not backing out already." He looked wisely at Galden, who was hanging his head in thought. "I'm sticking with you to the end of the road, friend."

"No," he replied, "I'm not backing out already. The book says that Senna came from the kingdom of Erz. And even though it says she didn't return to it, she may be there now. And if she isn't, maybe someone there knows where she is. Besides," and he brightened at the thought, winking gleefully at his friend, "I'm out of the house, and we can do what ever we want to; with no Uncle Pat pissing in our mushmeal about it."

"Suits me fine," said Baringer happily. He put his arm around Galden's shoulders and pulled him roughly. "All we need now is a little elf woman for you and a warrior woman for me, and we'd be set!"

"Fat chance!" laughed Galden nervously. He blushed inward, his anxiety leading him to wonder if his friend had any idea of what he did with an old gown in an attic. "Where are you going to find an elf around these parts, let alone a female one?" The elves of Harlus had become quite scarce after the cataclysm. They preferred to be among their own kind, adopting a nomadic way of life, hiding out in the great

mushroom forests, hunting the occasional wild animal that strayed too close to their presence. To purposely go out of one's way to locate an elf was nearly impossible, especially when they stayed close to the cover of the forests.

Galden had seen a few elves in his lifetime, though. A small group of them had come through Kaelmorde, apparently on their way to some great tribal meeting. In fact, with startled realization, Galden remembered seeing the pointed ears on one of the two late-night travelers that had crossed their path back at Baringer's hut. He reminded himself to ask around about them, if he ever returned. From what he could see of the group he had earlier witnessed, they were vastly similar to regular humans. The only differences being that the elves had darker, ruddy skin, pointed ears, slanted eyes, and incredibly long, black hair. They dressed in simple leather clothes, but their hair was treated like a great treasure. They took great care to keep their hair clean and long. And the blacker it was, the more proud they were of it. That was when Galden had seen the elf maiden.

He could remember how beautiful she was. She was still quite young, judging by the relative shortness of her hair. It fell only as far as the calves of her long, slender legs. But she was nonetheless breathtakingly lovely. The outfit she wore peeled off in his mind. The shifty tunic fell from her shoulders, exposing soft skin the color of smooth silt, an amber shade that intoxicated him each time he thought of it. He peeled off the leather breeches she wore, leaving her clothed only in the silken tresses cascading so darkly over her shoulders. He could almost feel his fingers combing through those locks. She remained long afterward in Galden's dreams and fantasies, coaxing him into doing foolish things with her coy eyes and alluring figure. Causing him to roll around in dusty attics with antique dresses held close to skin pricked with goose bumps. Galden inhaled deeply, thankful that no one had ever seen him do such an embarrassing thing.

"You never know," he said to Baringer, putting such

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thoughts out of his head. "We may just yet run into some. I bet this journey will take us at least a month!" He smiled nervously at his companion, hoping that the prospect of at least a month's travel would not deter the other from accompanying him. He also worried that he might give up, rational enough to realize that a long, arduous trip was not as comfortable as his own bed in his own home. And so what if he didn't meet the elf-maiden of his dreams. He always could go up into the attic... He shook his head violently, shouting "No!"

"No? No what? Of course we could run into some elves," agreed Baringer simply, annoyed at his friend's quirky habits. Shaking his head incredulously, Baringer was relieved to see no signs of turning back in Galden. He had never known him to undertake such a long quest, let alone stick with it after three cycles of darker-ness. He sighed, having long since grown used to being around his unusual friend.

Yes, Baringer and Galden had been trudging along the winding roads of the bleak countryside for quite some time now. At certain points of the journey, as one or the other would tire of the incessant trodging, he would mount Speedwell, and the faithful unicorn would bear his weight for many a mile before the rider chose to walk again. After all, Speedwell was a thinking, feeling sentient being herself, and though they appreciated her willingness to carry them, out of respect for her, neither took advantage of her too much.

In this way the four companions held a steady pace toward their destination. The book that Galden had rescued from his attic trunk contained a highly detailed map of the countryside they now traveled. Although Galden was assured by Baringer many times that the map was long out of date, it still provided them with the surest guidance. Hills, valleys and other landmarks still corresponded with the ancient map, and Galden was confident that this guide would lead them to certain fame and fortune, if only they had the fortitude to strive onward.

Their journey was beset by occasional rains, though not

wet enough to dampen their spirits as they would their clothes. As Baringer had pointed out earlier, the two were quite fortunate that Galden had packed two extra outfits in his satchel. Although Galden was a lot less brawny than Baringer, his trousers fit him easily, as did one of his looser shirts. At the times when they did have to change a shirt or a pair of pants, Baringer would drape the wet clothes over Speedwell's mane, allowing the light fluttering of her hair and the intermittent breezes to dry them out, at which point he would promptly put them back on again, preferring to opt for his outlandish appearance rather than that of a Kaelmordian mushroom farmer.

The days passed slowly as the two adventurers made their way unharassed over the dark countryside. Passing the time with imaginary games helped; deciding what they would do with whatever great wealth they would amass never ceased to be amusing.

As they passed through various small townships that were spread out intermittently across the land, Galden would compare their position to the map, tracing their journey as they went along. Though several townships were not represented, some had sprung up over the ruins of others, which helped pinpoint their location. Indeed, the hands that etched the ink on these maps were skilled, rendering highly accurate directions.

In one small township they came upon the ruins of an obelisk that had once dominated the town. Galden and Baringer compared this structure to that of their own town, which was in much better shape and had been converted into a cathedral.

"Amazing how such a place of evil could become a church back in Kaelmorde, isn't it Baringer?" he asked, reverting to his mother's steadfast religious influences. He held the old tome of history opened in front of him, looking from a stylized illustration of one of the obelisks in their heyday to the ruined building before them, and back again.

"Or a crumbling mess like this," commented Baringer

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dryly. "Come on, let's find a place to stay. I'm getting tired, and I know Speedwell hasn't rested since yesterday." He began walking toward some more agreeable-appearing buildings located nearby. As with all the townships that once were dominated by these large fortresses, its location was in the town's square, the gathering place of its inhabitants. The townspeople had built their homes close to the sanctity of the now emaciated obelisk.

"Come on!" grunted Baringer, not very amused by Galden's fascination with the structure. "Get a move on!" He couldn't help but notice the suspicious eyes glaring at them from within various homes.

"Coming," acquiesced Galden, hesitating only momentarily in his musings before dashing over to where his friend stood waiting for him. "I'm sorry," he apologized to the other.

"No problem, Galden," stated Baringer more cheerfully now. "Only next time let's find a place to stay before we take in the sights." Baringer slapped Galden heartily on the back and led him and Speedwell to a nearby tavern. Po had been sailing overhead for some time now, acting as a lookout for them. He now sailed down to land upon Baringer's waiting arm.

Fluttering noiselessly upon his extended arm, he croaked a single phrase. "Storm coming!" He craned his neck to point his beak skyward, indicating the westerly region they had been heading for.

Baringer glanced toward the direction that Po had indicated. Squinting his eyes to make out the weather as best he could, he muttered curses under his breath. "Looks like a big one this time," he said, crossly pulling Speedwell after him to the tavern. "Come on, Galden. We don't have time to waste out here in the open." Around them, the few townsfolk that had ventured outside their homes for one reason or another were bustling to get indoors, pulling in with them children, animals, and clothing and tools that had been left outside.

Lumber was a construction material sorely lacking anywhere on Harlus. Mushroom parts weren't as steadfast, and had not the same durability as the ancient wood. What buildings remained from the time before the cataclysm were dilapidated and weather worn. Stone, thankfully, remained a consistent structural foundation. Built of stone and ancient timbers appropriated from other buildings long since past, the local inn was a larger structure situated between other, less desirable shacks. There was a corral built of mushroom wood to one side of the inn, and Baringer led the others to it. Once inside, he did not tie Speedwell to the stalls. The unicorn never wore a bridle anyway, and besides, Baringer did not trust the strength of structures built from giant mushbark. The inn itself seemed to be constructed from solid rocks, but the lean-to stable looked rather flimsily put together. Baringer inspected the roof, walls, and supports of the enclosure, finally reassured that it would be able to withstand the substantial drenching it was sure to receive. If anyone or anything served to bother the steed, her horn and tough hooves would be the solution to the problem.

"Stay here with her while I go inside and get us settled in," directed Baringer. Galden nodded in agreement, and was promptly met by Baringer's outstretched hand. He stared at the hand and then at its owner curiously. "Well?" Baringer asked impatiently, snapping his fingers.

"Oh." Galden hurriedly reached into his satchel and pulled out a small money purse. This he handed to Baringer, who smiled appreciatively at the gesture and then left the small stable.

"Well," sighed Galden to Speedwell and Po. "I guess it's just you and me here. Along with all those other horses," he added, noting the other steeds that were in adjoining stalls. Po hopped merrily back and forth over the floor and railing, amusing Galden. "You're quite the clown, aren't you Po?" he asked, not expecting the bird to reply. Po displayed an astounding intelligence, croaking words here and there

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and actually understanding the speech of others.

“Clown!” repeated the raven, dancing across the wooden railing. “Hungry clown!” He looked quizzically at Galden, tilting his head comically as he did so.

“Of course,” chuckled Galden, glancing around the small structure. He noticed a bale of hay lying among others of its kind nearby. This was quite odd, as hay was made from the long roots of certain fungi and the sparse vegetation, along with some of the very few grasses that still grew in the cold climate. Therefore, it was very rare to find such a bale, let alone seven or eight of them. “Looks like we’ve hit the jackpot,” he commented to the two animals, retrieving one of the bales and setting it in front of Speedwell. The horse daintily nibbled at the block of feed, hungrily swallowing the hay.

“Yuck! Yuck!” croaked Po, angrily hopping away from the bale. “Real food!” he remonstrated, glaring at Galden.

“Don’t worry,” he reassured the raven. “We’ll get you something to eat once we get inside. Baringer’s going to get a room and hopefully something to eat. He...” Galden let the words trail off as his attention was abruptly seized by another form in the stable.

Galden paled at the thought of being cut down by some dastardly rogue that had somehow managed to sneak in upon him. He swallowed hard, trying his hardest to stifle his fear. He backed up to the protective cover of Speedwell’s horn. “Help me out, Speedwell,” he whispered to the unicorn.

“There is no need to fear,” spoke a female voice from the darkness in front of him. Although the speech was heavily laden with a distinctively foreign accent, Galden felt relieved at the gentleness in it.

“Who are you?” he asked of the figure. “Come out so I can see you.” He stepped cautiously forward, inviting the stranger to do the same.

As she did so, Galden was surprised to see before him the figure of a young woman. A young *elfin* woman. She

was dressed in a simple animal skin, and wore leather moccasins upon her dainty feet. Her almond shaped eyes were large and glistened brightly in the darkness. She had long, silky black hair that cascaded down her back and shoulders. This was the woman of his dreams, and now he stood blatantly in front of her, fearing her as a foe.

“Food time is now,” croaked Po, startling them both as he hopped out the stable doorway and off into the dark and stormy night.

“Who are you?” asked the elfin woman of the dumb-founded Galden. She stood temptingly in front of him, not oblivious of the effect her beauty had on him. She reached out a hand to touch his, which brought him out of his reverie. “What is your name?” she asked.

“G-Galden,” he spat out, trying to overcome his enchantment. He stared rapturously at her, amazed at the event that fate had brought about. “What’s yours?” He was squeezing her hand, and she winced demurely.

“My name is Vortigurn,” she answered in her elvish accent, coyly batting her dark eyelashes. “What are you doing here?” she asked, pulling her hand from his.

He realized what he had done, and smiled meekly and apologetically. Galden was pleased to have the opportunity to converse with the woman of his dreams. He might get a chance to know her better, and maybe even convince her to join him on his quest, hare-brained and impulsive as it was. “I’m here with a friend of mine. He’s in the tavern right now, making arrangements. We’re on a quest.”

“A quest?” she breathed excitedly, pronouncing the word distinctly. “What fun! What is it that you are questing for, Gugalden?” She clasped her hands in enthusiasm, looking eagerly at him.

Galden was sweating now, despite the relative chill. As Vortigurn leaned closer to him, he did his best to fight against his natural urge to back away. This was the girl of his dreams, damn it! “For a lost treasure,” he faltered, not wanting to give away too much of the details to someone

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who was still much of a stranger to him. Too late, he realized. Treasure was the stupid answer. He should have said something about history, or a lost family member. He was too nervous to even correct her mispronunciation of his name. Galden looked a little closer at his visitor. She didn't seem to be the horse-riding type, and he wondered what she was doing out in the stables so close before the oncoming storm. "Uh, w-what are you doing here?" he asked. "Out here in the stables, I mean." He brushed his hands against her shoulders as she leaned alluringly closer, her breath touching his lips. Suddenly she backed off, and took a step away from him.

"I..." she began, looking nervously away from him. "I am checking in on the horses..." she muttered. A rosy blush covered her face, and she averted her eyes from his. She caressed the mane of Speedwell, rather dejectedly.

"I see," smiled Galden wisely. No doubt the girl intended to steal a steed for herself and anyone she might be traveling with. At least, that's what he'd do. If he had any gump-tion. Or was a risk-taker like Baringer. Or didn't care what other people thought.

"Are you here with anyone else?" he asked of her, now feeling the upper hand. His confidence was returning as he surmised her intentions.

"My father is inside the inn, in the tavern. I must go to him soon." She smiled appealingly at him. "Will you be joining us in there?"

Galden nodded slowly, smiling to himself. He had caught her trying to steal horses for herself and her father, and he now was feeling quite smug. He joined her in petting the unicorn, their fingers almost touching. Vortigurn turned off her allure, and appeared to be shy and nervous. "What do you think, Speedwell?" he asked of the unicorn. He patted her neck and smiled knowingly at her. As he was doing so, he was surprised to feel a hand reaching into his pant pocket.

Spinning around, he faced Vortigurn once more, look-

ing warily at the elf. She had quickly withdrawn her hand from him and grasped it with the other behind her back. An innocent smile spread across her face as she attempted to back off.

“You’re... you... you’re just a... a girl!” he cried, amazed at her impish gall and at a loss for words. He certainly did not want to insult the object of his affections, and stopped himself from accusing her of something he would later regret. He grabbed her by the shoulders and held her. “You were trying to pick my pocket, weren’t you? You’re no thief! There’s no way you would’ve been *that* sloppy. What’s going on here?”

Her face grew saddened at his questions, and she looked as if she was about to cry. Galden loosened his grip on her arms and allowed her to lean against him. He breathed in sharply at her touch. “Tell me,” he requested more softly of the elfin girl.

Vortigurn looked into his brown eyes and began to tell her story. “My father and I are here because we are outcasts,” she informed him. “He is a human while I am an elf. People do not look kindly upon a human adopting one such as me. And he is blind now, so I must take care of him. We needed horses so we could steal away before the storm ends. But now, I suppose you will tell of my actions to the innkeeper.” Two large tears trickled down her soft, brown cheek as she looked pleadingly into his eyes.

“Maybe,” replied Galden, feeling the weakness of his rapture beginning to fall upon him again, “and maybe not. Why don’t you tell me more about yourself. My friend should be back out here shortly, and then we can decide what to do.”

The scent of her on him was intoxicating him now, and he could not have stopped her picking his pocket even if he wanted to. She did not, and he was grateful for that.

• • •

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Baringer was met by the heavy aroma of strong wine and ale as he entered the front door of the building. It did a good job of covering the underlying stench of piss, vomit and sweat, and of mildew, smoke and rot. All around him were tables at which small groups of people sat, talking, drinking, arguing and otherwise amusing themselves. Baringer looked beyond the scattered tables and people to see the barkeep standing behind a large counter. He was writing something down in a book on the countertop, and looked extremely happy. Baringer made his way through the crowded room to where the barkeep stood, keeping a firm grip on the money purse in his hand. As he passed through, he received many glances from admiring women, and even a few men. Baringer smiled inwardly, pride swelling up his exposed chest. He returned the smiles and continued onward. He smiled just as genially at those who scowled at him, from the very dangerous to the very disapproving.

Plopping the bag of coins on the countertop, Baringer spoke to the barkeep. "I need a room for the night. How much will that be?"

The barkeep smiled genuinely at him. "Depends," he said with a chuckle. "Do ye want a dinner with that? We got one last room left. It's yours for two gold. Dinner will cost you an extra half-piece." He raised an eyebrow and looked at the satchel, wondering what caliber of coinage it held.

"Make it two dinners, and you've got yourself a deal," Baringer replied, setting down three gold coins on the counter. Gleefully picking them up, the barkeep reached under the counter and removed a key. "This is the last one!" he laughed. "All of my rooms are sold tonight! The storm has brought every one to my inn!" He happily rubbed his hands together and picked up the quill-pen he was writing with. "Names of people that'll be staying in the room?" he asked, casting his eyes upon Baringer.

"Baringer and Galden," he answered. "I've also got a unicorn and a raven that'll be staying in the stables." He

leaned comfortably against the counter, watching the man write.

“How long will you be staying?” asked the barkeep, pausing from the ledger. Holding one of the coins close to scrutinize it, the barkeep whistled low, recognizing the mint as that of a fairly lucrative family. If this wasn’t stolen gold, then this fellow might have more.

“I’d say three or four days, judging from the storm.” Baringer noticed other men at the counter drinking from large mugs of ale. “Say, can I get one of those?” he asked, gesturing to one of the mugs.

“Sure,” laughed the barkeep, looking at Baringer’s money purse. “That, and your stay, and you’ll be into another four of these nice gold pieces. Dinners included.” He smiled even broader as Baringer dropped four more coins into his hands. “I’ll be right back with your ale, my good man,” he said happily, walking down the bar to the barrels of liquor.

As Baringer was leaning contentedly against the counter, a wizened old man standing next to him turned his eyes to him. Baringer was startled to see the empty whiteness that clouded his eyes, having never before seen anything like that.

“It is because I am blind, my friend,” spoke the elderly man. His wrinkled dark skin told Baringer that he was dealing with some ancient foreigner, probably traveling from some far off country. The old man startled him by placing a gnarled hand on Baringer’s fore arm. Baringer instinctively pulled away, but he immediately felt ashamed of doing so.

“You are correct,” said the man. “I am from a far away land.” He reached out a trembling hand to him. “Do not be startled. I can sense what you are feeling.” He stood closer to Baringer and bent in a whisper. “Do not show off that money purse of yours around here, lad. People are not smiling at you just for your looks.” The old gentleman covered the money satchel with his hand and pushed it closer to

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Baringer.

Baringer quickly secreted the bag into the side of his breeches, thanking the man. "How do you know all these things?" he asked of the old man.

"I am an empath," he answered. "I feel emotions of others, and I act as a healer." He whispered even quieter. "My daughter is in the stables, too. She is now telling your friend about herself, and the situation we all find ourselves in. She is trying to steal the money that you have in your possession. It's his money, isn't it?" He winked at him, and continued. "I would advise you to join us for dinner tonight. Look for me and a young elf-girl sitting at the far table. That one back there." He pointed a trembling finger at an empty table that sat against the far wall, secluded from the others by a partial wall. "Be there!" he ordered. His voice was not questioning, and his tone implied that his order was to be followed.

"Here's your ale, friend," said the barkeep, handing Baringer the mug. Baringer stared into the amber liquid, frothing atop the surface. He breathed in the heady aroma and shook his head.

"I've changed my mind," mumbled Baringer, shoving the mug away from him. The barkeep raised an eyebrow, but said nothing as he reclaimed the mug. "Can you give this to someone else?" he asked politely. "I don't think I can handle this right now."

"Suit yerself, lad. I'll bring you another at dinner." He set the mug behind the counter and walked down the bar, giving attention to his other customers. Baringer turned once again to confront the blind man, but was surprised to find him gone; no trace of his presence ever having been there. Baringer looked around the room, trying to locate the mysterious stranger, but to no avail. He grabbed the key from the counter, tightly gripped the money purse, and left the tavern.

Outside, it was colder than it had been but a few moments ago when he had entered the inn. The storm was get-

ting closer, and he felt the droplets of rain already falling cold upon his body. He trotted swiftly to the stables, calling Galden's name as he did so.

"Baringer," said Galden from within the shed. "Come in here. I've got something to show you." Baringer entered the shed, finding Galden, Po, and Speedwell, along with a young elf woman. Though he was not surprised to see her, having been warned by the old man, he was impressed by her appearance.

"Well, now," cried Baringer at the sight. "What have we here? Looks like you're finally taking my advice, Galden. I don't think your choice of locations is that great, but at least you're getting there." He draped his arm about his friend, and touched the maiden's cheek with his finger. "Nice," he commented, smiling.

"Funny," laughed Galden sarcastically. "This is Vortigurn. She's here with her adoptive father, a blind human. She said..."

Baringer cut him off. "A blind human?" he repeated, slightly shaken. "I was just talking to one inside. Is he really dark-skinned, with a long white beard and a wooden staff?"

"Yes," answered the elf. Baringer liked the sound of her voice, and drank in the accent. "That is my father. Did he already ask you to join us for dinner tonight?"

"Yes..." stuttered Baringer. "He did. But how..." He dropped his arm from Galden's shoulders and roughly pushed his friend aside to confront the girl.

"That does not matter," curtly spoke Vortigurn. "What matters is your answer. Will you?" She smiled at Galden, who was angry at Baringer's brusque gesture.

"I suppose we will," answered Galden slowly. He looked sternly at Baringer and then at her, trying to make up his mind whether to trust her or not.

"I, uh, already told the old man that we would," added Baringer. "So I guess it's decided." He looked at Galden and then at the girl. "I suppose we'll see you at dinner tonight

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then,” he finished. Vortigurn nodded, then turned back to Galden.

“If you’ll excuse me, I must be going now.” She gave them both a short curtsy, and dashed from the stables.

“Vortigurn!” called Galden after her as she ran out into the rain. “Wait... I...” But he had already lost her in the gloomy rain. In his frustration, he scowled at Baringer, wanting to blame him for something. Anything. He did not want to be left sputtering after a girl in the presence of his very virile best friend.

“Let’s go inside,” suggested Baringer in an authoritative tone. “I got us a room for the next three days. Come on! I’m starving, I’m wet, and I’m tired. And I have no intention to walk for several days again without relaxing for a few.” He looked commandingly at Galden, who in turn looked at the animals. “Don’t worry about them. Po will eat what Speedwell eats if he’s hungry, or he’ll find something outside.” He pointed sternly at Po, who had inconspicuously returned, and was hopping madly about. “Eat, Po!” he ordered. Looking then at Speedwell, he said to her, “Keep an eye on the foolish one. We’ll check in on you two every now and then.”

The two left the stables, and dashed around the side to the front entrance of the tavern.

“Give me my money bag,” said Galden as they entered. “I mean it, Bar. Give it to me.”

Pursing his lips and raising an eyebrow, Baringer handed it to him, insisting that he had to take special care that it would not get stolen in the large building. Galden snatched it gruffly, and shoved it into his pocket. They passed through the large dining and drinking area, heading for the stairs that led to the boarding rooms. At the very top floor, halfway down the hallway, they located their room. Baringer inserted the key in the lock, turned it, and they entered their new home for the next few days.

a book of dreams...

Chapter 5

Life in the dungeon was bad, as Valza'in well knew, but not quite as bad as some of the things he'd experienced in his life before he was captured. At least here he had regular meals, tasteless and unappealing as they were, and this nice woman to take care of him. She kept him clean, warm and happy, and always made sure that he never wanted for anything. His two friends—the pretty white ghost and the little grey one—visited them daily, spending nearly the entire day with the two captives. On the occasions when the guards would—strangely generous, though not in the least unwelcome—bring them buckets of water to bathe in, the pretty lady would let him use it all for himself. She never seemed to eat much or need the same things he did. But that didn't matter. He liked her just the way she was. In fact, he was rather pleased to have someone care for him no matter what circumstances it was under. When he would bathe in the water, she took the time to wash through his hair, and over his back. She would use a large piece of material that she had torn from the long folds of her dress to dry him off, and would then comb the hair out from his face with her fingers. Yes, he certainly did appreciate her.

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It seemed that she never slept at night, either—at least, as far as he could tell. That was good, too, since he would always fall asleep on her lap. She could keep an eye out for any guards that might come in to get him while he was asleep. And the ghosts spent many nights along with the days there with them. He felt safe and secure in the dungeon for the first time in his life. He did wonder, though, what they did when they weren't there with him and his "mother."

All he could remember of his early childhood were visions of fire, and hearing screams and shouts. He could remember being so overwhelmingly scared, a fear that remained with him for the rest of his life, until he was captured and put in the dungeon with his new family. His first family was a pack of wild creatures. He did not know what they were; animal, human, or something in between. He remembered how he had first came upon them, stumbling blindly in the forest, looking for food, and crying desperately for his mother. The pack took him in, and a large female creature adopted him as her own. He stayed with them for the longest time, learning their ways, and hunting for food as they did... Sometimes having to scavenge off of the carnage of past killings, learning to be subservient to the leader of the pack.

One such carrion feast was that of a man that had fallen under the mighty blow of a bear. The beast had gorged himself from the man's torso and neck, leaving a bloody husk, complete from the chin up and the waist down. The pack had come upon the kill from the acrid odor of cold blood and flesh, and closed in on it. But for some reason, Valza'in felt he could not partake of their feast. The dead creature looked too familiar. It was not that he recognized the face. The form of the creature's body, and the fact that he wore clothes reminded him of a life he remembered once being a part of. Before the creatures of his pack had a chance to pull any meat from the long-dead body, he snatched the torn pants from the man, holding them up about his waist,

to the uncertain growls of the other animals. From that day forth, Valza'in was no longer a member of the pack. He had to hunt for food on his own then, and scavenge when the opportunity arose. At first, life on his own was harsh. He was constantly being chased away by other animals, and being scratched at and torn by certain ravenous things. He shivered in the cold of night, and cowered under the darkness of day. He chose to steer clear from any human he saw, horrific memories of that one night of scavenging filling his mind. Instead, he stuck close to the dense underbrush of the mushroom forests. There, the mosses and lichens grew to immense sizes, protected from the elements by the huge overhanging mushroom cap canopies. There, Valza'in could hide in wait for his prey, which usually consisted of small animals and rodents. He grew lean and lithe, qualities that stayed with him for the rest of his life. His reflexes became keen and sharp, and the animals soon learned to stay away from the area of forest he inhabited.

That brought about a change in Val's life style. He was now forced to go nearer to the places he chose to avoid. The towns had fenced in areas where they kept fat birds of some kind that could not fly, but were edible nonetheless. During the times when most of the people would be asleep, Valza'in would steal into these areas and snatch one of the birds. But he would never stay in one area for too long. The people in the towns grew wary of him, and he kept on moving from one to another to avoid capture or those annoying good-intentioned people who wanted to help him out of the cold, give him clothes and an education, and make him civilized.

It was at this time in his life when Valza'in came upon the one city in which the Obelisk of Darkness stood. He had noticed many such towns where one such as this structure stood in the center, but in all the other cases, they had been torn down, converted into something else, or falling into ruin. There were many differences between this place and the others. The town was larger, but less densely populated.

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The tower in the center was black and shiny, the occasional guard exiting from it, and the occasional prisoner being pulled into it, never to be seen again.

Valza'in did not know of the vast evil that resided within the tower walls, nor did he know of the immaculate goodness that dwelled beneath them. His only concern was that of the food he could possibly find there, and how to get it. The usual intrigues of creeping into the enclosed yards when the other people were asleep were obsolete here. The people were all awake at various points of the cycle; always someone around to see him if he should try. He had to devise another way to get anything out of this town. Walking in the streets was too dangerous. He would not feel comfortable doing so, being around so many of these people who looked so much like him, and none of them dressed like he did. He would feel too conspicuous doing that. But he had to try something. He was slowly starving, freezing, and desperate, and rationality was swiftly leaving him.

The waiting behind the huge mushrooms was nerve-racking to say the least, and he was getting bored quickly. He had to have something to eat soon, or he would eventually starve. The mushrooms, if they didn't make him sick, were distasteful and tough to swallow.

One house nearest to where he hid had an enclosure that contained these birds, and it was to this that he one night foolishly crept. As he was creeping up on the sleeping fowl, his presence alerted one of the dogs that slept also in the yard. Valza'in had always tried to avoid these creatures, too, but he had not seen them when he entered. The animals made a raucous din, waking up not only the residents of the home but the neighbors and many others as well. Valza'in tried desperately to get away from the noise, but he could not elude the angry dogs. They chased him around the yard, tiring his legs and making his lungs ache for air. Soon he heard shouts from outside the yard, and saw large men in heavy garments racing in upon him. He struggled even harder to escape the angry canines, and made it over

the fence, where he started sprinting for his life toward the forest beyond a small clearing. He could hear the heavy breathing and the shouts of the men that bore down upon him, their heavy boots making loud thundering noises as they struck the earth. Valza'in's breaths came in short gasps now, and every one of them grew shorter and burned hotter than the first. His legs ached to rest, and his stomach convulsed in aching cramps. Pumping his arms and legs harder than ever, Val tried to widen the distance between the guards and him, but they caught up with him before he could even reach the forest. Five men bore down upon his thin frame, pinning him kicking and screaming to the ground. Struggle as he might, he could not break free. At least the muddy road they fell on absorbed some of the weight, and did not break any bones.

It took the five of them to drag him—thrashing and biting—into the Obelisk, and another two to help them along. He did not get a chance to see much of the interior, since he diverted all his attentions to breaking free. All he could recall was being led through a vast entryway into a black hallway lined with torches, with too many turns to recall his way. But struggle though he might, Valza'in could not loosen their grasp. The men took him down many long flights of stairs, deep within the bowels of the earth, levels underneath the tower. Here they threw him into the dungeon with the woman and her two ghosts. And there he had been since. Oh, and he definitely remembered getting hit. That still smarted occasionally.

Looking up from where he was crouching on the floor, his knees pulled up to his chest, Valza'in saw Broceliande and Garid float through the walls. A bright smile lit up his drawn face. The memories of his past had served to dampen his spirits, but the two spirits that now entered the cell were far from being damp. They both wore bright smiles upon their gaunt faces. They both sailed toward him like children dashing forward to meet a friend; in essence, exactly what they would have been if they had not been killed ages

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before. Valza'in spread his arms out in greeting, allowing the ghosts to pass ethereally through him. This experience always served to greatly amuse him, and he enjoyed the tickly feeling he got from Garid's semi-substance as he pulled the boy down onto his back. Senna looked up from her weaving to take note of the frivolity. She had taken yet another fold of her dress and torn it into small strips, which she was weaving into a small mat. She meant for it to be a make-shift bed and coverlet for him. Senna had been singing a merry hymn to herself as she did so, soothing Val into his thoughts.

And it was from these thoughts that the two ghosts now roused him. Still lying on his back, laughing gleefully, Valza'in looked over to where the two ghosts now floated. They were both crouched as if in a running position, their ghostly arms outstretched and impish grins on their faces. The two of them meant to chase Val around the cell, having their fun and amusing him too. Garid pushed Senna's patience on tickling Val, coming close to annoying the good woman too many times.

"No you don't," said Senna in a stern tone. "I won't have you three making any noise today. The guards are in a bad mood because I insisted that they get me a needle and some thread. One of them appropriated some cloth from the Lady Avalzanet's chambers, and they are all in trouble for it. How else do you think I'm making this coverlet for you?" she asked Valza'in, knowing that the stern sound of her voice would sufficiently chide the boy, despite the fact that he probably had no idea what she was telling him. She shook out the coverlet in her hands, revealing it to be much bigger than they had first expected. Not only had she woven the strips of her dress together to create a mat, but she had sewn onto it the heavy cloths she had gotten from the guards into a blanket for it. And her gown was vastly layered with varying colors and styles of cloth, silk being very prevalent among them. But in all her many centuries of captivity, Senna had no need until now to make use of them.

Senna smiled inwardly, acknowledging the auspicious nature of getting the guards to do *anything* for a prisoner of the Obelisk; let alone steal from Ullix's consort for her.

Valza'in hung his head in apology, smiling innocently at his foster mother. Turning back to the ghosts after receiving a forgiving sigh from his "parent," Valza'in held out his arms to the ghosts, beckoning them to come closer. This they did, and the three of them began humming a tune that Senna had taught them. Though Valza'in did not know the words, the melody was simple enough, and he hummed along happily.

Senna looked up from her tatting and observed her friends singing the old Hymn of Salvation. She set down her weaving and listened more carefully. Val had such a beautiful voice, and it blended smoothly and beautifully with those of Broceliande and Garid. Theirs were ghostly voices, ethereal as their transparent bodies. The combination of their two wispy voices and Valza'in's humming was almost angelic. Senna started singing with them, adding her deep, dulcet tones to compliment theirs and augment the melody.

The song they sang told about the ancient history of Harlus, of the way it used to be, of her discovery of the orb, her capture, Ullix's gaining of the sphere, and the subsequent disasters. It also told of the impending rescue and salvation of Harlus' people, and of those who would make it so. Senna had originated the song in her dungeon when she was first entrapped there, and somehow it had leaked out of the Obelisk, traveling from town to town over the centuries on the tongues of bards and commoners alike. She was sure Broceliande had sung it in the presence of one of the town's populace, and unknowingly started a tradition. Or perhaps a guard, having heard it sung enough times to remember it well enough, sang it to a child who in turn remembered it and shared it with her own. The song survived because the song offered hope for the people who heard and shared it, even though many of those whose

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tongues had shared its beauty have long passed this realm, as have many who had heard it.

The hymn was quite lengthy, and many of the bards chose to shorten it in their chantings. Others customized it to their own preferences, or misunderstood it; and thus it evolved. But the melody and the message stayed the same.

The guards were in trouble for stealing material from Lady Avalzanet. But the deed was not enough to be worthy of Ullix's attention. He had a world to maintain in his grasp. It wasn't as though the Lady Avalzanet was anything more than a pawn to be played at his whim anyway. The guards might be upset by their singing, or they might be comforted by it. So Senna joined the three figures on the floor, casting her ageless beauty upon them. The four sang earnestly, and the beautiful aria wafted through the cracks in the walls and the spaces in the doors to float gently throughout the lower dungeon level, enlightening and bringing hope to those few who heard it. Not once were they told to be silent, for the guards that sullenly passed the time down there enjoyed the music too, despising their task as much as they despised their hateful master. Ullix was not stupid. He wanted his servants to value their lives enough to want to go on. So he did not reign utterly in destitution and despotism. He allowed for *some* freedoms. Why keep this world alive otherwise?

Senna, Valza'in, Broceliande, and Garid spent many nights doing such things as this. While those who dwelt above their pitiful abode were oblivious of the joy that was felt in the pit of deepest oppression, sparks of joy lit up the gloom like fireflies, darting here and there to be heard and enjoyed by all within hearing range. Wails of the tormented, moans of the sick, cries of the heartbroken and dying were eased if only for the moment to listen to the hymn. The guards leaned against their posts, nodding off dreamily to the melody of two human and two ghostly voices. It seemed that the beauty created in the darkness momentarily freed everyone down there, and they were all the more happy

for it. The guards and the prisoners were in solidarity; equals in their unwanted fates, equals in the hope felt in their hearts.

And for the reason that the inhabitants of cell number four-hundred and thirty-eight brought respite from the horrors of their everyday lives did the guards obligingly begin to be more hospitable to the prisoners. Senna would speak through the door of her cell to the guards at times, requesting certain things such as the cloth, the thread, and the needle. Now the food was never forgotten, and Senna delighted in finding fresher, cleaner water more often for them to drink and clean themselves with. Oh, Senna was quite proud of the loving home that her jealous prison was doing its best to oppose. And she was not about to give it up. Broceliande and Garid heard no further news about Ullix and the orb, and that was perfectly fine with her.

The guards that had secured the cloth for Senna had long since forgotten their rueful woes, and were now thoroughly enjoying the enchanting sounds that emanated from behind the heavy door. It was made from heavy oak, a wood that was common in the days before the cataclysm. It allowed the music to pass more freely than stone. Lady Avalzanet could stew in her jealousy and anger. Their positions were secure.

Their only thoughts now were to keep the two prisoners and their ghostly friends as happy as they could, for they did not want to see them go just as much as the other prisoners wanted them to stay... to brighten their lives and bring hope. Just as much as their captors had no intention of letting them go. The majority of the guards that had thrown Valza'in into the dungeon those many months ago were in some manner or another dispatched or killed, allowing for a feeling of less oppression among the guards and captives alike. The guards even smuggled in juicy tidbits of meat and other more desirable delectables for Senna and Val. The inmates grew to know and even like the few guards that spent their lives down there with them, for they—along with

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the ghosts—were the only contacts they had with the outside world. Sadly, the pair of ghosts and pair of guards rarely left the Obelisk walls.

Loris and Pouldin, as Senna came to know the guards, would often question them on any needs they might have, or just call through the door to tell them any prominent occurrences. The two guards were kind to them, often requesting that they sing their lovely melodies, or just ask them to laugh. It so much warmed their hearts to hear Val's innocent laughter. Innocence was not commonly known in the city of gloom. And very rarely was it heard. Valza'in grew to recognize their voices too, eventually. Whenever the two men would speak to them it usually meant food or water, or something like cloth for Senna. Val liked these men much better than the five who initially captured them, and he did not care that they wore similar clothes.

Pouldin had a wife and children at one time, as Senna learned. But the guard refused to speak of them, and Senna soon put the notion out of her head to ask. Her ability to read thoughts told her enough. The guards spent their lives in the subterranean gloom with them, prisoners themselves of their lowly positions. Their only respite was the knowledge that they were not considered prisoners, and that they were treated a modicum better than the prisoners when other guards came down there to inspect the place.

And eventually, they too became part of Senna's family.

...of regrets

Chapter 6

Baringer and Galden pushed themselves through the throngs of people that milled about within the confines of the tavern. Baringer noted that even more people had gathered around the tables now than when he had first arrived. Most likely due to the storm outside. Though the stone walls were thick and the people were loud, they could still hear the thundering of the storm and the rain as it pelted the walls and roof. The air was stale and musty, rife with the scents of easily one hundred bodies forced together to avoid the thrashing winds and wet outside.

The land had not received a decent drenching in quite some time, although the rains were intermittent and common, despite there being no sun to provide engorged clouds with steam. Baringer was thankful that he had checked to make sure the stable was reinforced with heavy wooden beams and some slabs of stone on the sides. He was satisfied that it would last through the downpour, no matter how long the rains would last. No matter the wood being easily five centuries old and not suitable to last another onslaught. Miracles happened. People took them for granted, but utilized them nonetheless.

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Baringer pulled Galden along behind him through the masses of people. They were all quite mellow and sodden with ale, the few that weren't noisily eating their food or talking with their neighbors. Their nostrils were assaulted with mingled aromas of meat, ale, spices, and mushrooms. What a pity that everything always smelled of mushrooms. Someone must have taken care of the urine and other bodily seepages Baringer noticed earlier. Galden hoped he did not have to suffer through a meal containing anything anywhere near mushrooms.

Without warning, a big, sweaty head was pushed into Baringer's stomach, knocking him back into Galden, who fell onto the floor. Baringer almost toppled, but saved his friend from a concussion by keeping his balance. The head belonged to a much sweatier man who staggered sideways and upset a nearby table and its contents, sending the diner's drinks and food noisily to the floor.

Those seated, in turn, jumped to their feet and shoved the man back, sending him sprawling onto the floor. Baringer, who had caught his breath, steeled himself for another onslaught, and with one menacing look at the agitators, informed them he was in no mood to be trifled with. The drunkard remained in a heap on the floor, which Baringer clumsily trod upon, though Galden skirted the messy bulk, sickened by the vomitous dribbling from his mouth. He helped the people set the table back upright, and apologized for the loss of their meal. Making sure his friend wasn't looking, he slipped a gold coin onto their table, and backed away quickly.

"Over there," said Baringer, pointing to the back of the room, at the lone, secluded table. He was either too focused on their destination or chose to disregard the annoying fracas behind him. Vortigurn and the old man were sitting at the table, the elf looking over the crowd to see them. Her eyes met with Baringer's and a smile crossed her face. She called out to them in her thick accent, and gestured them forward.

“We have been waiting for you,” she said as the two young men sat themselves at the table. From where it was situated, the crowd was separated from them by a small wall protruding from the building’s interior, apparently from a time when the inn’s owner had decided to increase the building’s capacity. It effectively shielded them from the incessant babbling of the people behind them, and allowed them to speak more freely and be understood better.

“The barkeep will serve your food momentarily,” spoke the old man. “I have informed him that you two would be joining us. He already knows you are here, and is preparing your meal.” He focused his empty eyes on Galden and continued. “And he will not be serving you any mushrooms.” Galden looked quizzically at the old man, but said nothing. Vortigurn smiled at him, dizzying him with her radiance.

“Galden,” said Baringer after a pause, “this is... uh...” He faltered, looking at Vortigurn pleadingly for assistance.

“Saris,” spoke the old man, nodding his dark brown head politely. “And this is my daughter Vortigurn. We will be joining you on your quest.” He touched his fingertips together in front of him, neither smiling nor frowning. He stared straight forward.

Baringer’s politeness was instantly forgotten and he brusquely questioned his statement. “And who said we were going to ask you to join us?” he demanded, an angry grimace shrouding his face. “That is, if we were even on a quest; not that we’ve said we’re on one anyway. It seems to me that you’ve assumed...”

“I’ve assumed nothing,” interjected Saris, cutting him off. “It was your own subconscious desires that asked us to accompany you, and we gladly accept. You will find us valuable on your journey.” The pursed lips and icy stare added gravity to the old man’s statement, and told all assembled that there was no argument to be accepted.

Galden looked from Vortigurn to Saris, curious as to what he was saying. “In what way can you two help us?” he asked. “I must question your motives; and your ethics.

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When I first encountered your daughter, she was trying to steal horses. And that doesn't make you two sound very helpful to me." He folded his arms across his chest, trying to avoid the intoxicating stare of the elf by focusing all his attention on Saris. It wasn't working well.

"I will prove it to you then," acquiesced Saris, smiling slightly. "Now, then, pay close attention to me, and every word I say. He leaned across the table, closer to them, and cupped his hand over his mouth. "I can read your minds!" he whispered, smiling slightly.

"What kind of secret is that?" asked Baringer, angrily sitting back in his chair. "You told me that earlier today."

"Ah yes," responded the old man. "But you both looked directly at me for just a moment. Take a look," he said with a smile, waving his arm at Vortigurn.

"Oh!" gasped Galden and Baringer together, staring blankly at where the girl had been sitting. Neither could understand how the old man was able to get them to focus their attention, and to not see anything else that happened directly in front of them. Instead of her dainty elfin form, the two companions saw sitting in her place the form of a large, burly man, brawny muscles jutting out in every imaginable place, and large, shaggy furs draped over his rough body. He growled ominously at them, revealing two rows of sharpened teeth set deep in a battle-scarred face.

"Allow me introduce my daughter Vortigurn to you," mirthfully spoke Saris. The form of the warrior instantly melted away to reveal her original shape, that of the elfin girl. Galden breathed a sigh of relief and dropped his gaze to the table. "I guess we could use you after all," he agreed, noting the immense possibilities the girl held. "But what about you?" he asked Saris, looking back at him. "What can you do for us?"

"Not now, Galden," stated Saris, looking up. Galden was just about to wonder how the old man knew his name without him stating it when he was greeted by a buxom waitress who was deftly balancing a large round tray in her hand.

On it were four plates of steaming food—no mushrooms to Galden’s relief—and four large mugs of ale. Smiling at Baringer, who basked in the momentary glory by nonchalantly pulling aside more of his vest to reveal his chest, she set down the four plates and mugs in front of them, and then held out her hand for the gratuity.

Baringer drank in her appearance with his eyes. He could see the milky white flesh of her décolletage as it heaved with her breathing, tantalizingly inviting him to partake in hidden pleasures. Leaning back, he opened his mouth and slid his tongue across his upper lip. The waitress, not unfamiliar with his language, allowed a faint smile, and gestured with her outstretched hand. The sly and frugal man that he was, Baringer instead grasped her hand in his own, and gave it a genteel kiss. He looked into her melting eyes and smiled gratefully. “We all thank you for your fine service, milady,” he said, further enrapturing the young woman, “and I look forward to any additional... services.. you can provide.” She blissfully pulled her hand back and backed away, all thoughts of a gratuity forgotten in her enchantment. She returned to the bar, giggling as she told her fellow waitresses about her experience.

“You are very wise,” spoke Saris, nodding at Baringer. “Your talents will serve to save you a lot of money... Along with your lives perhaps.”

“What do you mean: our lives?” queried Galden as he lifted his fork and knife to cut into the meat before him. It was tender and juicy, and cut easily as he sliced into it. It tasted even better than it looked and he enjoyed it immensely. “Do you think we’re in danger?”

“I just say that as a warning,” he answered, starting with his own meal. He daintily cut apart the meat and ate it along with the various other items on his plate. Vortigurn, however, ate voraciously, as if she had not eaten in days... Or did not intend to. Galden was fascinated by her, watching as she ate, while she paid little or no attention to him. He slowly began to partake of the meal himself, noticing that

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the others were already wolfing down the meal.

Baringer was no longer riled at the thought of their companionship, although he continued to be suspicious of their motives. But, he thought to himself, it was apparent that these two needed to escape from something, and that by joining them, they could accomplish that. Why else had the elf-maiden tried to secure them some horses? He stared openly at the elf, noting the outfit she wore, and how well it concealed her figure. He could tell there was a heavenly body beneath the bulky animal skin—whatever fur that bulked up her appearance couldn't lie to him.

"What are you running from?" he asked aloud, setting down his fork. He was met by instant silence from the table, as all eyes were turned to Saris. He set down his utensils and folded his hands together, leaning his elbows on the table.

"That, Baringer of Kaelmorde, is quite a story, and worthy of a lengthy explanation. You two deserve to hear it, but I shall not burden you with the details. Let it just be known that we no longer wish to tarry in this village, and your quest seems more appealing than what may befall us should we decide to stay here. There are certain people who have been hunting me... hunting *us*... and would stop at nothing to kill us—should they find us. And I fear this may be soon." He fumbled on the table for his silverware, picked them up, and returned to eating.

Vortigurn looked again at Galden, although this time he did not feel entranced. She was looking at him earnestly now, imploring him with her eyes. "Will you help us, Galden?" she asked of him. "Will you let us accompany you?"

"Of course," answered Galden, unable to refuse her pleading stare. How could he refuse her; and would they even listen if he refused? They ate in silence, casting occasional glances at each other. As they were finishing the dinner, Saris set down the mug he was drinking from and placed his hands on the table.

“The storm will end the day after tomorrow at precisely midcycle. We will come to your chamber on that day, and then all four of us shall depart, early that morning, before the rains end. No one will be foolish enough to follow us. No one will be expecting us to leave so soon.” He then rose from his chair, as did Vortigurn, and the two departed.

“I must say,” said Baringer to Galden after the mysterious father and daughter had left them, “those two are some of the oddest people I’ve ever met. When did you tell them our names?”

“I didn’t. I thought you did. He... he read our minds. I didn’t tell him. Anything.” He pushed his plate and mug away and lifted himself from the chair. “Come on,” he spoke in a low voice. “Let’s go back to our room before anyone breaks into it and takes the book.”

“I wonder if Saris knows about that, too,” muttered Baringer as he followed him. They hurriedly pushed their way past the masses of people toward the staircase, making sure to give a wide berth to the table that was upset earlier. The drunkard was no longer on the floor. Someone either moved him, or he got tired of being kicked, jabbed and stepped upon. Once they made it to the inn’s front and the staircase, they were no longer hindered by the various bodies getting in their way. They leaped up the stairs, taking two at a time, and very soon arrived at their small room. When Galden inserted the key into the lock, he was relieved to find it still secured. They both went inside it, closed the door behind them, and locked it securely.

“So we’re going to stay here one more day then, I guess,” noted Baringer, looking squarely at his friend. He took off his vest, kicked off his boots, and sat on the edge of the single bed in the room. “We’re going to get soaked to the bone! That old man is crazy if he expects us to...”

“Maybe not,” interrupted Galden. “At least it’ll give us a head start. And besides, I’ve got some money. I can buy us some cloaks and some more supplies.” He sat down on the other side of the small bed, exhausted from the day’s expe-

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riences, and fatigued by the rain outside. The cold soaked into his very soul, exhausting him more than any strenuous effort could.

“Move over,” grunted Baringer as he tossed his hat onto the floor at the foot of the bed. He pushed Galden over to his side of the bed, and lay down, pulling the bed cover over himself.

“What am I supposed to use?” asked Galden, pulling at the cover. Baringer only grunted in annoyance and pretended to ignore him. Glumly, Galden lay back upon the bed, pillowing his head with his arms. When he heard his friend’s snores and deep breathing, he turned his back to Baringer’s, and gently tugged enough of the blanket over himself to keep from shivering himself to sleep.

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“I’m going to tend to the handsome one,” said the barmaid to the group of giggling women that crowded into the kitchen of the tavern. “You know, the one with all those bulging muscles and... other things.” She traced a line from her breastbone down to her stomach and grabbed herself below, to the delight of the cackling barmaids.

“Ha!” snickered an older hag tried and true in the profession. “Every woman in the tavern saw it bulging the minute you swung yourself and your loose tits into his sight!” She pressed her own sagging mounds upward with her hands and pursed her lips to mock the other.

The first speaker pouted and crossed her arms underneath the very mounds of flesh they were discussing. “Well, that may be,” she said slowly, “but last night you were mistaken for a man six times by six different people!”

“You bitch!” shrieked the older one. “Kaydrith, you’re a slut! You’ll end up on the wrong end of a pitchfork one of these days. You mark my words: You’ll get what you deserve, and it won’t be a knob in your hatch or a coin in your purse, either.”

Kaydrith scoffed audibly at her warnings. "Right," she drawled. "Of course. As you say exactly, ma'am! You tried so hard to teach us virtue, and this is how we turn out."

"The other guy's kind of cute," spoke up a younger barmaid hopefully. She gulped hard, and blushed.

"That skinny little puppy," laughed Kaydrith. "No. No indeed. I'm going for the choice cut! The other's just a baby! Whatever meat he might have on his bones probably can't even get up on its own yet!" She sneered at the younger barmaid. "He's a little boy, and definitely *not* worth my time. You'll set your sights a little higher if you want to get anywhere."

"I... I don't mind," replied the younger one, dejectedly. She smoothed her short hair back, and brushed some loose strands out of her face.

"Hey, girls," laughed the old barmaid, who had been listening to the whispered intrigues of yet another who had come up to them. "Hear this! Them folks are going on a quest... for treasure! Word is they got treasure already up in their rooms!" Indeed, with so many people in the tavern and inn, Baringer and Galden's schemes did not go completely unheard.

"Treasure?" repeated Kaydrith loudly. She narrowed her eyes and licked her lips greedily. Facing the old hag and her conspirator: "You heard that, eh? See that, Nisqué? Maybe you should go after that puppy dog!"

"A quest?" whispered the youngest, Nisqué, under her breath. Her eyes lit up, and a smile slowly spread across her face. In her seventeen years of life, ten of them had been spent serving ale and food to the aristocracy of filth that she was also obliged to clean up after. A quest? Nisqué cast her glance down to the floor, not speaking another word about it.

The others continued their gossip, though Kaydrith soon lost interest in their idle chatter. She had set her sights on a prize, and meant to get her hands on it.

• • •

The next morning, Galden woke up to find himself on the floor beside the bed. Scratching his head and stretching, he realized that he must have been dreadfully tired not to notice such a tumble. The blanket was covering him, but the fact remained that he was on the floor, and his side ached from the chill he absorbed from the ancient floor boards. He could hear Baringer moving about on the bed above him, and this further served to aggravate him. Baringer always managed to do things like that to him. Somehow during the night he must have either spoken to and convinced him to get on the floor, or very meticulously lifted him and deposited his sleeping form down there. That, or he really did fall. Galden pulled the cover around himself and stood up. His back ached and that did not sit well with him.

He noted the peacefully slumbering Baringer on the bed, one arm propped beneath the pillow, the other lying across his chest. Galden slowly leaned down to pull the pillow out from under his head, when Baringer snapped his body upward, upsetting him from his plan.

“Huh? What?” he sputtered. He looked at Galden standing next to the bed, robed in the bedsheet. His alarm subsided, and he stretched luxuriously. “Thought you could sneak up on me?” he asked with a wink. He punched the pillow and set it straight on the bed. “Here, hand me that,” he requested of Galden as he rose from the bed. Galden grumpily gave the blanket to Baringer, who shook it out, folded it, and set it on the bed. Again he stretched, extending his arms above his head and bending backwards. It was an opportune time for Galden to toss some water from the wash basin upon him, which he did.

Baringer looked Galden straight in the face. Galden expected him to jump upon him and fight, something they occasionally did. But Baringer only smiled politely. Baringer always did like to keep Galden one step behind him. And Galden knew that Baringer would get him back for that

when he least expected it. "What an idiot!" he thought to himself grimly.

Before they could do anything further, a knock on the door startled them. Baringer strode across the room and cautiously opened it. He was surprised to see the woman who had waited on them the night before. She was carrying a bucket in her hand and dragged a large barrel-on-wheels behind her.

"D'ye need any fresh water for your wash basins?" she asked of him with a smile. Baringer noticed that she was wearing a low cut blouse that hung loosely from her shoulders, cleverly revealing more than it was supposed to when fully buttoned. He could make out the pink tip of her breasts, which she proudly displayed for him. He rubbed his hand across his chest and smiled. He knew that the tavern's staff would have filled the wash basin with fresh water later on in the day anyway, and that the girl had gone through the trouble of hauling up the barrel just to catch a glimpse of him without his shirt on. Her choice of outfit did not go unnoticed, and it was apparent to the skilled minister of womanly virtue that her intentions were not of the honorable sort. Her dress was hiked up and pinned to the side, revealing her slender legs underneath. She was barefoot, and Baringer could see her small feet, pale against the dark floor.

"Sure," he spoke with a smile, admitting the girl into the room. She entered, running the fingers of her left hand across his chest as she did, passing Galden as he was buttoning his vest. Without giving him a second glance, she grabbed the wash basin, opened the window, and tossed the water out into the rainy, dark morning. She closed the window before any of the drenching rain could fall in, and set the basin back upon the small table across from the bed. She then looked deep into Baringer's eyes, staring intently.

"Ummm... Galden," spoke Baringer, his eyes never once averting from hers, "you go on ahead and get yourself some breakfast downstairs. I'll just stay up here and rest a bit."

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“Yes,” added Kaydrith. “And I brought some breakfast up here anyway... But only enough for one. I’m sorry,” she said, looking apologetically at Galden, who grumpily closed the door behind him.

“Now then, milady,” whispered Baringer as he picked up the bucket of water, “do let me help you with this heavy bucket.” He poured the water into the basin, and set the bucket back upon the floor, but not before intentionally spilling some on the front of his pants.

“Why, good sir,” she whispered back to him, putting a trembling hand to her bosom. “You needn’t be so kind. I can *do* my job.” She alluringly batted her eyes at him, sidling closer to him.

“May I take the liberty to ask your name?” he asked with a smile. He too was slowly edging closer to her, goosebumps spreading over his body. He reached out his arms and placed his hands on her shoulders, then ran them down her arms. The shoulder of her blouse slipped off revealing the smooth skin of her arms and her breasts.

“Kaydrith,” she answered, running her slender fingertips across his chest and stomach.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Kaydrith,” whispered Baringer. He backed her against the foot of the bed, planting a kiss on her anxiously awaiting lips. In one fluid motion, Kaydrith unfastened the waist of Baringer’s breeches, letting them join her blouse on the floor, and the two fell onto the bed. Baringer, while kissing the girl passionately, pulled her dress off, and the two enjoyed the pleasure of each other’s company above the covers of the small bed.

Below in the inn’s tavern, Galden glumly sat down at the same table he had sat at the night before, setting his arms on it. He angrily lay his forehead down upon his clenched fist, clenching his eyes shut and grumbling about the injustices of having a friend with tremendous sex-appeal. He could envision Baringer thrusting into the woman, testing the endurance of that small bed... a bed he would

have to sleep on that night; unless Baringer somehow kicked him off again. How he hoped that he could find more sheets somewhere. And another pillow.

A tap on his shoulder brought him back to his senses. Galden looked over his hunched shoulder to see Vortigurn standing there, smiling pleasantly. "May I join you for breakfast, Gugalden?" she asked, sitting down beside him. Galden returned her smile, grateful to have some company... especially hers.

"It's, uh, it's just Galden. Where's your father?" he asked of her, before she could respond to his admonition. He no longer seemed to be entirely flustered by her presence, although she still made him feel giddy with her radiance.

"He's ordering for us. I expected to see your friend Baringer with you," she added, looking to the empty seat across from her. "Baringer is his name, yes?"

"He's still upstairs," he added glumly, not wanting to talk about his companion and his ministrations.

"Oh, okay," Vortigurn sighed, looking back to the counter where Saris was talking to the barkeep. He reached into a pocket of his robe, pulled out something, and deposited it in the barkeep's hand. Then he stumbled toward them, one of his hands groping slightly in front of him. He thumped his staff lightly on the floor ahead of him, using it to guide his way past the tables and chairs. Galden wondered why he even needed it, seeing that the old man moved with the grace of a cat. As he arrived at the table, he sat down with a soft plump, and leaned his staff against the side of the table.

"Good morning, Galden," he said brightly, smiling cheerfully at him. "Where is Baringer?" He folded his hands on the table. "He is meant to be with us this morning. I have seen it so." Galden motioned upward with his hand, then remembering that the man was blind, he was about to speak. Saris however cut him off, nodding patiently. "He is still in your room, then. Just as well. We shall have to save his breakfast for him then." He wrinkled his brow in concern,

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and Galden wondered if the old man had an idea of what was going on.

Vortigurn smiled shyly at Galden, then demurely cast her eyes downward. Galden smiled at her as well, making note of the slight hint of something in her eyes.

Breakfast was served them by another waitress, as Galden well expected. The girl was younger than Kaydrith, and less developed. "Here you are," she spoke shyly, hastily setting down the plates in front of them. She smiled broadly at Galden, who failed to notice it. "Shall I save the fourth serving, good people?" she asked, setting the glasses of spiced milk before them. Her hands were trembling slightly, and managed to upset the third glass she set on the table. It fell over, spilling the milk over Galden's lap.

"Oh!" she cried, tears beginning to well up in her eyes. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." She immediately ripped off her apron and set the tray on the table. As she leaned down to wipe the spilled milk from the floor and table, she bumped her head against Galden's as he, too, was leaning forward to avoid the spilled milk before it soaked into his pants. "I'm so terribly s-sorry," she wailed, crying now.

"Nonsense," laughed Galden, brushing her tears away with his finger. As he did so, he looked into her young eyes, a reflection of... something catching his attention. But only momentarily. She smiled, and stood up. She deposited the wet apron on the tray, and set the fourth glass of milk before him. "I'll get another for your friend when he gets down here," she spoke softly, turning to go back to the counter.

Galden grabbed her arm gently before she could go. Something stirred within him, and he asked, "Will I see you again? I mean, uh, will you be our server today?"

She smiled demurely at him, and nodded her head gratefully. She then walked quickly to the counter, disappearing behind the kitchen doors.

Galden sat at the table, the milk making his breeches sodden and clingy. He smiled awkwardly at Vortigurn, who stifled a giggle behind her hand. He knew that the milk

would give him an unpleasant aroma if he did not change into something else and clean his pants.

“Why do you not go back to your room and change?” Saris asked, reading his thoughts. “Certainly your sitting here will do nothing for your breeches. Do not worry,” he laughed, “we will not eat your breakfast.”

“I, uh, I can’t go up there... right now,” stuttered Galden in exasperation. “Baringer’s up there... with one of the girls. The one that served us last night. They’re having... relations...”

“Good heavens, boy!” erupted Saris, standing abruptly up from his chair. Galden looked confusedly at him then at the suddenly worried face of the elf.

“What? What is it?” he asked, looking back and forth between the elf and the old empath.

“Do you not see, lad?” asked Saris angrily. “The whore will steal your book! Her only reason for having intercourse with your friend is to steal all your valuables! She knows about your book and your quest!”

“Oh no!” cried Galden, jumping up and running to the stairs. He was followed closely behind by Vortigurn, while Saris worriedly trotted along behind them, doing his best not to bump into anyone.

Jumping up the stairs three at a time, they both arrived at the door simultaneously, breathing hard from the run up the stairs. Galden hastily fumbled the key into the lock, and twisted it open. Throwing open the door, they saw Baringer lying face down, inert and naked on the bed, a stream of blood from an open slit across his neck soaking into the bedsheets. Kaydrith, fully clothed, was rifling through their belongings.

“Dear Heavenly Fathers!” gasped Galden, tripping over the water bucket that Baringer had let fall by the door. Before he could react, he heard an animalistic roar from behind him, and turned just in time to see a huge gryphon spring through the open door, striking its mighty claws at the petrified Kaydrith. Vortigurn struck the back of her im-

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mense paw against Kaydrith's head, and knocked the girl unconscious against the wall.

As the whore fell limp to the floor, the shape shifter reverted to her elfin form and helped Galden to his feet. "Hurry!" she cried as the two dashed to Baringer's side. She turned Baringer over onto his back, drew the bed sheet over his lower extremities, and used the pillow cover to wipe away the blood from his neck and chest. Baringer was deathly pale, and when Vortigurn leaned her ear against his chest, she shook her head sadly. "I cannot hear anything," she whispered, her voice trembling from the excitement.

"No!" shouted Galden angrily, he grabbed Vortigurn's shoulders and shook her angrily. "You're lying! He can't be dead! He's my best friend! I won't let..."

"He is not dead," spoke Saris' voice from behind him. "Yet." The old man had stumbled his way up the stairs, finally arriving at the room after Galden and Vortigurn's noisy entrance. "Step aside please," he ordered sternly, shoving Galden away from the bed with his staff. Vortigurn fell to the floor, a hurt look covering her face as she glanced at Galden. Saris dropped his staff onto the floor, where Vortigurn quickly grabbed it and held it close. The old man leaned down over Baringer, extending his gnarled hands to touch his neck.

"What are you doing?" shouted Galden, trying to rush forward and snatch the old man's hands away. The staff, handled by the elf-girl, stopped his progress, tripping him and sending him sprawling on the floor. From there he could see Saris' hands begin to tremble as a pale light shone forth from his fingers, embalming his friend in its faint glow. Before his very eyes, the gash in Baringer's neck sealed itself, and the blood that had trickled out flowed back into his body. As Saris pulled his hands back, he issued an order to his daughter in some foreign tongue, and the girl jumped up and retrieved the bowl of water from the table. This she poured over Baringer's face and neck, and Saris' still-trembling hands.

“What?” sputtered Baringer, coughing. He looked around in surprise, blinking the water from his eyes. He noticed Kaydrith’s limp form across from him, slumped on the floor, and realized what had happened. He reached up to touch his neck. “Did you...?” he asked looking astoundedly at Saris.

The old man nodded and pulled him up. “Come, hurry. Get dressed. We must leave today. Vortigurn. Get our things. Galden, gather your belongings together. We depart today. The girl too.” The old man helped Baringer to his feet, the latter holding his hand to his head, still dizzy from the healing he just experienced. He pulled on his clothes quickly, casting stray disdainful glances at the unconscious woman. Galden had just finished packing and Vortigurn had just entered with two bags and several cloaks when the young waitress burst into the room.

“I heard some noises from up here, and when I didn’t find you at the table, I thought...” She gasped in mid-sentence, noticing Kaydrith on the floor. “Did she try to kill... I mean... Oh Lords.” She paled, staring blankly around at the other’s faces. Tears welled in her eyes, and she held a trembling hand to her chest. “Take me with you,” she whispered, trembling visibly now.

“We can’t!” hissed Galden angrily at the frightened girl. “We have no room!” He had not noticed Saris’ statement thinking he was referring to Vortigurn. “ ‘The girl too’,” he repeated, looking at the old man in exasperation. “How many people *are* coming with us?”

“I’ve got a horse in the stables,” she pleaded. “I have nothing here. No family... Everyone treats me like a child...”

“No!” snapped Galden, looking madly about him.

“But I...” she faltered, falling to her knees. “I c-can’t stay here. I *need* to come with you. *Please*.”

“There is no time to argue now,” spoke Saris as he accepted a cloak from Vortigurn. “We have prepared for your company, girl. Be swift about getting your necessities for the trip.” He sniffed at Galden. “Do not ignore me again,

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boy,” he hissed angrily.

The girl hesitated a moment, then, prodded by the stern look Saris gave her, rushed out of the room.

“What do you mean by taking her with us?” asked Baringer. “For all we know she could be in with this slut here!” He pointed angrily at Kaydrith’s slumped body. Vortigurn handed him and Galden a cloak, shaking her head firmly.

“She is not in league with that sort,” she spoke softly, brusquely handing Galden the cloak. “If my father says so, we must trust that she will be an asset to our journey. You shall discover that soon.” She put on her own cloak and the four bustled out of the room. Galden was relieved to find the book safely packed in his satchel, never having been discovered by the unwelcome visitor to his room. The four quickly glided down the steps, Saris being guided and supported by Galden, Baringer leading the way. They were met by the young waitress, a thick cloak covering her head, and a lump on her back that told them she carried with her but a few supplies.

“I’m ready,” she spoke hastily.

Amid stray and curious glances from the patrons of the tavern and the staff, the five hooded figures departed the dry warmth of the tavern and entered the pouring rain outside; earlier than they had planned.

“Follow me!” shouted the girl over the roaring downpour. They dashed through the mud around the side of the building and into the opened door of the stables.

Once inside, they breathed easier, the cramped confines of the shed allowing them temporary respite from the rains. Speedwell and Po instantly recognized their masters, and gleefully crowded closer to them.

“We’re going out today,” spoke Baringer to the unicorn and the raven. Po perched happily on Baringer’s outstretched arm and quietly folded his wings together as the man pulled the bird under his cloak. The girl meanwhile had pulled several extremely large blankets from an open

cupboard on the side wall of the stable and began draping them over some of the horses.

“We’re taking these,” she informed them, indicating the four horses she had just covered. Galden assisted her in bridling them and hoisting the saddles onto their backs and securing them. The horses stomped anxiously at the floor of the stable, knocking around the stray wisps of hay.

“These are not your horses,” Saris stated as Vortigurn helped him mount.

Nisqué did not respond.

“What were you doing on your...” began Galden, but stopped himself before he could speak further. He did not want to know the intricacies of his friend’s sexual escapades. Baringer turned away from his friend in shame, and helped Nisqué finish the bridling.

Once Speedwell was covered by one of the tarps, the five wordlessly galloped out of the shack, into the black rain of early morning.

a book of memories

Chapter 7

Candles were spread about at various spaces inside the dank cell. Some of them were burning, some were not. Some were melted lumps of wax, some were pristine examples of new waxwork. On the smooth rock floor lay a small, woven rag rug that Senna had created from various scraps of cloth that Pouldin and Loris had managed to secretly smuggle to them. Senna herself sat upon a makeshift chair fashioned from pieces of one of the old oaken doors of a cell that had long since caved in. Pouldin had fashioned it for them in the solitary late nights when he and Loris, as was usual for them, were left alone down in the dungeons to guard the prisoners. It was not as if any of them were about to escape, but they had been stationed there for a reason... These two men were not deemed good—vicious, bloodthirsty?—enough for Ullix’s army, and were to be kept separated from the others in some useful function if they did not want to end up as prisoners themselves. Pouldin had spent quite some time building the chair while Loris kept watch for other guards. Then they snuck it into the cell to the delight of its four inhabitants. The chair had to be kept where it would not be seen by the casual guard inspecting the cell,

and the cave had enough space to guarantee that. It was, after all, in the lowest depths of the dungeons. Not many inspectors wasted their time down among the dregs.

Valza'in was sleeping peacefully on the mat and coverlet that Senna had made for him, his long hair falling over his face. Senna enjoyed combing through his hair after she washed it, lovingly comparing it to her own, which was now all of five feet long. His was only about a foot long, give or take an inch or two. It was constantly getting in his face when he was awake, and he no longer pushed it back from his eyes, being so accustomed to it.

Broceliande and Garid were off somewhere in the castle, having their fun scaring the few unwitting denizens of the Obelisk with their ghostly antics. Taking advantage of the superstitious lot. Senna knew that the two spirits never dared enter the higher portions of the black tower, knowing full well what sort of creatures dwelled up there. It was common knowledge among all the residents of the Obelisk—prisoner, guard, soldier and subordinate alike—what sort of horrific experiments Ullix performed on the mutilated bodies of his slain and wounded underlings. These experiments were occasionally seen from far off by various members of the guard battalion, their stories describing horrific creatures part human, part elf, part wolf, part bear, and part anything else that might come to mind. Broceliande and Garid also reported having seen these diabolic abominations. Senna was well aware that they were too frightened by the monsters to stray any farther upward than the ground floor. Ghosts could be made prisoners, too, it seemed.

What a shame, she thought, that the two of them were confined within the walls of the Obelisk. Their deaths had been so terrible that their essences were locked within the stone and mortar that made up the tower. Senna knew their only hope of freedom lied with her and Val's escape. Where she went, so could the haunting spirits. She had been present at both deaths, and she herself was the key to their salvation. And she knew that that salvation was drawing

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near. She did not know how she could bear losing two such good friends as they progressed to their new plane of existence. Perhaps they would stay with her long enough for it to be done. Senna leaned back on the chair, closing her eyes. She formulated an image in her mind; that of an open book. With her mind's eye she read the carefully etched writing that had long, long ago been written on the pages of the great tome... Written in the hand of her youngest son's youngest son. He had been too young to accompany his older siblings as they followed in thier parents' footsteps in the almost traditional search for Senna.

Senna's son was raised by his father in the kingly arts, and grew up to become the new ruler of Erz. One of his sons, Hronnemeer, rejecting the boring life of a pampered prince, ran off to become a bard. It was he who wrote the many passages of history in the book; imbuing it with his own unique perspective. It was the passage that told of the creation of the Sphere of Knowledge that Senna now perused.

For countless ages the gods who created life as it is known to this day dwelled high above the clouds, within the gaseous body of a star. Norbinda, the gods' stronghold, became the center of the universe... and the center of life.

From the fiery depths of nothingness that surrounded this star an unnamed planet erupted violently into existence within a dark expanse of a newly sprawled out universe. Forged by the very power of the gods, the world began to flower with a multitudinous variety of life, which included many species fashioned to the exact forms and likenesses of their own creators.

Humans resembled Mannedor, the god of mankind; elves bore a likeness to Koorlinn, god of elven-kind; Zarfozoluk appeared exactly as his own creations—the trolls; and so on until each species resembled its divine creator. Each particular race or species was born with a deep, innate belief, embedded nearly as deep as their souls, that his or her own race was superior to the others.

A conglomerate of deities and demigods called the Great Twelve poured as much life into the planet as possible. It was they who were

responsible for the formation of Harlus and the vast majority of its inhabitants, the other creations borne from unsanctioned and unholy unions between various members of the different species. As tribute to the twelve main races, twelve moons were erected around the planet, each named for its corresponding deity.

As the vast throng of separate cultures grew, so did racial tension; almost to the point of a smelting pot about to boil over and violently splash its roiling contents into a fire that would surely increase tensions to war. Within the marble halls of Norbinda, the gods and goddesses became restless. Here, too, tensions between them grew. How could they not support the standpoints of their creations? Does not a parent love their child to the exclusion of anything else? As the years progressed, so did the immense hatred for one another. A major conflict was unavoidable.

Mannedor gave the gift of foresight to Senna, the purest of her kind, as a warning of what would become of the world. In a last desperate attempt, Mannedor began to fashion a sphere of crystal into a containment device for such wisdom, knowledge, and truth never before known to mortals. Surely one as virtuous as his chosen would be the ideal guardian of the wisdom of the gods.

Nearly ten days before the great cataclysm rocked the world, the sphere of knowledge was spewn from the gods' stronghold in the sun toward Harlus' gravitational field. From Norbinda to Harlus, unerringly it rocketed downward, pulled by the planet's gravity, landing somewhere upon the surface in a rain of fire and smoke.

Days later, the house of the gods exploded, sending waves of shock millions of miles in every direction, shattering any planet in its path. It crushed moons and asteroids as if they were nothing but brittle glass. Despite Mannedor's greatest intentions, he could not stop the other gods from decimating everything about them in their destructive hatred.

Harlus' only salvation was its twelve moons, which, aligned in the heavens as they were at this celestial moment, absorbed and deflected the brunt of the blast. It was as if the moons, sensing their namesake's cataclysmic war amongst themselves, had chosen to offset the destruction as best they could. The moons were not able to protect the planet completely though. Debris plummeted earthward, causing tidal waves, volcanoes, and earthquakes to shake the world apart. And in its subse-

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quent darkness, the great Queen Senna was able to see the light of the Sphere of Knowledge shining brightly amid the emaciated fields of her once majestic kingdom.

Senna did not need to read further. She knew well the story of her discovery of the orb and her subsequent disappearance. She noted that the book neglected to mention that Mannedor had also given her the gifts of precognition and immortality. Those gifts to her were most likely unknown to the people of Harlus, as she disappeared soon after the cataclysm.

It was obvious to Senna that the moons' destruction should have—and likely *did* have—far reaching effects; far beyond anyone's comprehension. Magic was the only explanation for the unexplainable. The planet survived, despite the despicable condition it remained in. What did the forces of gravity, of stellar destruction and black holes, the laws of physics and science... what did any of that have to do with a single, lone planet remaining intact in a solar system that did not? If there was life outside the known universe, life that was more aware of any known—what explanation could be made? How does one rationalize Harlus?

Senna opened her eyes and looked down at the still sleeping form of Valza'in. He usually slept with his head on her lap, her comforting hands upon his head. Senna arose from her chair and snuffed out the candles. She then lay down beside her son, and put her arm softly over his slumbering form. She pulled her hair into a pile beneath her head, and closed her eyes. Her son's mind would never be troubled by the thoughts that plagued hers. It just could not be possible. It *would* not be possible.

...of pride

Chapter 8

What started as one, then four, became seven, and then ten. Galden, Baringer, Saris, Vortigurn, Po, Speedwell, and Nisqué had been traveling for three days before they met up with the two elves. Talkative and nervous, Nisqué had been adamant about telling them her life story, about how she had been abandoned at the inn by uncaring parents, raised by barmaids and tennants, and taught to be subservient to all the wanton desires of the tavern's customers. She was highly proud of the fact that she was an expert cook and seamstress, and insisted upon sewing up a jerkin for Baringer, whom she suggested did not wear enough clothes.

The rains had died down the farther they were from Kurlingforde, as Nisqué had identified the town for them, and as the day was growing late, so the storm was dying down. Nisqué knew the area well, and when she was told of the quest that they were upon, she suggested that she knew the easiest and fastest way to the coast of the Kaelmorde peninsula. She spoke of a strait that separated the two peninsulas of the continent, and that beyond the second lay a vast ocean. She had served several sailors and merchants who had traversed that expanse of water, and was told many

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tales of the land of Erz. She told them all this as she cooked their meals from the scant bag she carried with her. They were amazed at the great amounts of food concealed within it, and more than grateful. It was she who stumbled upon the elves and the troll first.

The group, with Po flying off somewhere in search of a rodent or anything dead, had rounded a large outcropping of rock from the marshy surface, and discovered a rift in the earth before them. Down the slope of the crevice they were able to make out the two tall and one short forms.

Saris indicated that he sensed tension from the three figures below, but also general good intentions and an obvious great need to be rescued. "Tension?" asked Baringer, crossing his arms across his chest. "Really?" Galden and Baringer unwound a length of rope that Galden had secured in his satchel back in Kaelmorde. Nisqué insisted that one day she would have to clean out and organize the large bag for him, obviously wanting to discover the many interesting things within it and hopefully getting a glimpse at the wonderful *Book of Days* she heard so much talk about.

Shouting down to the three indistinguishable forms, Baringer made clear to them their intentions to help, and the three figures down below hollered up their appreciation and cooperation.

The rope was quickly secured to the rocky outcropping, and lowered to the unfortunate travelers below. Saris nodded happily as he recalled how a feeling of his had cautioned them enough to be on the lookout for such pitfalls, and Nisqué rebuked that it was her woman's intuition that saved them all. Vortigurn giggled to the others that it was their boredom of Nisqué's constant chatter that caused them to keep their eyes peeled for anything else that might take their minds off her ceaseless prattling. Galden politely asked them to shut the hell up, and he and Baringer pulled up the first of the unfortunates.

After some tugging and grunting, and some very obliged help from Vortigurn in the shape of a massive quarterhorse,

they hauled the first one up. He was a short, squat fellow, of a sickly green complexion. He was approximately four-and-a-half feet tall, had a small hump on his back, and a huge nose hanging above two chapped lips and below two jaundiced, yellow eyes. The fellow had sharp fangs, large pointed toenails, patchy hair, and clubbed feet. Altogether he presented a rather ungainly sight, and the travelers knew right off that the growling individual was none other than a troll. He held a large shield and a sword in one hand, and was grappling with a large bag, that appeared to contain something or someone, with the other.

“My deepest gratitude, folks,” he growled at them, making a facial gesture that was supposed to be a smile, but appeared to them to be an even deeper grimace.

As they greeted the troll, Vortigurn reverted back to her elf-self. “You know,” she said, “no one asked me if I could turn into a roc or a gryphon or something. You cannot expect me to do all of the thinking.” She folded her arms across her bosom and stamped her foot. Before any of the entourage could reply to her statement, Vortigurn had flung herself over the cliff, changing shape to that of a winged horse before their astonished eyes. They could see her winged form flutter down to the awaiting captives of the crevice, and before long, the two of them had ridden Vortigurn back up to the surface.

For once, Nisqué was silenced in awe, a rare treat for the others. Standing before them, albeit heavily bruised and visibly wounded, were an elf, a half-elf that bore a striking resemblance to the first, and the troll.

“We must extend our deepest gratitude to you and your followers,” spoke the first elf to Vortigurn, kneeling in front of her and kissing her extended hand. He wore leather breeches and a vest of the same material, and moccasins formed of a similar material. His long black hair hung loose from his head, a thin band keeping it out of his face, and a large beaded clasp at the end preventing the great mass of hair from straying too far. Although he had obviously at

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one time bled profusely from the many cuts and gashes on his body, he nevertheless assumed Vortigurn to be the leader of the group and paid her his chivalrous duties. The kneeling caused him discomfort and pain, but he bore it, and bore it well.

“Oh,” she breathed, amused at his droll actions. “I am not the leader of these people.” Looking around, her gaze stopped on Galden. “He is.” She pointed at him. He smiled briefly and waved a free hand. He and Baringer were rolling up the rope and re-depositing it in the satchel. Neither had paid attention to the rescued elf’s actions, nor heard what was spoken.

“Oh,” grunted the elf, wrinkling his nose in distaste. “Allow me to introduce my companions,” he said, standing again. He extended his arm to introduce the two others, both as wounded and bruised as he.

“I am called Kieran the Full-Blooded. This,” he said, pointing to the half elf, “is my brother Koldin. It is not his fault that he is only half-elf. He can... well...”

“I can do things with my mage half,” spoke the other calmly. He was hunched over, slightly covered by his heavy cloak, but the adventurers could easily make out his features. He wore a patch over his right eye, gloves on both hands, and had streaks of elvish black and magish grey in his long hair. He appeared to be the same age as his brother, however, which Nisqué later assumed to be around one- to two-hundred years old. “You know,” she whispered to Baringer. “They live much longer than we do. Elves, I mean.”

“And this is Zeboblonuk Fenoizizuk,” said Kieran last, pointing to the troll. The angry creature nodded his savage head, glaring at the spectators.

“Maybe we should’ve left him down there,” mumbled Nisqué to Vortigurn, nervously, hiding behind the elf girl.

All the while, Galden had kept silent, but noticing the prodding glances of the others at the old gentleman in their company, he spoke to the three newcomers. “Please forgive my ignorance,” he apologized, pulling Saris forward. “We

have a healer with us, and I'm sure he can help you with your wounds. Saris?" he asked, nudging him forward.

"Of course," laughed the old man, extending his hands before him. He neared Kieran, who backed away in disgust. "A human!" he gurgled, paling in disgust. He shrank back from Saris' trembling hands, but a touch on his shoulder from Koldin's gloved hands held him in his place.

The half-elf looked calmly at his brother, and then at the healer. "Be not prejudicial now, brother," he spoke calmly. "You know how I detest your superior attitude." He narrowed his eyes, and Kieran reluctantly allowed the old man to run his trembling fingers over his wounds.

The gnarled hands grasped Kieran's wrist. He rubbed them both up the arms, and across to the elf's neck. Kieran tilted his head back, restraining himself though gritting his teeth. The touch of a human, regardless of what that touch meant, was almost as bad as what malicious blade caused the angry gashes on his body. Saris, in a gentle movement, knelt down and put both hands on Kieran's thigh, rubbing downward as if he was brushing dirt away. He finished at the foot, and when he pulled his hands away, the elf abruptly backed off.

Once Kieran was fully healed, Saris advanced slowly to Koldin, who guided the old man's wizened hands to the various parts of his body needing attention, an action that his haughty older sibling had not seen fit to do. With the half-elf's aid, Saris was able to more swiftly heal him, and the troll had been so fat and well-armored that he had but a few scrapes on his face, legs, and arms. Saris healed those in no time at all, and stepped back, allowing Galden to begin the introductions.

Galden quickly introduced the members of his questing party, beginning with Baringer, and ending with Nisqué and Vortigurn. "She's his daughter" said he, a smug smile upon his face as he pointed at Saris. He could see the shock register on Kieran's face, glad that the elf-maiden had not been raised in the same prejudicial manner that the other elf was.

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His brother wasn't so bad, though, he thought. Probably because of his own tainted bloodline. Galden had always heard stories of the pompousness and almost debilitating pride of the elves, and now experienced it in person. "She's a shape-shifter," he added, a mysterious edge to his voice, "so watch out."

"What brings you to this remote pass?" asked Koldin, standing erect now that his wounds had been healed. "I'm surprised you haven't met up with the dark knights yet." He tossed his shoulders back and rolled them around, glad to be free of the aches and pains that they had recently been rid of. Nisqué, shy though she may be, was also quite personable and outgoing. She walked up to face him, smiling shyly.

"Dark knights?" repeated Nisqué in excitement. "Oh! Are there really dark knights here? Where did they go? How many of them were there? What were they riding? What did they look like?" She was promptly silenced by Baringer's hand as it clamped across her mouth. Her outgoing nature already gave her a modicum of familiarity among her traveling companions, and Baringer had no qualms about treating her that way.

"Yes," answered Koldin to her question, but speaking to everyone. "There are quite a few of them riding their shadow beasts around these parts." He pointed to the continuing road across the chasm. "They pursued us down this path, and we fell down the crevice to escape them. They continued onward, wailing like bansiodhes as they passed over us. We haven't been waiting long, and when you appeared, we were greatly relieved to see that you are quite alive... not... like them." He flashed an smile in their direction, and extended his gloved hands. "We are your humble servants now, and shall be glad to aid you upon your journey." He shot his brother a withering glance, and continued. "Do not worry about my brother. He will not hinder you with his fallibilities. Although he is extremely arrogant, he is also a valuable warrior, as is Zeb." The troll nodded in agreement.

"You mean," breathed Nisqué, freed from Baringer's grasp, "to tell us that there were dark knights not more than a few minutes ahead of us?" She wrapped her arms about herself, and shivered noticeably.

Galden realized now that the dumpy creature was not glaring *angrily* at them, and that his expression was naturally frozen in an ugly grimace. He looked at Koldin, apparently the wiser of the two brothers, and spoke. "We are already well-equipped for our journey, but I think we could use a few more good bodies to join our quest. I must speak with my companions before we make any decisions, but... uh... I-I welcome you to join us for a short stretch, and then spend the night with us as we make camp across the chasm."

His speech was met with approving nods from the assemblage. They then concentrated on crossing the chasm. Vortigurn immediately volunteered to change into the form of a winged creature as she had done before, and as that was the most feasible mode of crossing the gully, they all agreed upon it. She was easily able to transport the eight people across, and Po had no trouble flying across himself, but Speedwell and the horses posed a problem for her.

"I am not sure what shape to assume to bring the horses across," she worried, looking at the others for assistance.

"Why not assume the shape of a roc and carry them over?" asked Galden, not understanding the situation fully. "That should be easy enough."

"Your unicorn would understand my daughter's good intentions," spoke Saris, "but the horses would be frightened away by her form. I'm sorry, but I believe that we must leave the horses behind."

"And walk?" demanded Baringer. He breathed out a deep sigh and dropped his shoulders in resignation.

"We can't leave my horse back there!" argued Nisqué, stomping her foot in anger. "Take me back over there, and I'll make sure she won't run away. You'll see!" she declared, impertinently thrusting out her hand to point at the horses across the chasm. "Please! She's all I've got!"

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"All right then," agreed Vortigurn, assuming the shape of a large bird. She grasped Nisqué by the waist and flew her over the chasm. On the opposite side she set the ecstatic girl on her horse, and resumed her elfin body. The adventurers could see that the two girls were talking to the unicorn, who in turn nodded her ivory maned head in agreement. Then Vortigurn became a roc, and grasped Speedwell and Nisqué on her horse in her two giant claws. The other horses shied off, settling down a short distance away. The huge bird then flew her two burdens across the chasm, and dropped them safely on the other side.

"I believe that leaves us without steeds," commented Baringer dryly, smiling sadly at Galden. He looked back over the chasm to catch a last glimpse of the horses, when suddenly he saw a cloud of dust rising from around the rocks. The horses apparently noticed this, too, and began to gallop in various directions, snorting and neighing frantically.

"The gods!" cried Saris suddenly, throwing his head back as he wailed. "A great evil comes this way! We must depart immediately!" The old man began stumbling blindly away from the chasm, frantically tapping his staff in front of him.

"What's going on?" cried Galden, looking back in the direction from which the cloud had arisen. By now the horses had run off, while some had fallen over the cliff, screaming making horrible crunching noises as their heavy bodies met the bottom of the gully.

"The dark knights," softly replied Koldin, smiling grimly over the chasm. "They've circled back for us."

Baringer looked back to see first one, then a horde of the undead knights rounding the rock corner, riding their monstrous steeds. The ghastly demons were nothing but decayed bones inside the empty husks of what was once regal armor, but an unholy light lit the empty sockets of their eyes, filling their bony bodies and giving them an evil life. They rode what were at one time great and beautiful monsters; unicorns, dragons, and basilisks, that had been struck down and killed long ago during the great cataclysm.

The magic residue from the exploding sun and the disintegrated planets, along with that of the mages that once ruled that land, imbued their dead bodies with the same unholy life that invigorated the dark knights, mutating the once majestic creatures into horrific denizens of death.

Galden faltered backwards, stumbling and falling upon his back. All around him was chaos. Nisqué was screaming hysterically despite Baringer's best efforts to hold her, while Saris kept reciting chants and prayers of protection. Kieran and Koldin were already shouting orders to the others as they assumed a fighting stance, and Vortigurn immediately assumed the form of a gigantic fire-breathing dragon.

"Protect the old man!" shouted Koldin over the din as the evil minions of death effortlessly rode over the opening in the earth. Galden could see their faces now, deathly white grins glued eternally upon their pale faces, rusty black remnants of armor hanging from their rotting corpses. They all brandished weapons of some sort—sharp, deadly scimitars, swords, spears, morning stars, and the like. It was all he could do to lift himself up off the ground and pull out his own meager sword before the horde of dark knights and shadow-dragons befell them.

Galden backed as fast as he could to stand in front of Saris, who was now wildly swinging his staff at the creatures around him. As he forced his back against that of Saris, a dark knight thrust his sword at him, slicing into the hard muscles of his forearm. Sharp pain instantly shot through his entire arm and chest, and he dropped his sword. Saris reached back a frantic arm and, with superhuman strength, single-handedly lifted him onto his feet, healing his wound as he did so. Galden picked up his sword once again, holding it out, ready to strike down any dark knight that dared harm their healer.

As he watched the carnage around him, Galden saw all the members of his entourage doing their best to defend themselves. Speedwell was skewering the shadow-dragons with her horn, disabling them and knocking the pale riders

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off their backs even as their flailing talons scraped long, painful cuts into her snow-white coat. Vortigurn was roasting their undead bodies with the fire she exhaled like nuts in their shells, crunching them as she stomped them underneath her immense dragon feet. Baringer, Kieran, Koldin, and Zeb were lashing out with their swords, slashing off arms and heads from the dark knights. Nisqué was frantically trying to hold onto her horse, the poor animal frightened out of its wits. Another dark knight lunged forward, striking at him and Saris, but Galden was able to deflect the blow, although not without some difficulty.

The battle was fruitlessly continuing, both sides waging a valiant struggle, the dead hopelessly outnumbering the living. Nisqué was able to drag her horse over to where Galden and Saris were standing, avoiding the jabs and thrusts of the undeads' weapons. With the four weakest members of their group together, the others were able to create a circle around them, holding off the attacking monsters.

But although they were able to strike down many while affording only minor cuts and gashes, there seemed to be no end to the invading mass of evil. The cuts grew deeper, the blows continued to rain down upon them. Galden knew that his people were going to tire soon, and some already were. Koldin the half-elf was already pulling back to the center, using great effort to keep his sword-arm up. And Baringer had already suffered some nasty slashes across his foolishly unprotected chest and stomach. There was only one thing he could do, or rather, Vortigurn could do.

Galden craned back his head and shouted at her to catch her attention. "Vortigurn!" he yelled waving his arms maniacally, "how long can you keep that shape?"

"Not too much longer," came back the labored and booming voice of the dragon. "Another hour, perhaps. Maybe longer!" Though strained and altered, her words were still painted by her distinctive accent.

Galden shouted over the battle to the other eight to be

ready to mount Vortigurn's back. The shape shifter instantly understood his intention, and began lowering her massive bulk to allow her allies to climb upon her shoulders. Her tail lashed out, scattering their assailants and allowing them a second's respite. "Hurry!" he yelled to the others, pushing Saris toward his daughter. "Climb on!"

Still slashing frantically at the oppressive demons, Baringer, Kieran, Koldin, Zeb, and Speedwell began making their way towards Vortigurn's prostrate body, joining Galden, Saris, Po, and Nisqué. While Speedwell and Kieran remained to hold off the onslaught, the others climbed aboard the dragon's shoulders while she continued to spray the dark knights and shadow-dragons with her fire. She grasped onto Nisqué's horse with her razor-clawed talons, ignoring the frightened beast's neighs of protest. Lashing out with her tail and her other free limbs, Vortigurn spread her wide wings and started to flap them above their heads.

"Get on Speedwell, elf!" cried Baringer, cupping his hands over his mouth to carry his voice down to him as he and the unicorn remained on the battlefield. Kieran obediently mounted Speedwell, both of them fighting with all their might to fend off the swarming marauders. The dark knights closed in around them, toppling each other over in their mad rush to add the elf and the unicorn to their undead affiliation. A black mass swarmed about the white speck below the rising dragon. But before the demonic horde had a chance to skewer them, Vortigurn's other free claw reached down and snatched them from the field, hoisting them above the howling forms of the dark knights, up into the air, and across the rest of the bleak peninsula.

...of hope

Chapter 9

Valza'in had been sick for two entire months now, and Senna was at her wits' end. Never once in all his three years in the dungeon did the boy fall prey to any of the germs that floated about the dank dungeon air. Why did this have to happen now, so close to the day when *it* would happen? If anything happened to her dear adopted son Senna would not be able to hold herself together when the time came, and she needed to be strong. Valza'in was the vessel in which all her strength and stamina was held in. He was her pillar, her rock. And now he was lying on the tattered old coverlet she had woven for him so long ago, sickly and pale, coughing pitifully every now and then. Loris and Pouldin had done all they could to help the poor lad without being discovered by the other guards, and their help did not amount to much. They constantly brought in fresh buckets of water, treading dangerously close to discovery as they trudged out some three times a day to retrieve the water from the well outside the Obelisk and hauling it down the levels. They brought him clean blankets from somewhere outside the tower, but Val shunned these, clinging painfully to the ragged mat that Senna had created especially for him. Senna

sat on the floor next to him, Broceliande and Garid hovering protectively nearby. Val's head thrashed fretfully as he turned about in his miserable sleep. Senna had sent Pouldin and Loris out to find a specific type of mushroom that she knew had medicinal properties and would instantly eradicate Val's suffering, but so far all they had been able to find for her were food and weed mushrooms. Senna had begun to fear that the mushroom she was looking for had become extinct in all her years of captivity, but Loris assured her that he had a friend enlisting the aid of all the trustworthy mushroom merchants and farmers in the area, and that if the mushroom existed it would be found.

The candles were burning low, and only a few of them were left. The two guards had stopped bringing the candles to them as the supply room of the Obelisk was running low, and they did not want to attract any further unnecessary attention. They were in enough danger of being discovered as it was, what with bringing all the best food and various small supplies to Senna and Val. And now that they had been straying out to get more water, their excuses had to be made even more elaborate, and the two of them were slowly being tangled in a web of lies. It was paramount that they retain their guard posts by doing as good a job as they were expected to, yet at the same time maintaining their uselessness as combatants in Ullix's militia. The precarious balance had to be maintained.

Senna did not dare look into the future to see if Val would make it. She had already allowed herself to see the... *event* that was prophesied to pass, and Val was not among those fighting in the battle. That could mean many things, but Senna did not allow herself to think of all the possibilities. She only knew that she must do anything and everything in her power to make Valza'in well again... Not only for his sake, but for hers, too.

But for now there was nothing she could do for her son. "Go now," she said softly to the ghosts behind her, "but stay near. I may need your assistance." Garid and Broceliande

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glumly floated out of her presence, remaining immaterial between the walls of the adjoining dungeons, awaiting her summons.

Senna gently wiped away the beads of perspiration that formed across Val's pale face. She was wrought with worry over him. When he was awake, which was less and less often the more the illness progressed, Val would feign strength, assuring her with his eyes and demeanor that he felt better than he looked. But Senna knew that the boy was deathly ill, and she swore to herself that whatever brought on his sickness would feel her wrath on the Day of Reckoning.

Oh how she wished she could experience what he was going through. But she was cursed with the gifts bestowed upon her by Mannedor. She could never experience physical pain or hunger, and sickness was beyond her. But she could and did experience grief, never at all growing accustomed to it. What good was the gift of foresight when visions of young men digging in ancient attic trunks mingled with the mixed memories of the past and signs of things to come? And why could she not see the immediate future, the future soon to come? Why could she not see Val in the epic battle?

Senna lowered herself to the floor beside Valza'in, and lay her head softly next to his, looking sadly into his pale, sweaty, beautiful face.

The queen-mother did not consider the visions she saw in her sleep to be dreams. She knew them to be vivid memories of the past, not all of which she had experienced herself. That was another thing that Mannedor had given her. Along with being able to foretell the future, Senna was able to recall the past, in all its vivid detail.

The highly esteemed scientists and royalty of Harlus had a difficult time adjusting to the great cataclysm. Their system of days, weeks and months and of telling time was now completely defunct. The old system relied upon the rising and setting of the sun and of the phases of the moons. Now

all they had were periods of time in which there was only a bleak, cloudy sky, and a darker, star-filled expanse of blackness barely visible for those moisture-laden clouds. This they recognized as night, and it was only after years of deliberation that they were able to suitably divide the other period of time into what was then known as day. A “cycle.” Fortunately for them, the absence of a sun, being replaced by a nebula, allowed for the remnants of the decimated moons to be visible all night long, and when Harlus’ axis brought it around to face the nebula, the clouds and debris, and also the dimness of the nebula, allowed for a dusky appearance, allowing the people to see, albeit ever so slightly.

Senna recalled the life of one such scientist. His lifetime was not hers, but she remembered it in her dreams as if his life were her own. He had been one to toil endlessly, experimenting in methods of telling time and separating the years into measurable amounts. Candles, torches and bonfires were commonly used at that time, their eyes not yet accustomed to the dimness of their new environment. Over time, this scientist devised a certain candle that, when lit and its flame shielded from the elements, was able to act as a yearly calendar. The candle itself was created from a fifty foot long length of rope soaked in melted wax. It was dipped and coated in a four-foot diameter layer of wax, and to this the scientist added at thirteen evenly spaced intervals flat disks that fell from the candle as it burned down to the level each disk was inserted at. The candle was held up by supports and placed in central areas of the towns that owned one of the great calendars. As each township grew more and more reliant upon these candles and needed to protect them, large obelisks were constructed around them. The candles grew taller in height, and as they did, the obelisks around them were added onto, reaching upwards to nearly two-hundred and three-hundred feet tall. The keepers of these obelisks were specially trained scientists. The original inventor of the candle had appointed one of

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his fellow scientists in each obelisk to take care of the candle. Each had their own unique abilities, magic-weilders and alchemists alike. But one of them was abnormal. His excuse for becoming one of the candle-keepers was that his abnormalities necessitated him to be separated from the others, secluded in the candle tower. His name was Ullix, and he was a demon.

Ullix was the first of the candle-keepers to be known as a mage. His magical powers lent credence to that name, and eventually all the other candle-keepers became known as mages. The scientist whose memories Senna shared was in constant conflict with Ullix, always cautioning him to control his abilities and use them for the good of the people. Counsel upon counsel ignored, the scientist—already the uncontested superior mage—grew weary of Ullix, and thus his life was the first ended. But it was not ended by the people who he ruled. It was ended by a fellow mage.

Senna's dreams shifted, jumping from mind to mind of past peoples, gleaning bits and pieces of memory to construct the rest of the dream.

The mages grew in respect and power, eventually becoming despot lords of the townships that had grown around each obelisk. Naturally, theirs was the magic that kept Harlus alive, enhanced by the scattered magic from the atomized Norbinda and its denizens. It was only when the people of Harlus had adapted to the dark did they dare overthrow the candle-keepers and destroy or otherwise utilize the obelisks. Ullix, the one and only true remaining mage, was the final candle-keeper in existence.

Senna awoke to hear the rattling of a key in her cell's door. It opened to admit Loris, a small bag clutched in his hand. The big man dashed into the dark cavern, dropping a handful of candles and matches on the floor beside her.

"Take a look inside, milady," he whispered urgently, extending the bag to her. Senna looked into the bag, aided in viewing its contents by a candle that the guard held in his other hand. "I cannot stay. Tell me: is this correct?"

A smile of delight crossed her face. "That's it," she whispered happily. Loris breathed a sigh of relief as he handed the bag to her. He quickly headed back to the door, a broad smile across his face as he told Pouldin of their small victory.

Senna pulled the caps of the dozen or so mushrooms and deposited their spores into the palm of her hand. Shaking Valza'in gently to wake him, she made him open his mouth, which he did without hesitation, and she poured the soft powder in. Valza'in grimaced in distaste, but did not spit out the powder. Senna scooped some water out of the bucket that the guards had thoughtfully left with her, and Valza'in drank from it thirstily.

As Senna sat with her son, her hand propped against his back to hold him up, she was greatly relieved to see the lines of pain disappear from his forehead, and his eyes droop with sleep.

"Ma," he whispered as he drifted off into a long-awaited peaceful sleep. He touched his still-shaky finger to her lips and her eyes, and then to his lips, a gesture of affection that he had originated long ago.

Senna let her tears of relief and motherly pride fall profusely on the cave floor, hugging Valza'in close to her breast. "Thank you," she whispered in the darkness, loud enough for the two sympathetic guards to hear.

And deep in her heart Senna was positive that Ullix's candle was burning very low... Nearing its end.

a book of flight

Chapter 10

The weary adventurers had been soaring above the clouds aboard Vortigurn's dragon-back, reflecting glumly upon the experience they had just had. From the vantage point that they held, they were easily able to see the stars and the heavens. Vortigurn flew them high up in the atmosphere, above the rain-laden clouds, where birds seldom dared venture. They were able to see the faint flicker of what was left of their sun, now a red, smoldering crescent husk in the sky. It was setting on the far western horizon of Harlus, and the stars were blinking their brilliant eyes over the eastern horizon. The few wispy clouds that lingered so high up in the atmosphere were tinged pink with the setting nebula's rays, and the quest party was awed into silence by the eerily spectacular sight.

Vortigurn had been flying for nearly an hour, silently flapping her red wings in the thin air. Their pace was a quick one, no landmarks or villains to hinder their progress... only clouds. The calm gave them a chance to talk among themselves, though it was Nisqué who really did most of it.

As was expected, she was the first to strike up conversation with her companions. Her first question was directed

at Zeboblonuk Fenoizuk, the troll. She wanted to know what the still-squirming thing was in his bag, to which the troll promptly revealed her. He had captured a small, green goblin in the bag. The only reason, as he explained to them, for letting the imp out of the bag was that it had no possibility of escape, being confined to the back of a dragon in flight. The creature had hopped madly about at first, vexed greatly by his treatment from the troll. With the wind blowing over them as they soared through the atmosphere, they were all morbidly curious to see if the goblin would sail off and fall to his doom. He did not, though not for lack of trying. After he had calmed down and accepted his situation, and was introduced to everyone aboard the shapeshifter's back, he introduced himself as Ganasta Goblin, and promptly removed a corn cob pipe from his pants-pocket and began smoking it. It was nigh impossible for him to light a pipe while they were in flight, but he somehow managed it. He presented quite a comical sight in his impish garb, an orange-and-white striped cap with a bell on the end perched precariously on his head, brightly colored vestments enlivening his meager body.

Po instantly likened to the little man, croaking madly and flapping his wings as the two of them conversed in the crow tongue. Fortunately the dragon's back was broad enough so that when Po was flung about by the wind, he just landed, hopping back to where the others were huddled about clutching scales. Galden was amazed that such a creature could actually hold a conversation in croaks and screeches, but Zeb and Baringer only chuckled at the droll sight. Kieran had secluded himself as far back on Vortigurn as he could without falling off, but the others remained congregated between her shoulder blades, protected by her massive neck. Nisqué and Koldin had prepared a small bite to eat for all of them from their satchels, which kept them suitably satisfied until the time when they knew Vortigurn would land. And Galden realized that that time would have to be soon. The girl had warned him that she was not able

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to keep up large shifts in shape over long periods of time. And since night was beginning to fall, Galden called down to the girl that she might want to land somewhere.

Vortigurn obediently soared downward through the clouds, leaving the pristine beauty of the heavens behind. The clouds were heavy and dirty, miniscule particles of the disintegrated moons still—after the five long centuries—floating within the mists.

As they emerged from the clouds, they were happy to find that they had traveled quite some distance; more than they had expected. The dragon had brought them to the coast of Kaelmorde's peninsula, and they could see the waves of the inlet lapping against the coast, stirred into a froth by the winds. Farther beyond the body of water they could see the beginnings of the other peninsula that extended from the great continent of Gaelwinn. Galden hoped and prayed that they could make it just far enough to cross the sea and land on the opposite shores, saving them any unnecessary troubles crossing by boat.

"Can you make it to that far shore?" shouted Galden over the rushing wind that now pelted at them from in front. Rolling one of her enormous eyes backwards to look at Galden, the dragon nodded slowly, not wanting her movements to effect her flight. The gesture was understood.

"She is not as strong as she was when we set out," spoke Saris gravely, holding onto his daughter's scales. "We must rest the night or I fear my daughter will soon expire."

"We'll do that," agreed Baringer, nodding at the old man. He looked sternly at Galden, and the young man nodded in agreement. "We'll spend the night on the coast," he shouted over the wailing winds to the others. Looking at the four newcomers, he shouted, "You four can stay with us if you want." He wanted to add, "We'd be glad to have your company," but he was wary of so many unfamiliar faces on what was supposed to be a personal quest. Or mostly personal.

"Believe me, gracious saviors," called the half-elf Koldin, "we shall be at your side as your humble servants always!"

He made a very good attempt at a bow, but somehow, sitting on the back of a massive flying dragon against harsh winds, his attempt was futile.

Vortigurn cut through the sky at a slant, sleeking her wings against her body to speed her plummet earthward. As they neared the surface, she leveled off her flight, skimming over the sandy coast and then the icy blue expanse of the inlet. Cold sprays of water washed gently against the riders of the dragon, and Baringer had to hold Po closely to him to prevent the bird from being swept away. Speedwell had been lying on the dragon's back, her strong legs folded beneath her crouched body. Now she was struggling to stand, while Galden was struggling with her to keep her down. The last thing he needed was such a valuable fighter to be washed into the sea.

Vortigurn was nearing the opposite shore at a break-neck speed, and Galden had begun to worry. What if she, unable to retain her over-sized dragon shape, was forced to revert back to her true shape? *If that—an elf—was her true shape after all*, thought Galden. *Remember how coincidentally she resembled the woman of his dreams... down to the very last detail... when she first met him?* Was she a mind-reader too? Her father definitely was, and if she was too, did she assume the shape of the elf-maiden just to please him? Just to infiltrate their quest? And if so, why? Galden was forced to put such thoughts out of his mind and concentrate on their present situation. He was surprised that Nisqué had not thrown a fit over losing the horse that they had tarried so long to save, but the girl was mercurial, he realized, changing with the wind. And there was plenty of wind up in the sky. Kieran was still hanging onto Vortigurn's hind-section, haughtily shunning the company of the other, lesser beings. Galden was not sure whether his would be a welcome presence upon the quest. But Koldin and Zeb were quite the opposite. Although both were misfits of one sort or another, they seemed to have a genial attitude, and that served to make them much more desirable than their

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companion. He had not gotten much time to formulate an opinion of the goblin however, because the troll had roughly shoved him back into the bag and slung him over his shoulder as they neared the surface. Zeb explained that the imp was more than likely going to escape as soon as they touched shore, but he did not go on to explain why he held Ganasta in captivity in the first place. As they flew, Baringer and the others had been healed by Saris, and the old man was crouching on the dragon's back, a stern look upon his face as he grasped his mushroom-wood staff in one bony hand and held onto a large dorsal scale with the other. Speedwell had gotten the clue that Galden had been trying to give her that it was beneficial for her to stay down. Fortunately for her, the unicorn was able to curl one folded foreleg around the base of Vortigurn's left wing, and with buttressing from Baringer and Zeb, remained secure on the expansive dragon's back. All were generally tense and ready to depart the dragon's back once they neared the shore.

And this they did almost immediately, to Galden's surprise. He had been so caught up in his thoughts that he neglected to realize that they had already arrived over the coast, and Vortigurn was gently flapping her tired wings and stretching out her legs to land.

"Everyone jump off as soon as she hits the sand!" he shouted to the others. They were already preparing themselves to depart, and did not need Galden's order to tell them what to do. Vortigurn's large feet skidded upon the soft sand, leaving long scrapes in the beach behind her. She fluttered to a semi-graceful landing, falling completely upon her belly in exhaustion; nearly toppling over and throwing her riders. The all jumped off just in time for her body to glow with her shifting and begin to shrink. Before their eyes, the still-shifting Vortigurn stood up, her mercurial body flowing like a globule of jelly as she ran past the dunes that separated the coast from the rest of the peninsula.

"Wait!" called out Kieran, his only concern being for the one whom he considered to be the only other true elf in

their company. Though his bronze body bristled with strong muscles, the thin, gaunt hand of Saris held him from following her.

“Leave my daughter alone, elf,” he warned in a hiss. “I do not approve of you.”

“I do not need your approval, human!” cried the elf in disgust, trying to pull himself away from him. The old man had a firm grip on his arm, and would not let go. “Let me loose!” ordered Kieran angrily, throwing a punch at Saris’ face. The empath took the blow, falling upon his back onto the soft sand.

“Kieran,” whispered Koldin slowly, advancing upon his brother as the others glared in mottled anger, shock and disbelief at the elf, “you will come with me.” Frozen by the half-elf’s icy stare, Kieran could only watch as his brother lifted him by the shoulders, shoving his gloved hands under his arms and plucking him from the sand as one would pick a flower from a garden. The elf stared in cold horror into Koldin’s uncovered eye, struggling meekly against the cold hands that held him above the surface of the sand.

“P-please, Koldinnnnn... d-don’t do this, I... I... I didn’t mean...” A tall and athletic figure though he was, Kieran crumbled like a rag in Koldin’s arms, flailing about and struggling in futility.

“Pardon us,” whispered Koldin to the others without looking at them. He strode quickly behind another large dune, covering the distance in amazingly long and swift strides. Nisqué began to follow, but Baringer held her back. Before anyone could react, they heard a scream of anguish from the two elf brothers. There was incoherent murmuring and the sound of muffled crying, along with some grunts and moans followed by more whispered arguing. They then saw Kieran limping determinedly back to them, clutching his stomach and doubled over in pain. His eyes were clenched shut, and he relied upon his half-brother for both support and to guide him as he stumbled blindly.

Koldin dropped Kieran to the ground in front of Saris.

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"I'm sorry for punching you sir. It was wrong of me, and inexcusable. I..." he paused, swallowing hard and forcing himself to utter the words he was obviously made to speak by his brother, "I d-don't expect your f-forgive..." he could not speak the word, though his speech had obviously been hastily rehearsed.

"Please, sir, if you would, help him now," requested Koldin kindly of Saris. He gently eased his brother to the ground, guiding Saris' fumbling hands to set upon his brother's chest. Kieran flinched, but did not move. He bit his lower lip instead, and the pain and revulsion were apparent on his face.

"I have never felt pain like this before," whispered Saris in awe, pulling his hands back. Kieran's chest was cold and dry, as were his forehead and his armpits, where Koldin had held him as he dragged him away.

"You can heal him though," informed Koldin with confidence. "Please forgive my outburst. I cannot abide it when my brother makes a foolish ass of himself."

Galden and his crew looked warily at the elf, whose apologetic smile made them feel more at ease than they originally were with the elf-mage than when they had witnessed—or actually *heard*—him punish his brother. Saris replaced his hands upon Kieran's chest and drew the pain and cold welts from his body. His ministrations took longer than he was accustomed to, and he had to fall to his knees in front of the defeated elf before he wilted. As he withdrew his healing hands, Koldin squatted down and looked into his brother's eyes.

"Are you recovered?" he asked, genuine sincerity in his voice. He smiled comfortingly, easing Kieran's fear. He put his hands on Kieran's shoulders and squeezed them gently. It was obvious that the brothers just participated in something that they were both accustomed to. Baringer could not help but wonder what sort of relationship they had; and how often they hurt each other like that. He shook off the feeling with a violent shiver, bringing a glare from Nisqué.

“Yes, brother,” whispered Kieran, wiping away anguished tears from his eyes that managed to escape despite his best efforts. “I’m s-sorry,” he said, first to Koldin, and then to Saris and the others. He allowed Koldin to lift him to his feet, and hung limply in the half-elf’s strong arms.

“You are forgiven,” spoke Saris, though not with the gentility that Koldin had exhibited. He stood erect and stomped his staff twice against the ground, then marched off to search for Vortigurn from behind the sand dunes.

It took the old man quite some time to locate his daughter, being blind and not knowing the area or where she fled to. But when the two of them did reappear, the elf-girl appeared to be still exhausted, but none the worse for wear. She smiled wearily at her comrades, old and new alike, and lent a hand to Nisqué as she began burning strips of mushroom bark to start a small cooking fire.

Kieran and Koldin were found sitting against some large rocks that were lying upon the beach, their backs supported by the grime-encrusted boulders. They were talking to each other in hushed tones, Koldin occasionally making a motion to wipe away stray tears that fell from his brother’s eyes; but stopped each time by the prideful and strong hand of his brother. Their dynamic was unfathomable, and it was unknown which of the two had the upper hand in their twisted relationship. With his arms about his brother’s shoulder, constantly touching Kieran’s face and Kieran consistently swatting his brother’s attentions away, they presented an unusual—and discomforting for some—sight. Yet though Kieran presented the appearance of disliking his brother’s cloying attention, if Koldin attempted to rise up or turn away for only a moment, Kieran would angrily tug on his brother, not wanting to be parted from him.

“Twisted,” muttered Baringer, wrinkling his nose as he spied.

Galden, Baringer, and the troll were unpacking the blankets they had brought along in their individual supplies, spreading them smooth over the sand of the coast and roll-

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ing various large rocks around the perimeter of their camp to protect them from the winds and predators. Once they had done so, they headed further inland to gather driftwood—none was found—and dry mushroom bark for the fire that the two young women were already cooking over. The smell was mouthwatering, and the men were anxious to taste what delectables Nisqué and Vortigurn had prepared for them. Even mushrooms would be welcome, for their battle and the subsequent flight drained them all.

The meal consisted of baked potatoes and beef that had been jerkied back in Kurlingforde. Nisqué had soaked them in boiled water she had gotten from the sea and heated in a small pot she had brought along, removing much of the salty content of both the meat and the water by including the potatoes in the boil. The adventurers ate these along with some stray mussels, clams and some crustaceans they were able to rustle up. Nisqué was able to roast them in their shells and serve them with certain spices she had brought along, presenting all in all a tasty meal for the tired group. When she offered a small serving of the meal to Zeb for his prisoner, the troll kindly refused, revealing to Nisqué that it was not imperative for the goblin to eat, although the imp did protest angrily and insist that he was hungry.

Later, when all had supped to their content, they retired to their meager encampment. They were all beginning to sit and lie on the blankets crowded around the fire when Koldin spoke up from where he had been sitting with his brother.

“If you all would permit, most gracious saviors, I would like to do you a favor, although it in no means could repay you for what you have done for us.” He stood, ignoring a protesting hand from Kieran fruitlessly trying to pull him back. “I dabble in the mystic arts every now and then, having inherited some skill from my... er... father’s side of the family.”

“Koldin, no,” protested Kieran, reaching out to stop his brother, to no avail. The stockier elf rose to his feet and fol-

lowed his brother, but Koldin shook his head at him as a parent would a naughty child, and continued. "I believe I can transform your blankets and these rocks into a suitable camp for our needs, better able to protect us from the night. May I?" he asked, looking questioningly at the rest.

"What do you think?" asked Galden of Saris, who was sitting next to him with Vortigurn. He trusted the old man implicitly, although he was not entirely sure why.

"He is benign... mostly," spoke up the old man, nodding his head. Vortigurn smiled in agreement, and Galden nodded his head to the elf-mage.

"Go ahead," he said, unaware of what to prepare himself for. To Kieran's chagrin, Koldin removed his gloves and eye-patch revealing underneath two scaly, clawed hands and an amber-colored eye, a red slit down the center of the pupil. Nisqué stifled a scream, and the others shrank back in horror. Koldin, sadly gazing at their distaste, nevertheless began chanting in an ancient and long-forgotten tongue, and waved his arms mystically in the air around him. As they watched, the rocks and blankets around and underneath them began growing upward, forming a dome that circumscribed their camp and covered them from above. Koldin stopped his chanting just before the dome sealed itself above them, leaving a round hole large enough for them to see the stars above as they winked through the heavy cloud cover. He then pointed at the side wall of the interior of the dome, in which they now all stood or sat, and traced the outline of a door. As he did so, a beam of light sliced through the air from his amber eyes, cutting an opening into the wall. Koldin then put his gloves and eye-patch back on, and returned to a sitting position on the few blankets that still covered the floor of the dome.

Nisqué, looking over the fire and through the smoke that separated her from the elf-mage stood and walked over to him. "We need to talk," she stated matter-of-factly. "You look like you could use a friend." She helped the half-elf to stand again, much to his surprise, and the two headed for

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the far end of the dome, sitting down upon the sand with their back propped against the wall. They began speaking in hushed voices, and soon the others returned to their senses and began to talk among themselves.

Baringer took a deep breath and patted Speedwell's snout. The unicorn had lain herself down beside him, and Po was nestled quietly between her strong legs. "I don't know about this, Galden," he said in a whisper to his old friend. "Remember how it was supposed to be just you and me, and Speedwell and Po? I thought it was just going to be us four, and now there's..." He paused to count the motley crew of adventurers. "Eleven of us... right? One of them is a magician, one is an overstuffed elf who's obviously got his dick stuck up his ass, one is a troll who looks uglier than a pile of dung, and the rest of them aren't half as different! The healer and the shape shifter I can understand, and maybe Nisqué to cook the meals... and I suppose the troll's a good fighter, but I don't like the elf. Or his brother."

"Saris and Vortigurn seem to trust them, and so do I," replied Galden, whispering as his friend did. He, too, had noticed the odd relationship the two brothers shared. How could he not? He sneered in spite of himself, repulsed by their behavior, but recognizing the benefit of their company.

"And when did you start trusting those two implicitly?" asked Baringer, gesturing toward the now sleeping father and daughter with his head. His blond locks bounced in the midnight coolness, glistening as the meager starlight fell upon his head from the hole above. "I admit that I like them, too, but...I can't say why." He received no response from Galden, and only shrugged in wonder. "What a quest this is turning out to be," he commented, to no one in particular. Galden nodded, and soon the two friends were fast asleep.

Late, late into the darkness, Vortigurn was awakened by a strong hand clamped down upon her mouth and another holding her arms pinned to her stomach. A weight like that of two strong legs held her feet down, and try as

she might, she could not struggle free, nor alter her father sleeping nearby.

“Sssh!” hushed a male elfin voice in her pointed ear. Vortigurn focused her almond-shaped eyes upon those of Kieran’s. He was straddling her, and was smiling grimly in the darkness. “I only want you to come with me so I can show you something,” he whispered. Vortigurn was able to see him slightly in the surrounding darkness of the dome. She could see that he had removed his leather jacket and was now wearing only his headband, breeches, and his moccasins. “Come,” he urged, his smile betraying his intentions.

Vortigurn was unable to prevent him from lifting her up, since her long bout of dragon-ness had left her weary and unable to shift shapes. But this condition was only temporary, and if she could just hold out long enough to learn of the male elf’s intentions, she believed that she was in no real danger. So she allowed herself quietly to be led through the open door of the dome, Kieran’s hands still covering her mouth and pinning her arms behind her back.

Once outside, Vortigurn was allowed to pull her arms to her sides, although Kieran’s strong arms still held tightly onto her shoulder. He led her away from the dome, toward the sand dunes that she had fled to earlier. From outside she was able to see the dome’s exterior. It was rough and dull, as if it was hewn from the very rocky foundation of the continent itself. It was unusual in the starlight, its perfect crescent-shaped expanse standing out against the dullness of the sand dunes around it. Kieran pulled her along with him further and further away, much to her alarm. When he finally stopped, he pushed her down to the ground, where she sat, looking suspiciously at him through narrowed eyes.

“What is this that you wanted to show me?” she asked, making no attempt to hush her voice. Her accent gave her words a strength that they might not otherwise have had.

“You may speak as loud as you wish now, female,” laughed Kieran, falling to his knees in front of her. “But first I must ask you some questions.” He fell to his hands,

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his arms and chest arching over her as he lered hungrily into her face.

“Ask,” she spoke, quieter now. She was wary of the male elf, not knowing what to expect and daunted by his unwanted presence.

“How is it that an elf, a lovely one such as you, came to be the daughter of a blind *human*?” he asked, still wearing the smile upon his finely-chiseled face. She could tell by the way he sneered when he said “human” that the word was distasteful to him.

“I...” stumbled Vortigurn, “I was adopted,” she answered, still staring into his hypnotic eyes. “M-my real parents were killed, and he found me in the swamp... saved my life. He raised me as his own, and I came to know him as my father.” She tried to pull herself away from his presence, but he only followed her, crawling on his hands and knees as she crept on her hands and feet, until he cornered her against a large boulder.

“What reason do you have for traveling with these other humans?” he asked, a foul grimace marring his otherwise handsome features.

“That is my own business,” she mumbled, trying to avert her eyes. He was straddling her now, kneeling in front of her, his arms folded across his massive chest.

“Mm-hmm,” he muttered, feigning concern. “I have one last question for you,” he whispered in a mock accent like hers, propping one hand against the stone behind her head. He looked deep into her elfin eyes, and awaited his query. “Have you ever been with another elf, Vortigurn?” he asked, slowly undoing the strings that held up his breeches. Vortigurn looked down at his waist, her own body aroused by the thought of what Kieran was intending to do. But she fought her primal urges and struggled forth a reply.

“No,” she said, trying to pull away from him. “I haven’t, and I do not intend for tonight to be my first experience.” She narrowed her eyes to slits, and added, “Not with *you*.”

Kieran’s leather pants were undone now, and fell to the

ground about his knees. Vortigurn courageously averted her eyes from his midsection, and tensed her body for the assault she knew waited her. Kieran was panting now, and tore at her scant fur tunic. He had pulled the animal skin off her shoulders, and his hands were probing portions of her body that she had always considered private. Her breasts responded to his rough touch, firming in anticipation while she tensed in resistance.

Biting her lip, Vortigurn stifled her screams of protest, and before she realized what she was doing, her knee had jerked up, smashing upward between his legs, sending him sprawling on the sand. He rolled over the fine sand, moaning in pain and clutching his groin. "Wench!" he cried, trying to rise, a mad look in his eyes. "I'll..."

"You will do nothing further!" she hissed, throwing a handful of sand into his face. Kieran spat out the sand and grabbed at his eyes, the sand filling them and burning. Vortigurn pulled her tunic back over her shoulders and ran back to the camp, sobbing quietly all the way.

The next morning found the entire group fully refreshed and rested. Vortigurn was still somewhat tired, to the curiosity of Saris and the others, but she explained this away, telling them that her stint as a dragon had cost her more than she expected. She avoided looking at Kieran, who, too, was also inexplicably tired. The two elves made much ado about the others forgetting it, and their weariness was soon overlooked. Koldin suspected something amiss with his brother, but could get no answer out of him.

Galden suggested that Nisqué take along some of the shellfish for later, but the girl laughingly informed him that such morsels would quickly expire and begin to stink should they bring some along. Galden then wordlessly continued packing his satchel, reflecting upon the many times when his leadership had been questioned.

Once they had all gathered their belongings together and splashed their faces with the fresh water Nisqué had boiled for them, cooled substantially overnight, they set out once

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again on the quest. This time on foot. No horses shouldered their weight, nor could Vortigurn assist in their progress just yet.

Their journey was much slower now than it had first been, as Baringer constantly—and to his annoyance—reminded Galden. Nisqué did her best to keep up with the others, not wanting to be yelled at for lagging behind. The girl would hold her skirts up with her hands and daintily traipse along with the others, sometimes behind, sometimes along with. Galden was surprised to see that Saris was at no time lagging behind the others, and that in fact he and Vortigurn were striding along with him as he and Baringer led the way across the barren plains of the Gaelwinn peninsula.

Yes, Galden thought, he was actually glad that Nisqué had insisted upon coming with them. She never once complained about the rigors of the travel even though everyone could see how she struggled and tried to keep up, and in fact was a boon to them. She cooked excellent meals out of nearly nothing at all, hauled her load along with the others, and actually was... Galden was struck as if by lightning by the thought that maybe he felt something for the waitress form Kurlingforde. She certainly was not as enchanting as Vortigurn, and had no special powers, and in fact was a rather plain looking type of pretty. But she was near his age, and she seemed innocent enough. And her spirit looked to be nearly indomitable. Yes, Galden would have to get to know her better. If he could get past Baringer. Baringer treated him like a younger brother, and he already was treating Nisqué as a younger sister. An annoying one. One that he felt he had to protect.

Zeb had been having some trouble with the burden upon his hunched shoulders, so by the suggestion of Baringer, who lent him a leash that he used occasionally to keep Po from sailing off in unknown lands, the troll allowed the goblin out of the bag, fastening the strip of leather around his scrawny neck. Indignant though he was at the poor treat-

ment he received at the hands of the troll, Baringer knew nevertheless that the imp was glad to at least be free of the confines of the sack, and told him so. Ganasta fully denied any such notions, and before long had struck up a heated conversation with the raven, who hopped about comically as he croaked to the goblin in the birdish tongue.

For some reason that Galden did not look much into, Kieran had volunteered to carry Galden's, Zeb's, and Nisqué's satchels along with his own, and plodded along glumly next to Speedwell. He no longer stared at Vortigurn with his slanted eyes, but only whispered few occasional phrases to the unicorn and to his brother, who would frequently lag back to put a comforting hand on Kieran's shoulder and speak to him. At other times Koldin would walk alongside Nisqué who, it was obvious to the others, had become his new friend. The others shared mingled feelings for the elf-mage, but most were accepting, and the little fear they had for his mage side was calmed by the fact that he had somehow acquired compassion in his upbringing. The dome he had erected for them the night before was immensely appreciated by all who slept within its protective confines.

Unbeknownst to Galden and the others, except for Saris who did not question it, Vortigurn had removed the long knife she had secreted within the folds of the cloak that she had worn on the first night fleeing from the tavern, which now lay folded and compact inside the travel-bags upon the unicorn's back. She hid the knife inside her fur tunic, the cold metal held close to her skin attached to a thin leather strap she fastened it to her leg with. Though she had no real need for it, being able to change her shape at will, it offered her added protection, and she felt safer with it.

Relying upon Koldin and Nisqué to show them the direction in which to travel, the adventurers eventually passed through several small townships whose populace informed them that they were indeed traveling westward toward the

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coast. Across the ocean that separated the continents lay the land of Erz, their final—or so they thought—destination. Some of the towns contained obelisks, although most were defunct and some destroyed. One of the towers that they had come across had been converted into a hospitality house, complete with a restaurant, rooms for rent, and prostitutes of several—yes, several—genders. Baringer and Kieran appeared highly intrigued by the structure, but Galden and his associates prodded them onward, expressing that they certainly were free to stay at the place, but only if they were willing to give up the support and protection of their entourage.

The progress was little each day as they trudged across the land, but they had Koldin's moderate magic, Saris' healing abilities, and the other various talents to aid them along. They arrived at the coast of Gaelwinn in only three weeks' uneventful journey.

darkness arrived...

Interlude:

Regal and poised, the princess of Erz maintained her dignity as she entertained the various and sundry visitors vying for her hand in marriage. The selection was... it left much to be desired. Since the years of Queen Senna's departure, and the departure of her father and her aunt, she had been left to rule what remained of the kingdom—her younger brother having long since shunned his royal birthright.

Crown Princess Ganydronne Galdenne, all of fifteen years old, was not handling the situation well.

The tapestries had been sold or given away years ago, when she was but a small child. The townspeople took what they wanted—she did not stop them. What did she care for the trappings of royalty now? What dignity was there to maintain when the remaining royal was forced to compete for food with her counselors, courtiers, and the very peasants who fought hardest? She was at the mercy of her people, and now more than ever before she depended upon the advice of the few dignitaries that deigned to remain in the royal household.

It is said, among the people, that the gifts of the gods sometimes overlook a generation. That what whims granted any special benefit to one person might completely overlook his or her children. But Ganydronne was lucky. She inherited Queen Senna's gift of long life. Of course, a fifteen-year-old girl had no way of knowing that. The scrapes

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that healed nigh immediately, the cuts that sealed themselves up and disappeared within a day's time, the broken leg that the visiting physician could not detect upon his arrival... all of those were just Princess Gany's fortunate life. How was she to know that she would spend countless years losing her mind, her youth, her beauty, her home, and that rare dignity that she guarded so precious?

The castle was dark, the halls empty, the stones damp and mossy already, despite the efforts of Lord Ketamon, reduced to housekeeping when his upbringing had taught him otherwise. Ketamon was kind to Ganydronne, and she appreciated it. It was to him that her thoughts wandered as her feet did the same, losing herself within the marble halls once brightly lit now darkened with sorrow and loneliness. Her fingers traced a familiar trail along the wall. She was lost—in her thoughts, though her feet and hands knew their way. No torches nor elegant candelabras illuminated the hallways any longer. The fuel had long since burned up, and what little remained had been appropriated by the populace. Ketamon always told Princess Gany that her smile was bright enough to illuminate his every need, though he could tell she stopped believing him long ago.

Lord Ketamon was in his thirties, a striking figure with his dashing good looks and slender frame. Flowing dark hair joined with a beard that still he managed to trim neatly, despite there being no other courtiers remaining to impress. With her father gone, and no other parental figure in her life, Ganydronne looked to Lord Ketamon as father, brother, friend and lover; the last being in the lurid dreams she visited each night. A husband had been betrothed to her—or, rather, she to him—but no one enforced that familial promise, nor worried about repercussions from neglecting it. She allowed herself to fall into passionate kisses with him every night, her fresh, smooth lips caressing his full red lips. She closed her eyes and touched the wall that she had touched so many times before, beginning to wear it smooth from years of bearing the weight of her musings. In her fantasy, she brushed her fingers through his thick locks, letting it fall as she combed her hands out, then scratching gently with her fingertips along the back of his neck.

A tear trickled down her cheek. Was it a tear of sadness? Happiness? Loss? Disappointment? Ganydronne fell to her knees, pulling her hand down the wall as if she were painting it. Painting a long, red streak

of red paint down a white canvas; blood staining the white purity of her soul as her thoughts stained the purity of her mind.

Where was Lord Ketamon right now? She would disregard the proprieties of elegance, she would ignore the standards of courtly behavior, and throw herself in his arms and the two of them would fall down in a passionate kiss, and then... but her youthful mind did not know what happened then. It would be a full five more years before she discovered what happened then, and she would not find it as romantic and alluring as her mind made it out to be... wanted it to be. She just wanted to be held, to be cherished and admired, to be wanted and provided for.

Ganydronne realized that she was hungry, though it could just be a momentary pang. With a start she realized that she had not actually eaten anything in... in two days! Two whole days; yet there she stood, healthy and robust. Knealt. She was still kneeling. Kneeling on a floor covered with greasy dirt, ruining the skirts of her dress.

A dress darkened with stains, and torn with tatters, missing a sleeve that had been replaced with a shawl. A shawl that covered silken white skin that bore no bruises, no scratches, no sallow sickness. How long had she been there kneeling? She blinked her eyes sluggishly, wanting to clear her thoughts. She shook her head and looked up at her surroundings. The marble walls were still there, still sweating with condensation. And she was cold. The shawl did little to ease her chill, and with a sign of resignation Princess Ganydronne arose and retraced her steps back to her private chambers.

A rotted chair had fallen to the floor, and though she traveled these halls daily, she could not bring herself to clear away the debris. But could not Lord Ketamon do that? He did so much for her already; she dared not appear impetuous and ask of him something more. Besides, he was so tired lately, and spent a lot of time in the guest suite, resting. No visiting dignitaries used it anymore. It was no imposition. Goodness, she hoped he would not remain ill for much longer. There were things needing to be done, and as a lady, a princess no less, she could not be expected to do them herself.

Perhaps she would look in on Lord Ketamon, and she might see if he needed anything. A glass of water perhaps? A smile to light up the room? Where was the food kept in this place anyway? Now, try to remember... the last time she ate, it was... a plate of mushrooms... and they

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were not cooked. They were cleaned though, probably by Lord Ketamon. Why had he not cooked them, too? No matter. She had eaten them, and they must not have been that awful. Or if they were, her princessly dignity would not have allowed her to be sick from them. Much of the people remaining in Erz were sickly, and many had... died. Come to think of it, many of the courtiers had died.

Princess Ganydronne wrinkled her brow delicately, pursing her lips and pausing in her path. What happened to her parents now? Did they leave on a trip? A vacation perhaps? Why, then they might just return any day now, and she would have to make sure that they were properly fêted! Oh indeed! She must make plans. Lord Ketamon will be in charge of the meal. All the courtiers must be in attendance, for her parents were... they were the king and queen, weren't they? That's why she's a princess, of course!

Ganydronne spun in her tracks, and ran to the throne room, ready to decree that all in attendance must remain for the banquet. The cooks must be notified! There was a meal to plan. A royal party, with all trimmings deserving of royalty.

But the throne room was empty. As empty as the courtyard, save for the man she had seen skulking about several days ago. Right about the same time as the last of the tapestries had vanished. Blinking her eyes, Ganydronne realized that there was no coincidence involved. That man had taken the tapestry! Why, the thief! Ketamon would know what to do. The guards must be assembled and that tapestry retrieved. That tapestry was woven by her grandmother... or was it her great-grandmother? It was a family heirloom.

And thankfully it was still right where she stood, where she had Lord Ketamon move it to—for safekeeping. Why, she was looking right at it? How could that man have stolen it if she could see it right before her very eyes?

Now what was she so upset about? She was going somewhere, but she did not recall why, or even where she was headed. A total void filled her mind. What was she doing? She had to know. Gany fell to the floor, covering her head with her arms. Her eyes were wide with fright and confusion. How did she get there, in front of the tapestry? How did the tapestry suddenly reappear? Why couldn't she remember anything? And where was Lord... what was his name? The man who... who brought her

food, and who had been visiting with her. The man in the cloak who appeared in the courtyard. That was him, wasn't it?

And this infernal silence! It was so loud, it was deafening. Deafening silence. And the smell was unpleasant. Her face was pressed against the floor, and the dirt smeared against her forehead. Her hair hung in front of her face; long and greasy, tangled. Crying softly now, Ganydronne wished she had a comb. And a chamber maid to take care of her, to get her some clean clothes, and wash her hair for her, and comb it, braid it when she was ready to go to bed. Like Maleka had done. Where was she? The princess was in need of her, and Maleka was nowhere to be found.

That was it. That was what she had been searching for. Who she had been searching for. Maleka. Sweet, gentle Maleka. She would help her find something to eat, surely she would. She probably had some candles too. It would be nice to actually have some light. She could admire the tapestry better if she had light. The castle was full of tapestries, and their beauty and intricacies were lost without people to appreciate them. Princess Ganydronne raised her head and noticed that the castle was empty.

"Lord Ketamon!" she shouted, surprising herself. Her voice echoed around her, startling some creatures that scuttled about in the dark recesses of the building. Ganydronne pushed herself up and began to walk down the hallway once again. She turned into an open doorway and beheld the once majestic library. Piles of papers and books were heaped around the room, littered with trash and debris. Many more of the books had been appropriated as fuel, forever taking with them the histories and art that lay within their pages. The smell of mildew and stagnant air assaulted her senses, and her eyes stung from what ever was drifting about the room. Not dust. Mildew. Her lungs burned and her sinuses stung. She hastily stumbled out of the room and back in the dark hallway.

Her mind snapped back to... the visitors. They had come to ask for her hand in marriage, hadn't they? But her betrothed was... away. No, her betrothed was Lord Ketamon, and her mother, Maleka, the royal cook, was preparing a wedding feast. But she was a princess, and her mother was the queen. Maleka was the queen? No, no, no. She's off on a trip with her father. How she wished she could remember his name; his face.

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Ah, the guest quarters; the suites reserved for visiting dignitaries and their entourage. Servants' quarters were further down the hallway, near enough to be ready if they were needed.

And there was the door to the main bedchamber. Princess Ganydronne giggled into her hand, smiling coquettishly as she turned the door knob. Wouldn't Lord Ketamon be surprised to see her? Oh, would it not be so much fun to startle him and wake him up? He should be awake by now! But she must be silent... silent as a mouse.

She gently pushed the door open. It creaked terribly against its rusted hinges; hinges that had not been used in months, if not years. But she did not hear it. She stood on her toes, and looked across the room at the prone form lying motionless on the bed. Giggling merrily, she tiptoed over to it, and gently prodded the shape under the covers.

Nothing.

"Wake up, Ketamon," she whispered loudly, giggling more. She pulled the coverlet back and smiled, shaking the skeleton until the jawbone fell off. But he would not wake. He would not wake. Giggling and shaking, she continued to wait, but he would not wake.

a book of life

Chapter 11

Valza'in was frantic with worry. Senna had been gone from the cell since he woke up that morning, and only Broceliande and Garid were there to be with him. Where had she been taken? What was going to happen to her? To him? The ghosts had been no comfort to him. He did not understand much of the words they tried to speak to him, and the few that he did comprehend meant nothing out of context. He had searched all over the cave they were in, even going so far as to shine a candle into the deep crevice that ran across the far back of the dungeon. But she was no where to be found.

Broceliande and Garid tried to tell him that the queen had been taken to another cell during the night, but they were unable to make him understand. They and the guards had tried to wake him, but he was under such a deep slumber that their efforts were in vain. The lingering effects of his sickness still affected him. Where he was normally quick to wake on the slightest sound, nothing had worked.

After he had calmed down and stopped running around the cave and yelling indecipherable animal cries, they again tried to communicate to him what had happened, using

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hand, facial, and body gestures along with tones of speech to make him understand. The boy tried valiantly to understand, and finally did when Garid mimicked the guards escorting Senna out by re-enacting the scene with Broceliande.

Valza'in heard footsteps from beyond the cell door, and to this he ran, banging his clenched fists against the ancient wood. "Ma!" he screamed, the only word he knew to refer to Senna. If she was anywhere near, she would hear him, and somehow get to him.

While Val worried himself over Senna, the two ghosts conferred with each other near the back of the small cave. Though both had been relatively young when they were struck down, they had both accumulated a wealth of wisdom and maturity in their many years of floating around the Obelisk as ghosts.

"What could have been so abrupt and necessary that Senna did not foresee it?" asked the girl-ghost, floating in front of Garid, her wispy hands worriedly pulling at her pale tresses.

"I don't know," replied Garid. "All I know is that she's in the second cell down, with that fat woman that they just threw in there. I thought Loris and Pouldin were our allies. Now I'm not so sure."

"But what if she is needed there?" insisted Broceliande, trying to find a positive aspect to their situation. "What if..."

"Then they wouldn't have pulled Senna away in secrecy!" he declared, pouting his lower lip.

"It was not as if she was taken in secrecy," whispered Broceliande, not wishing to disturb Valza'in any further. "They tried to wake Val up."

"But not hard enough," rebuked Garid.

"Maybe they didn't want to scare him," she suggested. When her statement was met with a silent glare from her fellow ghost, she threw up her hands in exasperation. "Come on then, why doesn't one of us just go to her and ask her what's happening to her?" She blinked vacantly, imploringly staring at her ghostly friend. She knew full well why not.

“Because she told us to watch Val, stupid,” retorted Garid, rolling his eyes. “She said not to follow. You heard it as clearly as I did.” He sighed and blinked at her. “You go, Broceliande. I’ll stay here with Val.” The younger ghost floated over to Valza’in, who was sitting crouched in front of the door, whimpering through his tears. “We’re still here with you, Val,” spoke the ghost soothingly, extending his hands to pat the sixteen year-old’s back. Val turned his head to look at him, then returned to banging on the door with his fists.

“Please Val,” begged Garid. “You mustn’t do that. You don’t want to attract any undue attention!” He reached out an ethereal hand to pull Val’s from the door. Val turned around the face Garid, and slumped against the door, streaks of tears upon his grimy face. He looked despairingly at Garid, who could only smile comfortingly to his friend. Being only partially substantial, he could offer little more than his presence.

Broceliande floated swiftly through the adjoining cell to the north of Senna and Val’s. There were two people confined in it, three if you considered the corpse that had been rotting in the rear for three months now. This dungeon was smaller than Senna’s and not as tidy. In fact, it stank with wretchedness, and the ghost had no real desire to linger there. The huddled prisoners stared in fear and crouched in a far corner, watching as she passed.

Once she sifted through the walls, a strange sight met her eyes. She saw Senna, the young woman, and the two guards huddled together on the floor of the third dungeon, all of them talking in hushed tones. The ghost’s arrival startled them, and frightened the young woman.

“I told you *not* to come!” she said, almost angrily. She pursed her lips and frowned momentarily. Senna explained to the woman that Broceliande was a friend, and introduced the frightened and sweating woman to her. Senna then explained to the ghost the situation they found themselves in, much to Broceliande’s delight and wonder.

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“Come now,” insisted Loris to Pouldin and Senna. “We must bring her into your cell. She will be safest there, and it is the cleanest dungeon. I think it’s safe now.” They all helped hoist the woman, a large belly now visible upon her. Broceliande smiled with anticipation, floating along gingerly behind them. Whatever contingent of castle guards were present in the lower levels were sure to have headed up-level again by this time. They had waited for this very moment.

“Go back to Senna’s dungeon with her,” ordered Pouldin to the ghost. He was familiar with her, and had no qualms about conferring with the departed. Meekly, she and the queen dashed down the dark hallway, standing anxiously in front of the oaken door. But Senna made no attempt to escape. She had no desire to. The two guards lugged the laden woman between them to the door of the cell, and quickly unlocked it, permitting Senna and Broceliande to dash in. Luckily no other guards were around to witness their blatant disregard for procedure, for which Loris and Pouldin were eternally grateful. Other prisoners were too damaged or frightened to pay any attention to the goings-on outside their dungeons.

Valza’in was standing happily in front of the door as Senna and the others passed through it. His smile of welcome was quickly replaced by one of wonder and curiosity. Who was this new prisoner, and why was she being carried by the two guards? He had never seen someone in her shape before, and was intrigued by her presence.

“Can you take care of her?” asked Pouldin of the Queen, concern wrinkling his brow. Senna nodded, and the two guards quickly vacated the cell, closing the door silently behind them and locking it securely. As Senna turned to the young woman, who was now moaning faintly, they were interrupted by the door reopening, admitting Loris.

“I forgot to give you these,” he whispered, carrying to them a wicker basket filled with soft blankets. His fellow guard followed closely behind, carrying with him a metal

pail filled with clean, warm water. “The gods be with ye,” whispered Pouldin, smiling anxiously at the inmates. Loris grasped Pouldin’s hand and smiled nervously at him, then dropped it quickly when he realized what he was doing. Pouldin turned his face away and stepped through the cell door. Then the two guards disappeared a second time, leaving the door locked and shut.

“Garid,” ordered Senna as she pulled out some of the blankets and spread them on the floor, “you and Val go over to the corner and stay there. Talk to him or sing, or something. Just keep him over there. Wait for me to tell you when to bring him back.” She helped the young woman to pull her heavy body on top of the blankets, and then turned to Broceliande. “Shield us from their view,” she said, indicating Val and Garid with her finger. “And sing that lullaby I taught you. Softly.”

Broceliande sang the soothing tune that Senna had lulled her to sleep with many a time long ago. She billowed out her ghostly dress and hair, creating a white curtain against the curious eyes of the two boys.

“Sing louder now,” urged Senna, herself sweating along with the girl as her moans became groans and cries of pain. Val curiously moved toward them, but Garid’s gentle touch was solid enough to hold him back. Broceliande filled the entire subterranean level of the Obelisk with her enchanting voice, hauntingly filling the ears of all who heard it, lulling them into peaceful serenity, and blotting out the cries of the new mother. Her ethereal wailings soon became a sheer avalanche of sound, shattering thinner glass objects in the lower dungeons, dangerously close to summoning other guards.

When Broceliande finally finished singing and lowered her dress and hair to their normal proportions, Valza’in cautiously crept over to where his foster mother and the young woman sat. As he neared, he saw that the young woman no longer cried out in pain, though the beads of perspiration still clung to her forehead. But what really

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attracted his attention was the gurgling baby Senna cradled in her arms, wrapped in one of the blankets the guards had brought for them.

“Is this how I began?” he wondered, though not with the words and language of the spoken. The wailing thing in Senna’s arms calmed, lulled by the presence of the Queen and her warmth. Mesmerized, Val stared at it. Senna nodded and gestured with her eyes; to him and then to the baby. He tentatively reached out to touch, and was exhilarated when the baby grabbed his finger. The grasp itself was oblivious—he was grabbing at anything to test his own fingers, and the baby let go and grasped again. Val felt dizzy, as if the dungeon were spinning about his head.

“Are you ready to take him?” asked Senna to the woman, who nodded wearily. With trembling fingers, the young mother opened up and removed the side of her tunic, allowing her child to feed hungrily as Senna placed it in her arms. Valza’in watched enrapt, quiet as a mouse as he witnessed the astonishing sight. When the baby had finished suckling, it settled back in its mother’s arms and fell into a fitful sleep.

“Come,” whispered the young mother to Valza’in as he stared at her and her newborn child. Understanding the word as a gesture to come near, Valza’in crept over to her while Senna removed some of the bundled up blankets and threw them down the crack in the floor. Val reached out a trembling hand to softly touch the sleeping child’s head. The baby flinched slightly at his tender touch, but remained asleep. Val gently rubbed the baby’s bare head, smiling in awe as he did so, marveling at the faint, silken wisps of hair.

“Valza’in,” Senna spoke softly as she returned and sat next to him. She put her arm around him and held him close. She pointed first to the mother and then to her child. “This is Thirluaine, and her new son Kaldorne.”

Valza’in looked into his mother’s eyes, smiling brightly. “Ma?” he asked, indicating Thirluaine. Senna nodded her head, hugging her son. The unspoken communication was

at last clear.

It was only then did Valza'in see the long flowing black hair of the mother, and the pointed ears and slanted eyes that she shared with her son. She smiled gratefully, having learned that imprisonment in this deepest, darkest dungeon was by far more desirable than any other cell in the bowels of the Obelisk.

of desire... and waiting

Chapter 12

Galden was hard-pressed at first to pay for his entire entourage. The captain of the sailing ship, the Crescent Moon, demanded the payment for all seven of them before they could set foot on it, and for the unicorn as well. Galden was glad that the big man did not notice the raven that Baringer concealed in the bundle of cloaks he was carrying, nor the goblin that Zeboblonuk had threatened to remain still or else!

“Or else what?” sneered the goblin surlily from within the bag.

“Or else you die, imp,” replied the troll simply and without emotion.

But Galden’s woes were eradicated as Koldin produced enough gold pieces from his own money purse to make up the difference that he owed on his fellow passengers. Galden really felt that the half-elf was trying to win over the affection of the others in their group, and it was working. Koldin, however, only wanted them to like him for himself, not for what he could do for them. He insisted that paying for the voyage was the least he could do for his gracious saviors. He smiled inwardly, knowing that the gold pieces were in

actuality animal droppings that he had magically transformed into viable—but temporary—tokens of currency.

The ship was a veritable hotel in its own right, huddled masses of people crowding its ancient wooden deck, waving to people who crowded the harbor, who in turn waved and shouted back at them, creating quite an insufferable din. The ship itself was a miracle of engineering—being made of ancient timbers reinforced with various materials that gave it the look and feel of a patchwork leviathan.

Galden and his companions had a hard time getting to the pier as a group, for various merchants and urchins pulled at their bodies and clothes wanting to sell them something or pick their pockets, or both. The ship they were able to view from far off, standing tall among the others of its kind as it floated in the water, waiting for its masts to be hoisted and its anchor raised. Winds still blew on Harlus, stirred by the same magical forces that gave the planet its semblance of life.

Galden had another problem to worry about. Somehow Kieran, to Koldin's utter vexation, had separated himself from the others once their odyssey had been paid for. Galden would not stand for such impertinence, especially since he and Koldin shelled out so much payment for everyone.

"Where is your brother?" he loudly demanded of Koldin, forgetting that the half elf was his ally, and did not take kindly to being yelled at.

"Calm yourself," warned Koldin, the laughter in his voice trembling on the edge of a hiss. "I am not my brother's keeper." He slapped his hand on Galden's shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "He will be back soon enough. He cannot stand to be separated from me for long." He smiled, his one uncovered eye twinkling merrily. "Perhaps he has found himself a restaurant and is filling his thin belly. Do not expect him to bring any food for us." Koldin laughed, joined by a few hesitant snickers from the others. "He does not know how to be considerate. I am a poor teacher, and my attempts to teach him did not work well."

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“Come over here,” soothed Nisqué, noticing his disappointment at the failed mirth of his joke. “Let’s chat.” Koldin joined the talkative girl, the only one who seemed to be completely unafraid of him, and the others as they ascended the plank to the ship. Before they could even set foot upon the vessel, a shout was heard from below on the pier, and they turned back to see Kieran racing toward them, a velvet gown hanging on his arm and a silver pendant and chain in his hand. “Vortigurn!” he called up the elf girl as he followed them up the boarding plank. “I have some gifts for you.” He shoved past the others, annoying them with his disregard for their persons. “Gifts suitable of an elvish maiden as yourself. You deserve...”

Vortigurn turned her icy eyes upon him as Kieran nudged her gently from behind. She surveyed the bearer and the gifts silently, waiting for him to continue.

“I bought these things for you back at the harbor,” he said politely, extending the light blue dress and the jewelry to her. She let go of Saris’ arm, whom she was leading, and accepted the gifts graciously, painting a smile upon her face.

“Thank you, *friend* Kieran,” she spoke softly, avoiding eye contact. “I will wear these on the ship tonight.” Kieran tried to touch his hand to her face, but she pulled away, disappointing him just when he thought he had redeemed himself to the only other full-blooded elf in his presence. Her movements were not lost upon Baringer, who had been watching the male elf carefully.

Saris turned around and harrumphed sternly, sucking angrily upon his lips. Vortigurn re-inserted her arm into his, carrying the gifts in her other arm. “Come Father,” she soothed, pulling him along.

While the adventurers located the three rooms they were to share, Baringer led Speedwell to a special on-board stable for any traveling steeds. Though the unicorn was not used to traveling and being put up in various stables, she did not protest, and snorted contentedly after Baringer had set some feed in front of her stall and left her for his room.

The cabins were small and dingy, having been used too many times and with traces of past residences still living upon the walls. The heavy and ancient wood and metal of the ship creaked and groaned beneath their weight, constantly threatening to collapse beneath them but never doing so. Indeed this was a living legend of the deeps, a leviathan of bygone ages long past its prime.

“So this is what we’re living in for the next few days, huh?” asked Baringer of his two roommates. Nisqué and Galden were assigned to share the room with Baringer. The big man wandered around the small room and then sat upon the small bed provided for him. There were three such cots in the cabin, one singular and another double-deck set. Galden and Nisqué shared the double-deck cots, Galden preferring to sleep on the top bunk while Nisqué graciously and thankfully accepted the bottom. Baringer’s bed complained under his weight, but held up, so he lay back upon it, throwing his hands behind his head.

“I don’t like it,” complained Nisqué, standing with her hands defiantly on her hips. “I can’t stay in this... this room for an entire week!” she exclaimed, pouting. She picked at the sheets on the cots and sniffed them cautiously. Despite her statement, she reached into a satchel and pulled out a powder that she sprinkled on the two beds.

“You can and you will,” spoke Galden, noting her actions, “If you want to stay with us. Koldin and I paid a lot for our trip, and I’m not going to have our good money wasted. As it is now, I don’t have any left, and who knows where Koldin got his. I’m just thankful he did.”

“Oh, Koldin paid for me?” spoke Nisqué, calming down and smiling inwardly. “I didn’t know that he helped pay. That’s different...” She walked over to Baringer on his cot and gestured at him. “Up,” she ordered, shooing him off. She repeated her actions on his cot, and even shook out the flat pillow. “At least it’s clean,” she muttered. “Somewhat.”

Galden, jealous for what reasons he could not fathom blushed and leaned back to lay on his cot, bumping his head

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against the headboard of the small bed. “Ouch!” he grunted, rubbing the spot on his head where the bump would eventually rise.

Zeb, Koldin, and Kieran shared a room as well, with the silenced goblin still concealed in the burlap sack slung over the troll’s shoulder.

“Do you intend to let the goblin out of the bag?” questioned Koldin of the troll as the three explored their cabin.

“No,” answered Zeb curtly, tossing the bag violently to land with a jarring thump in the corner.

“Hey, idiot!” screeched Ganasta’s voice from within. “Watch where you’re throwing me!” He thrashed about in the bag.

“That was a nice little performance on the dock,” Koldin said to Kieran as he and his brother sat side by side on the bottom of the two bunks. “What was that all about? Do you and this Vortigurn have anything going on behind our backs?” He rubbed his brother’s back heavily, and pulled Kieran’s head closer to his own. “Is there something going on that I... that I should know about?” He sniffed, almost like an animal, at his brother’s head.

“No,” whispered Kieran meekly. “Nothing.” Pulling away, the elf settled his elbows on his knees and hunched his shoulders, drooping his head to stare at the floor.

“Mm hmm...” Koldin rose and nodded to Zeboblonuk and Kieran. “I’m headed off for the deck. I need some fresh air.” He took Kieran’s raised hand in his own and squeezed it, oblivious of Zeb’s distaste. Their relationship was their own, and they cared not what others thought of it.

“You will return soon?” asked Kieran.

Koldin smiled. He headed out of their cabin and strode quietly through the hallway, passing the third cabin that contained Saris and Vortigurn. Unable to fend off his burning curiosity, the half-elf leaned his ear against the door, listening to the room’s inhabitants.

“And furthermore,” ordered an unfamiliar voice, “I will not have anyone sleeping on the top bunk, nor the bunk

beneath it. I sleep on the top. You two may share the single bed.” The voice was female, and was deeply resonant.

Koldin smiled, amused by the rantings of the old man and his daughter’s unwilling roommate.

He mounted the steps that led up to the deck of the four-masted ship, avoiding the hardworking crew, staying out of their way as they bustled about their work keeping the ancient ship afloat and on course.

The sky above was deepest black, the stars of evening just beginning to glisten above the moist clouds.

“So you two think you can just stand there and laugh, eh?” demanded the angry woman, her face flushing crimson with rage. “I’ll show you who you’re dealing with!” The red-haired warrior drew a sword from its scabbard attached to her belt and lifted it above her head.

Before the strange woman could do any damage, Vortigurn assumed the shape of a dark knight, complete with the glowing eye-sockets and the rusting armor. The sight so startled and frightened the woman that she dropped her sword to the floor and backed up against the bunk-beds. “Have mercy!” she pleaded, her eyes wide in terror.

Vortigurn reassumed her elfin-shape and laughed merrily at the spectacle. Although Saris could not see what had occurred, he sensed the woman’s fear and then her embarrassment at being caught off-guard.

“So, you can use the bunk beds,” growled the woman, sheathing her sword and carrying her belongings to the single cot where she threw them angrily.

“Lady Azurad,” spoke Saris kindly, extending his right hand to greet her. “May we take advantage of this opportunity to introduce ourselves. My name is Saris, of Valinshae, and this is my daughter Vortigurn. You are right in that you had not told me your name. I am an empath and a seer. I knew it.”

“You must be batty as well as blind, old man,” snickered the woman. She had short, fiery red hair, and wore the clothes of a warrior of Balluirc, the badlands in the north of

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Gaelwinn. “Your ‘daughter’ is an elf.”

“Nevertheless,” spoke Saris, still smiling genially, “she is my daughter.”

“So then,” Azurad spoke, relaxing on her cot as she held her left knee to her chest, “are you headed back to Valinshae?” She smiled broadly at Vortigurn, who was busy examining Kieran’s gifts. “A special event? A... wedding?”

“No,” replied Saris, coming to a seat on the bottom bunk. “My friends and I are on a quest for the Sphere of Knowledge. You will be joining us.” He did not smile. “It will be a difficult journey.”

“And how do you know that?” laughed Azurad, slapping her other knee in amusement. “And how in Mannedor’s name do you propose to get to the Obelisk of Darkness without the dreaded Ullix killing you first?”

“We are many and we are strong,” answered Saris, his good humor fading. “There are others of our quest party in the next three cabins, and we have a unicorn above in the stable. We will make it there, and you will help us. There is no reward for the trials and tribulations we will go through, other than the knowledge we shall gain, and the fact that we shall free ourselves of the black oppression that Harlus is currently afflicted with.”

Azurad, for that indeed was her name, and she did not argue that point, blinked, her breathing slowed. Finally, she turned to address Saris.

“If there’s no booty, you can forget about it. Azurad fights for no man without pay.” With that statement, the woman lay back upon her cot and closed her eyes. “I am tired now, and you will not bother me as I sleep. Comprehend?”

“She *will* join us, won’t she Father?” whispered Vortigurn to the old man after they were sure Azurad had fallen asleep.

“Quite sure of it, Vortigurn. She will be a valuable asset to Galden and his quest. I only hope that she is wrong about us not getting there. I cannot see that far.” He knotted his brow in frustration. “I see... pain... for her, as well.”

While the old man sat quietly on the bed, Vortigurn tried on the gown and the pendant that Kieran had bought her, all thoughts of their meeting on that one dread night pushed from her mind... so that Saris would not be further hindered by knowledge of the incident if he accidentally read her thoughts.

Up on the softly lurching and swaying deck of the ancient vessel, Koldin was joined by Baringer and Nisqué, who had questioned at the half-elf's cabin and were told of his current whereabouts on the ship. The two had been ousted from their cabin when Galden fell asleep on his bunk. The rocking motion of the ship and the day's events at the harbor had served to tire the young man, and his cabin-mates left, not wanting to disturb him.

"So then, Koldin," called Baringer heartily to the half-elf as he leaned upon the railings of the boat, staring with wistful apprehension at the dull, wide ocean all around them, "we heard you had come up here for some fresh air. Find any?"

"Baringer, Nisqué, gracious saviors," Koldin spoke, bowing his head at the two arrivals. "What brings you two up here? And where is friend Galden?"

"He fell asleep, and his snores were loud enough to wake the dead, so we had to leave, but we were followed by some mysterious men in strange suits, so Baringer and I had to fight our way up here!" embellished Nisqué, spreading her hands in wonder.

As a sibling would a younger sister, Baringer slapped the girl on the back of her head and then put his arm around her protectively. "Galden was tired and we didn't want to keep him awake... and cranky," Baringer corrected, smiling amusedly at the giggling girl beside him. One of the crewmen of the ship walked hastily past them, carrying a large board on his shoulder, nearly upsetting them.

"Come over to the prow," suggested Koldin to them, heading off for the front of the ship. Nobody stood at that empty part of the deck, and it gave them an ideal place to

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converse privately.

“So what are you thinking about?” asked Nisqué of the somber elf-mage as they leaned against the wooden railing of the ship.

“I’m glad you’ve chosen to be my friend,” Koldin mused, not entirely ignoring her query. “So many other people fear and hate me for what I am, and few care about *who* I am. Nisqué I know is a friend. Baringer, what do you think of me?” He turned to face Baringer, for the first time speaking directly to the man.

“Well,” started Baringer, looking complacently at the placid waters, “at first I didn’t know what to think of you. Then I feared you. Now... Well, I still don’t really know, but I don’t think you scare me anymore.”

“That is sufficient for me,” Koldin murmured, sinking once more to a relaxed position on the railing. “I’d like to have your trust too, Baringer. For what I am about to tell you may be difficult to accept.”

Nisqué put her hand comfortingly on his shoulder and urged him to speak. “What is it?” she asked, genuinely concerned for her friend and what he had to tell them.

“I fear my brother may have done something foolish or even harmful to our friend Vortigurn.” He looked directly at them as he spoke, his eyebrows straining concern on his forehead.

“In what way?” asked Baringer, curiously returning the elf’s stare. “What did he do?” His muscles tightened as he bristled with anger.

“I cannot be completely certain, but judging from the way he’s been acting toward her and the rest of us, I’d say he may have forced himself upon her—or tried to. I don’t know whether he did or didn’t, but now he has been acting very apologetic to the girl, and that is the only thing I can come up with... knowing him the way I do.”

“Vortigurn wouldn’t have let him do that,” mentioned Nisqué, pointing out the fact that the girl was not defenseless. “Vortigurn is a shape-shifter. She probably changed

into a monster or something and scared him off.” Her reasoning was sound.

“Perhaps,” agreed Koldin, resuming his view of the ocean, “but Vortigurn has been acting rather distant and cold to him, and that adds to my suspicions.” Winds whipped his black streaked hair about his face and into his eye.

The three of them were silent for some time, not knowing what to say.

“I don’t think I’ll tell Galden,” stated Baringer after a moment’s pause, “or the others. She didn’t tell us. It’s not our place to say anything. We’re not even sure it happened. What made you tell *us*, Koldin? I mean, why did you decide to trust us and not, say, Galden... or Zeb?”

“Nisqué was the first of your company to make any attempt at getting to know me, and you happened to be with her when you two came up on deck just now. I only wish the best for my brother, though he is an insensitive lout, and extremely piggish. I love him deeply, more than anyone can know. I trust that you two will keep this knowledge within you, and not burden the girl with it. I just needed to speak it to someone.”

“I understand,” said Nisqué softly, setting her chin on the half-elf’s shoulder and peering out at the ocean with him.

“As do I,” added Baringer, laying his large hand on Koldin’s back and following their sights. The night was uneventful, as had been many of the days. But they all had a goal now to look forward to, and that they most assuredly did.

They were soon joined by the troll and his sack, who had chosen to abandon the sulking elf to the liquor he had brought along with him.

“He’s *that way* again,” muttered Zeb as he hurled the sack to the floor, arousing the goblin’s wrath yet again.

That way was drunk. And Kieran was not pleasant company when he was drunk. The troll had enough courtesy to

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take the goblin with him. "Get that fucking vermin away from me!" the elf had growled as Zeb left. "Why do you keep him anyway?"

Koldin hushed the others when he spied Vortigurn and Saris on the deck of the ship, obviously seeking them out. "No more of this talk," he whispered, waving so that Vortigurn could see them. Soon the railing was crowded with their party, and they did their best to stay out of the way of the ship's crew.

"Ought'n't someone check on Kieran?" asked Nisque after a while, forgetting her admonition to not speak of him. "I mean, I think I saw him... getting sick over the railing... ealier." She remembered her promise, and trailed off, hoping to cover her tracks.

Taking control of the situation before anyone could respond, Baringer spoke up. "I'll check on him." He squeezed Nisque's shoulder and nodded at Koldin. "After all," he thought to himself, "he can't hurt *me*."

The door to Kieran's cabin was ajar, so Baringer let himself in. He could see Kieran lying on the single cot, with a half-empty bottle in one hand and two rolling slowly on the floor as the ship swayed. The elf was nearly unconscious, but began to stir when Baringer entered. "What... do you want?" he sputtered, squinting his eyes to stare at the visitor. "Filthy... human..." he drawled.

Baringer was nonplussed and turned his head to survey the room. "We were concerned about you. I'm just here to see that you're all right. You should go to sleep." He remained where he stood, watching Kieran lift himself up on his elbows and stare at him. He had taken off his leather vest and his shoes. The elf's hair fell in front of his eyes, and he presented an almost feral appearance as he stared back.

"Close the door," he growled. Baringer considered the command, and tilted his head curiously. He closed the door quietly, locking the chain after the latch had clicked shut. He turned again to see Kieran clumsily unlacing his breeches with one hand, still holding onto the bottle with

the other. He approached the cot and sat beside him, brushing the hand away. Silently he pulled the strings loose. He then took off his own vest, and stood to pull his own breeches off. Kieran hungrily reached out and shoved the trousers down, then pulled Baringer to his face, burying himself in the human's arousal.

The party on the ship's deck was locked in conversation, and it being their first night on the ship, were unable to relax enough to want to sleep. Baringer and Kieran engaged themselves slowly, then more violently; Baringer riding the elf as he twisted and writhed beneath him. Hearts beating faster and faster, their sweat mingled as their bodies joined.

As their bodies moved, Baringer's hand snaked around to grasp Kieran's chest, his fingertips pressing deeply as he rubbed against the hardened skin. He twisted with his fingertips. The pain caused Kieran to twist around and gnash his teeth, but Baringer quickly placed his mouth on his, and kissed him deeply. His hand traveled down Kieran's mid-section until it found the straining hardness, which he worked to a frenzy as he worked behind him.

Once the throes of ecstasy had dwindled, Baringer arose from the bed and surveyed Kieran. He turned him over to lie on his back, and ran his hands along the elf's body, from his face down his neck, across his chest and stomach, and down to the rigidity between his legs. The elf was not spent, but had passed out from the drink and the exertion. "Your brother treat you this good?" he muttered, pulling the sheets over the prone form. He dressed himself and unlatched the door, striding out into the hallway. Part of him had hoped the others would be there to be aghast at his actions, but the hallway was strangely silent.

Except for the troubled whimpering and mumbling of another, tormented by nightmares.

Baringer stepped to another cabin door and stood silently outside, listening within. This was Saris and Vortigurn's, and he recalled that there was a third; an assigned cabin-mate. When Vortigurn and Saris had joined

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them topside, neither had described her other than to mention there being an ill-tempered warrior-woman made to share their cabin. He sighed quietly, leaning his hand against the door frame.

The door opened suddenly, startling him. A blade was pressed against his throat and the cabin's lone resident hissed angrily. "Who are you?" she demanded through gritted teeth.

She was bare from the waist up, and even wore boots, though her tread was soft enough to go unnoticed by the man listening at her door.

Though the lines upon her face told of age and experience, her torso—the supple breasts, the lean midriff and the muscled arms—bespoke of one whose touch left little to be desired.

Baringer could not take his eyes from her, despite the blade pressed close to his throat now. Still aroused from his tryst with Kieran, Baringer's eyes lustily drank in her form. His breath came in shortened pants now, and his hands tingled as he spread his fingers out.

"Answer me, fool! Are you mute like the old man is blind?"

"The... uh.. the old man... he's a friend of mine. My name's Baringer." He reached up to carefully push the blade away from his throat, and she relented. He could tell her breathing was labored now. Her body sensed his own arousal, though oblivious of its origins. Regardless, Baringer would have been just as aroused seeing her as he did, even had he not enjoyed the company of another beforehand.

"Baringer," whispered Azurad. She pulled him into her cabin, and this time it was he who did not resist.

The sex came hard and fast, different from the drunken melee only moments before. Her fingernails raked tracks across his back as he plunged deeper and harder into her heated wetness, the bed straining against their efforts, creaking its resistance angrily at each thrust. The skin of her abdomen was taught, and felt smooth and hard beneath

his rough hands. The flesh of her breasts gave his groping hands little resistance, and as he bit down on the pink tightness of her nipples both gasped hard.

Azurad arched her back as Baringer grasped her roughly about the waist, pulling her closer. His fingers squeezed the flesh of her rear as their bodies slapped noisily against each other. With a grunt he withdrew and spilled his seed across her undulating stomach. Azurad fell back on the bed, running her hands down her stomach and across her breasts. Panting, Baringer—still on his knees—sat down and leaned back on his elbows.

“We are not done, my warrior prince,” growled Azurad, raising herself. Before he could rise, she pressed her lips against his abdomen and ran her tongue across his belly, down to his fresh arousal. But this she passed over, continuing to bite and nibble at his inner thighs, until he could control himself no longer and erupted a second time.

Fully in control now, Azurad rose from the bed and pulled her trousers back on. For good measure, she pulled a tunic over herself and roughly grabbed Baringer’s shed clothes. These she silently crumbled together and flung at him as he was rising shakily from the bed. Baringer was spent, and blinked from weary eyes at her.

“I’m joining your quest,” she stated, though he continued to blink in confusion. “It was the old man. He told me that much.” She grabbed his arm and pulled him to a standing position and led him to the door of the cabin. “It’s better than flinging myself into the waves anyway,” she mumbled under her breath as she pushed him out into the hallway. And this time there were at least three pairs of familiar eyes to see him in his naked glory. And this time he did not feel proud of a conquest, nor did he feel any shame. Only embarrassment.

The weeks passed slowly, almost to the point of standstill, the nights flowing into the days, the days back into the nights. The odyssey lasted much longer than was planned,

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spanning over first one, then two, then three weeks. The companions got to know the woman Azurad, and her tale.

It seems the warrior woman from Balluirc had been a mercenary for the majority of her thirty-four years, and had grown tired of the business. It was a dangerous and often thankless job, and Azurad was no richer now than she was when she first started. Only Saris suspected her reasons for being on the boat, but said nothing contrary to her explanation. The meager funds she received in payment for her job served only to fund her needs, like food and shelter. Her idea that being a mercenary would make her wealthy had long since been lost, and she was now headed toward the continent of Monshera, in hopes that job opportunities might be a bit more lucrative there. She readily consented to join them in their quest, but under one small condition. She told them how she had been in quest parties before, and many times her advice and intuition had gone unheeded, often leading to her comrades' deaths. Azurad would accompany them only if they paid attention to her input and allowed her to act as a guide. Saris had been in the land for a large portion of his lifetime, and with Azurad's knowledge of the land's layout, Galden and the others readily agreed to her terms.

Once Azurad learned of their own respective stories, she surprisingly did not balk at joining such a group of misfits, but instead her determination grew, believing that they honestly did need her help and guidance. And somehow that old man had known when they first met that she would join them, a common story among certain others of the party.

Azurad particularly admired Baringer and Kieran the elf, even though he tried his best to stay away from her. The two men were the closest she had seen to true warriors in quite some time, and even if they did not have the skill, she thought, they certainly had the physique. Oh, she was certain of that, having seen Baringer's first-hand. She saw enough of Kieran's immodesty to appreciate his as well. Kieran insisted that he was a true warrior, but Baringer only

jokingly questioned her as to when the last time she had slept with a man had been. It was common knowledge—though unspoken—among the party that the answer to that was “last night.” Yes, she might grow to like this gathering of gargoyles. It might just help her reputation, and they never know, there might just be a monetary reward waiting for them at the finish of their quest. She hadn’t really planned on throwing herself to the waves anyway, did she?

And since she shared her cabin with the old man and the elf-girl, Kieran had come by many times looking for the girl, who always seemed to know when he was coming, and who always quickly vacated the cabin at these times. Azurad noticed that the old man seemed to know the elf’s mind, and since he had read hers, too, to find her name, this was not surprising to her. The first few times the elf came by looking for Vortigurn, he had left dejected and saddened, leaving behind the small things he had brought for her, like the occasional seashell or beads. Eventually he lingered behind, half in wait for Vortigurn, half to chat with Azurad, whom he recognized to be a fellow warrior. His conversation was minutely little at first, but eventually the two became acquainted and shared stories of their past experiences with great vigor. It eventually came out that the two shared other experiences; those with their traveling companion. At these times, old Saris would insist that they take their conversations outside. One time when they were leaving the cabin, Azurad thought she caught a glimpse of a large, burly man entering the cabin, though Kieran did not. She knew that he was Vortigurn in disguise, but since the girl did not seem to want to speak to Kieran, she did not tell him of her “discovery.”

Koldin, on the other hand, had grown quite fond and close to Nisqué and Baringer, who would spend their evenings on the deck of the large sailing ship, occasionally joined or bothered by other passengers. When more than six people would congregate on the deck, the captain or various crew members would shoo them back below deck. But

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then Koldin, Nisqué, and Baringer always stayed up, now common sights to the crew men, who treated them with respect and were not hindered by their presence.

Galden spent a lot of time in the stable with Zeb, Po, and Speedwell. They seemed to be the only people who could be considered outcasts, or rather abnormal, even though Galden was as painfully normal a human as one could be. At the times when he would join the troll and the animals in the solitude of the stable to discuss matters, Zeboblonuk would release Ganasta from the bag and keep him secured to a leash. Then the five of them would gather around a pile of hay and talk about their qualms, neither of them really paying attention to each other. All of them, especially Galden, felt loneliness and dejection to some degree, and the company they kept seemed to make it worse.

It was one especially dark and cold night when Galden was disturbed from his sleep by a cold hand shaking him awake. He was on the top bunk, so could not fathom why Baringer or Nisqué would bother to reach up to wake him. The room was dark, and he could not make out the shape beside him, although he soon realized it was neither of his roommates.

“Sshh!” hissed the miniscule figure seated upon the edge of his bed. “There is no need for alarm.” As Galden’s eyes grew accustomed to the darkness—all of them had long since gotten used to the swaying of the ship upon the swells—he was able to make out the outline and a few features; enough to recognize that the being who sat before him was none other than Ganasta the goblin.

“Good greetings to you,” spoke the goblin as he perched on the side of the bunk. “I bet you’re asking yourself just now how I got out of that dreadful bag and up here on your cot, eh? I’ll tell you, I will. It wasn’t any problem at all, mind you. I could’ve gotten away from that stinking troll long ago if I’d wanted to. Be sure of that. I just never wanted to, you know.” The imp pulled a small pipe from his trouser pocket and lit it up, puffing small circles of smoke from his mouth.

“What do you want?” murmured Galden sleepily. “You woke me up.”

“No! You’re jesting me! And how long did it take you to figure that out, master Galden? You must be some scholar or something like that! Great Gods, I never met anyone as smart as you!”

“What are you doing here?” Galden insisted, cranky and bothered. He sat up on the bed, making creaking noises that threatened to wake the others in the room.

“Now, now, master, you don’t have to get upset. I only come in here to let you know that I can be of some use to you on your quest, that’s all. But if you don’t want to listen to what little old Ganasta has to say, that’s all right and fine with me. I’ll just be on my way now.”

“Wait,” growled Galden, clutching at the goblin’s thin arm. “Tell me now or I’ll let Zeb know that you’ve escaped.”

“And done it many times before, too, I’ll have you know,” added the goblin impishly. “But since you’re so persuasive with that hand of yours there on my fragile little arm, I’ll let you know. I can talk to the little people that still are left in that continent you’re going to... Monshera you call it, right? That’s not the name it had in old times, but who cares right? Well, I happen to know some of the folks there, and we’re on a kindly term. So I was thinking that if you could convince that troll friend of yours to let me free, I could talk to them.” The goblin cocked his eye at Galden, smiling hopefully.

“Why don’t you just escape and leave him?” asked Galden.

“’Cause then I wouldn’t be *really* really free, you know?” replied Ganasta. “I want to be truly set free before I bother to tell him that I could’ve left long ago already.”

“All right,” sighed Galden, wanting to return to his slumber. “I’ll let him know.” He was too tired to try to reason out the goblin’s logic, and had long ago lost interest in why he was captured in the first place. Closing his eyes in resignation, Galden wanted nothing more than to sleep.

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“Thank you kindly,” chirped the goblin, hopping off and landing on the floor soundlessly. “Good night then, master Galden.”

“Goodnight, goblin,” murmured Galden, already drifting back to his dreams. He gave no pause to how the goblin was going to open the rickety door and close it, without making a racket. The goblin did not.

of hope...

Chapter 13

“Loris! Pouldin!” shouted Senna as she stood facing the door. There was no answer to her call, so she repeated it. Not wanting to attract any attention and danger to her growing family, the ageless queen stopped her cries and sat back in her chair.

“Why are you calling them, Senna?” asked Thirluaine as she fed her baby. Kaldorne was growing big for his age, but still remained as cute and cuddly as when they first met him. “You did not tell me why you are calling to them.”

“I need a knife,” Senna replied, looking angrily at the ceiling.

“Why do you need a knife?” asked Thirluaine, pulling the shoulder of her dress back up. Kaldorne snuggled against his mother’s breast and fell asleep. She handed the cooing child to Valza’in, who sat nearby, and strode over to Senna. Thirluaine had easily come to trust the wild boy with her baby. He was like an older brother or even a father to him, and loved him nearly as much as she did. In fact, Kaldorne was the object of all Senna’s family’s affections, from the ghosts to the guards. “You’re not going to do something foolish are you?”

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Senna looked into the elf's eyes, but said nothing. "No," mused the elf, "I didn't think you would. "

The inhabitants of the cell turned to the sound of a key in the door, opening slightly as Pouldin called in to them.

"What do you need?" he whispered urgently. "Hurry up! We're expecting the inspectors here any minute now!"

"I need a knife," whispered Senna eagerly. "May I borrow yours?"

"My knife?" blurted out the guard, nearly raising his voice. "Good heavens, Lady, I cannot..."

"I only need it for a few minutes," pleaded Senna, gazing fondly into her friend's eyes. Her eyes pleaded for her what her voice could not, and Pouldin handed her the knife.

"Don't do anything stupid, because Loris and I cannot help you if you do."

"I know," replied Senna curtly, closing the door quickly. It was locked from outside, and Senna quickly walked over to Thirluaine.

"Dear," she said, pulling her long hair in front of her, "could you hold onto this for me?" The elf complied obediently, though she was confused.

"Are you going to cut your hair off?" she asked, rolling the tresses around her hand and elbow.

"You are correct!" replied Senna eagerly, and cut her hair off at the nape of her neck.

"Good gracious!" gasped the elf-mother, abhorred by what she just witnessed. Though elves knew that humans did not value their hair as much as they did, the cutting of anyone's hair was torturous enough for them. Senna pulled the roll of hair from Thirluaine, and handed the knife to her.

"I need yours now," she spoke simply, extending her free hand to hold the elf's hair.

"What?" gasped Thirluaine, hardly believing her ears. "Senna! This is not the time for joking! You must be delirious! I cannot..."

"I can foresee the future," informed Senna nonchalantly,

“and I have foreseen that you will cut your hair, because it is a vital part of our escape and salvation. Now, arguing will only prolong the time when you will cut your hair, which will do no good, so just cut your hair and give it to me.”

Thirluaine looked confusedly at Val and then back at Senna. The ghosts were in the corner of the cell, whispering to each other. They looked at the elf and nodded their heads in unison. “All right, then,” she cringed, handing her elfin long hair to Senna. She slid the knife behind her head and winced as it cut through the thick locks. With a chopping noise it cut through her tresses, and came out the back, pulling a few stray hairs with it. She winced. “Ouch.”

“Wonderful!” exclaimed Senna, taking the valued hair into her hands. She bundled the hair into a ball and set it on the floor next to her chair. Then she retrieved the knife from the stunned elf-woman and strode to the door. Calling Garid to her, she said, “Take a peak outside and see what’s going on. If they’re alone, I can knock on the door. If they’re not, we’ll have to sneak the knife to him.”

“Why not just wait until this inspector’s gone?” asked the ghost, scratching his head.

“Because it might be one of the weapons on him that the inspector will look for. And he will find it, because I’ve foreseen it. Now go!”

Garid dashed through the door, fading to nothingness as he did so. No sooner than he had left he returned, shaking his head. “There’s another man out there, and he’s looking over Loris, and Pouldin is standing right next to him.”

“Curses,” muttered Senna, looking downward at the knife. “Can you get this to him somehow?” she asked, handing the knife to the ghost.

“Yup!” Garid brightened, anxious to prove to her the new escape route he had discovered for them. For quite some time he had been trying to convince them that the crevice in the back of the cell led to an underground river that eventually flowed to the surface, but they refused to try out his theory, not denying that they did not believe him. The little

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ghost grasped the knife firmly and flittered through the floor of the dungeon, down the crack, and out of their sights.

“Broceliande,” whispered Senna. “Come over here. Let me know what is happening. The ghost glided over to the door and stuck her face through it.

Pulling it back in, she reported to Senna. “That inspector man is standing in front of Pouldin now, and he’s saying something to him. Very formal. He’s talking a lot.” She looked back out again, and then continued, “Now he’s patting Pouldin all over.” She looked out once more. “His shoulders.” Another glance. “His chest.” Another. “His waist.” Senna hoped that Garid would get there soon, but then the problem arose of how he would get the knife to the guard.

To their surprise, a low rumble rocked the earth around them, catching the surprise and attention of everyone in the dungeons, including the inspector. In that moment of confusion, Garid instantly appeared and slid the knife into Pouldin’s leg-sheath. He then dashed into the dungeon, panting as if he were breathing heavily, which he, being a ghost, obviously had not.

“Done!” he sighed, mopping his brow with his sleeve.

“You don’t sweat, idiot,” chided Broceliande with a hint of laughter in her voice.

“Yes I do!” insisted Garid.

“That’s fine,” shooed Senna, ushering the two figures back into their corner of the dungeon. “Now hush up and let me get to work!”

As the prisoners of the dungeon watched, and sometimes were made to help, Senna first separated and tied several strands of her and Thirluaine’s long hair together, creating a long, fine thread, which was rolled into a ball sometimes by Thirluaine, Valza’in, Broceliande, or Garid. The ghosts, as Garid had earlier proven, were quite proficient at making parts of themselves tangible enough to carry or hold something, and Senna made good use of that ability; though the task more often than not fell upon Garid, who had no problem with tangibility as compared to Broceliande.

With the combined lengths of both her and the elf's hair, she eventually had a huge ball of thread to work with.

"Did you just tell me that so I would cut my hair off?" asked Thirluaine after the long task had been completed.

Senna looked complacently at the elf, her smile answering for her. "You *did* cut your hair, didn't you?" asked Senna. Thirluaine groaned in despair, putting her hand to her forehead in anguish while the others tried hard not to laugh at her distress.

"You still have not told us what you are going to do with the hair," muttered Thirluaine as she felt gingerly at what used to be her long tresses. The hair she had left was cut off at the neck, leaving her with a short boyish head of hair. Her neck felt stiff and sore during the days following; from no longer having to support the weight of her tresses.

"Why," answered Senna, who felt no such discomfort, "I'm going to make the strongest rope in the world!" Taking an amount of hair at a time, Senna began creating three separate threads by tying the ends of each batch together. These strands she had Thirluaine, Broceliande, and —once she taught him how—Valza'in roll up into balls. Finally, Senna sat down on the floor close to the very heart of the dungeon and began braiding the three strands together.

First one, then the second crossing over that, then the third crossing over the second, and so on, the rope grew quickly in front of their eyes. Senna braided the hair rope for hours before Thirluaine offered to help. Then after she had done it for quite some time, Val insisted upon learning how to do it, and Senna taught him, after which he added a great length to the rope.

After her two assistants had both toiled for days on the rope, half of it was finished, and it was already nearly two-hundred feet long, according to Senna's judgment. It might have been longer, since her own feet were somewhat less than twelve inches, but that was sufficient for her. The braiding continued for another two days before all three working together came to the ends of the balls of hair and had to

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stop. At this point, Senna tied the end of the rope into a tight knot and then showed them how to undo the knot so that more hair could be added later.

“Why would we want to make it longer?” asked Thirluaine, stroking the soft nape of her neck where her hair used to be.

“For any reason you can think of,” replied Senna with a wry smile. “Now we have a great tool for our use when the time comes. And it is near.”

“This *time* that you keep speaking of,” started the elf-woman as she hoisted Kaldorne into her arms from Valza’in’s, “what exactly is it? Are you planning to escape?”

“No,” replied Senna, still smiling. “It is the Time of Reckoning. It is the time when we shall be rescued from this dungeon, when the candle will snuff itself out, when the Obelisk of Darkness and Ullix with it shall crumble to the ground. Thirluaine, it is the time when the sun will be made whole again!”

Valza’in commandeered possession of the rope, rolling it and re-rolling it and carrying it with him as he pretended to be a hunter in a great jungle, or a mighty king in his castle. He served to greatly amuse the other tenants of the dungeon, and he in turn basked in their enjoyment. At times he would create a cradle out of the coiled rope for Kaldorne, and line it with a blanket that the guards had left behind. And when Loris and Pouldin discovered their creation, great was their admiration over the workmanship and length of the cord.

Shortly thereafter, much to their ignorance and while Valza’in and the elves were asleep and the ghosts were out prowling the town for some excitement or news, Senna was abducted from the dungeon... this time for good, leaving a distraught adopted son, a worried mother and her child, and two angry ghosts who could not locate where she was, no matter how hard they searched the Obelisk for her.

Loris and Pouldin were also of no assistance in locating her whereabouts, having no knowledge at all of when, how,

or why she had been taken from their supervision. The ghosts, with steely determination, overcame their fear of ascending above the ground level of the Obelisk to search for her. After all, they could wander the township, and that was aboveground. But the Obelisk was different. What they did find was as interesting if not as nerve-wracking as their search for their matriarch. They now fully viewed the horrid creations of the evil wizard; mismatched body parts cemented onto each other, horribly misshapen and distorted, carrying on some unknown business as they staggered and cavorted frighteningly about the different levels of the candle-tower. The candle itself Broceliande and Garid caught sight of; a huge mass of melted wax covering the entire floor of the Obelisk, a heavy rope wick in the center of it, steadily burning downward towards the base of it. All around the candle were these Ullix-created monsters, but they were unable to find Senna or the dreaded mage.

a book of time

Chapter 14

The port city of Tullmore was different from the port they had departed from. It was populated, as they expected, but not so densely as the previous. The other people who had undertaken the journey along with the adventurers went off on their own respective ways, easily blending into the small crowd of people who began to line up on the pier. After weeks on the seas, there was money to be made from the weary travelers.

Baringer had retrieved Speedwell from the stable, and although the other animals that had been holed up in there were rather gaunt, the unicorn—as always—looked to be in perfect health. Azurad led the way through the narrow and wet streets of Tullmore, followed closely by Kieran, who pointed things out to the warrior woman and asked her various questions in his hushed voice. He in turn was followed by Koldin, Nisqué, and Baringer, Galden, Saris, Vortigurn, and Zeboblonuk. Po fluttered his wings, shaking out the sea-air, and flew overhead, his cawing boisterously out of place in the rather sullen town.

Koldin was snickering quietly as they walked along the cobbled streets, and was joined by Saris, who commented

wryly to the mage, “Yes, the captain will be discovering the unusual smell of his money till right about this time.”

“I know of an inn nearby with good food and lodging,” informed Azurad to her new companions as she trudged along the muddy streets. “The innkeeper knows me, and we’re pretty good friends. We should have no trouble with lodging tonight.”

Before too long she led them into the open door of a small tavern, only two storeys in height.

It was empty, save for two scruffy men sitting at the bar and the fat innkeeper standing behind the counter. She was busy writing notes in a small booklet when the large group entered.

“Goodness gracious!” exclaimed the chubby woman, her round face glowing bright red in her happiness. “Azurad! You haven’t graced this humble inn in three years!” She instantly threw open the swinging door to the counter and dashed through to throw a loving bear-hug around the warrior-woman’s shoulders.

“Quite true,” laughed Azurad, trying to ease the ecstatic woman from hugging her so tight. “I’ve brought some friends,” she told the fat woman, her hand sweeping around the room to encompass her comrades. After introducing them—“That one,” she pointed out in a whisper, indicating Baringer, “is especially fun to be with”—to the innkeeper; Selene was her name, who insisted upon giving each of them, including Kieran, a hug; Azurad informed her that she would finally have some paying customers in her inn that day.

“Paying... customers?” stuttered Selene, fanning herself with her booklet as she reassumed her position behind the counter. “I think I feel faint!” She threw her arm over her forehead, looking heavenward.

“You’re over-acting, Selene,” growled Azurad as she reached into a pocket in her cloak to remove a small bag of money. “This ought to cover me and three others.” She turned to Galden and the others, raising an eyebrow.

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“Don’t look at me,” shrugged Galden, looking at Koldin. “Perhaps our friend here...”

“But of course,” smiled the half-elf, striding up to the counter. “If I may,” he asked, indicating the bag. To the nod of Azurad and the innkeeper, he removed one of the coins from the bag and placed it on the counter. “Now, then,” he said, removing one of his gloves to reveal his clawed, scaly hand, “please pay attention to what I am about to perform.” He passed his mage-hand in circles over the coin, back and forth, clockwise and counterclockwise, until it began to glow. Then he paused and looked up from his work. “How many gold coins do you wish to have, Madame Selene?” he asked.

“Why, it would cost all of you ten, but I could really use... er...”

“How about fifty?” asked Koldin, smiling amiably at her. When she nodded, emphatically at that, he tapped the counter five times with his clawed ring-finger, then clenched his hand into a fist and banged on the counter another ten times. To their great surprise and delight, the one coin he had picked out became five, then those five became fifty; each time bouncing noisily and expanding as the fist hit the countertop. Koldin put his glove back on and grasped Azurad’s bag of coins with it. “I suggest you hold onto these, Lady Azurad,” he said, handing it to her. “We may have need of it later.”

“Are these real?” asked Selene after she had overcome her bedazzlement. She picked up one of the coins and bit it between her teeth.

“Those had *better* be real,” whispered Azurad to the mage, growling softly as she did so.

“As real as the first,” answered Koldin glibly. Selene immediately held out her apron and swept the coins into it with her other hand. “Be back shortly,” she chirped, jostling her fat body into her office, which sat behind the counter. They heard the coins as they fell onto another table inside, and then she reappeared.

“Sit down!” she laughed. “Make yourselves comfortable!

Tonight you are the most honored and esteemed guests of Selene's Tavern! Anything you want is on the house!" She ushered them with wildly waving hands toward the stairwell. "Any room you want!" she said, pointing upward. "They're all empty! Take your pick! Come back down when you're ready, and I'll have dinner for you!"

The sight of a brilliant white unicorn standing in the center of a tavern was an interesting one, comical one might say. Zeb and Po had lingered downstairs while the others trudged up the low flight to deposit their belongings in the first few rooms they came across. Fortunately enough for them, Selene, though not having many customers in many months, had always kept the water in the washbasins clean and fresh. "Old habits, you know," she said to herself daily. "Never know when someone'll come in." There was enough of the water in Tullmore anyway, and at least it kept the hefty woman busy, if not financially sated. After a refreshing splash of water in the face for many of them, they came back downstairs.

Koldin, the first to arrive, noticed that the two men were still seated at the bar, though they had stopped talking now and were glaring suspiciously at him.

"Well, now," one of the men spoke up surlily, "what have we here? Looks to me like an elf!"

"Worse'n that, mate," snickered the other, "He's an *old* elf! Look at that grey hair. Probably couldn't even protect 'imself if we accidentally beat him up! And we'd only do that if he didn't give us some of that coin he's got."

From her vantage point behind the counter some feet down Selene looked up from her frying pan and winked at Koldin. She looked at the two men and then back at him, pointing her thumb downward. Koldin easily understood her clue, but said nothing.

"Look'a him," slurred the first who had spoken, stumbling off the bar-stool and swaggering toward the half-elf. "He's not even movin'! Scared stiff, he is!" The swarthy bar patron swung his large fist at Koldin, but the elf-mage

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ducked beneath the blow. The man stumbled past him, falling against a chair and table set, and made a horrendous racket as his body met the furniture. The second wiped his mouth with his sleeve, setting his mug of ale down on the counter with a jarring clang. "That's my pal there, ya crummy *elf*!" He spoke the last word with a derogatory slander in his slurred voice. Koldin saw that this one was not going to make the same mistake as the first, and he looked to be much larger than his friend. Koldin was about to remove one of his gloves and dispose of the menace in the manner he most detested, when a thick cast-iron frying pan came sailing through the air to land upon the unsuspecting man's thick cranium. Koldin deftly whipped his hand upward to catch the handle of the ricocheting pan, and held it as a shield before him. The man stood for a moment, still staring at Koldin through his glassy eyes, then fell with a resounding crash to the floor.

"They never paid their tab," pointed out Selene smugly as Koldin returned the pan to her possession. She pursed her lips as she gripped the pan in her hands. The sight of the large innkeeper holding the weapon over her shoulders and smiling so adorably was too much for Koldin, and he burst out laughing just as his companions descended the steps to join him.

"Pray tell," began Azurad, "what are you laughing about? Beating up those two slime-urchins is no big feat."

"For you, maybe, Lady Azurad," said Koldin with a flourishing bow, "but not for two unskilled in the practice." He then turned to the innkeeper, who was still holding the pan on her shoulder. "Please accept my gracious thanks, Lady Selene," he said with a smile, grasping one of her hands in his and kissing it gently on her fingers. "I was sure the end of my days was here. If it were not for your bravery..."

"Oh my," she blushed, waving away his chivalry, "it was nothing! It's about time those two louts got some hard knocks. Tell you what, though," she hinted, winking at the gathering in her tavern, "you can repay me by tossing them

out into the street. I don't need their kind in here, and thanks to your elf-friend here," gesturing to Koldin, "their tabs have been more than taken care of."

Selene set down her pan and joined the others in hoisting the two unconscious men from the parlor of her establishment and sending them packing out the front door. Nisqué joined Selene at her stove, and together with Azurad, they were able to prepare an excellent feast. Everyone, including Selene, gathered around the massive table in the tavern's center and enjoyed the repast.

Later that night, as Zeboblonuk Fenozizuk sat glumly in the darkened tavern with Po and Ganasta to keep him company, the old troll reflected upon his recent adventures, and the one that led into his current situation.

He, Kieran, and Koldin were old wartime companions from the battle between the elves and the humans many hundreds of years past. Of course, he had gotten over his grudge and long since accepted humans as his equals. They were only soldiers in their respective armies, after all; doing their duty. But Kieran, in all his two-hundred and fifty years of age still held contempt in his heart for the "lesser" beings. That was another story for another time. Zeb told his meager audience of how the three of them had teamed up after the battle to find adventure and excitement as wandering mercenaries, and of how they had gotten a job with an old hag named Ganydrone or Gnydronne or something like that... that promised them riches beyond imaginings if they could get her an old rune staff from the mountain regions. They were certainly willing to do so, especially with the cash deposit she had given them, promising the rest upon success. Ganasta easily recalled how the three of them had come upon him while he was sleeping beneath a rock, and how Zeb had unfairly insisted upon capturing him. Zeb insisted that it was in no ways unfair, and that in fact the goblin had been trying to pick their pockets. Po just squawked angrily that they continue the story.

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“There’s not much after that, raven,” sighed the troll, grabbing Ganasta roughly about his scrawny neck and inserting his kicking and cursing body into the burlap bag. “The old hag was insane anyway, and we all agreed that the quest was futile. We would just take the money she gave us and go onward. We were beset by the Dark Knights and their shadow-dragons soon afterward, and forced down into that gully where you and your friends found us.”

Po hopped from one foot to the other and flapped his wings to get the troll’s attention. “Kieran!” he croaked, almost sounding like a child laughing. “Bad elf!”

“Not really,” said Zeb, staring off blankly at the ceiling. “He just had himself a hard life. His parents, his wife, his children... All were taken from him and killed back in the war. He’s been really confused and angry ever since.” He paused a moment, and added, “His relationship with his brother... it doesn’t help much either. But you can’t separate them. *That’s* unhealthy, I think.”

And at the top of the stairs, too quiet to be heard, Vortigurn frowned sadly to herself and scurried back into her room. Though no one else thought to put merit into these misfits’ conversation, it taught the elf-maiden a great deal. Pity and understanding melted her heart.

The next morning after all of the companions had breakfasted to their hearts’ and bellies’ content, the messenger boy that Selene had sent out to retrieve the town crier returned, dragging the straggly individual along with him.

“There’s a good fellow,” smiled Selene, popping a shiny coin into the excited boy’s hand. “Now be off with you. I don’t want you idling around here bothering my guests.” The boy scampered out of the back door of the tavern, slamming the door shut behind him.

Turning to the tired-looking man, Selene offered him a mug of steaming ale. “Now then,” she said to him as he sat down and looked suspiciously at the companions, “my good friends here need some information from you. And since you’re the most knowledgeable person in town, naturally I

suggested they speak to you.” When she noticed the man’s hesitation to cooperate, she pulled another coin from her apron pocket. “There’s a nice little payment in it for you.”

The man snatched the coin out of her hand and prepared to stand. A threatening glance from both Kieran and Baringer, who stood behind Selene with their arms folded menacingly across their chests, set the man back on his seat, and he looked sheepishly at Selene. “What is it they want?”

“We’d like to know where the castle of the Queen Senna used to be,” answered Galden for the fat barkeep. The crier turned to him and sneered.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do,” interjected Koldin, removing one of his gloves to expose his scaly and clawed hand. “I could... *convince* you to remember.”

The man took one look at the horrific hand and paled noticeably. “’Twas up north, in the town of Kurz. Hardly anyone’s up there anymore. Just a few old people who want to keep their land... That’s all! Honestly!”

“Fine then,” Selene brusquely said, waving the thin poltroon from her presence as if he were a mere fly. “You may leave now. And enjoy that coins I gave you, crier!” she finished with a sarcastic tinge to her otherwise jolly voice.

“Now then, mateys,” she said to Galden and his friends, brightening her smile, “will there be anything else I can get for you?”

“Only more information,” politely answered the young man to whom she spoke. Galden looked around at the varying faces of the entourage, from the fat and ugly of Zeb to the dainty of Nisqué, the statuesque of Azurad and to the handsome of Baringer. “Can you direct us to Kurz?”

That very day found the motley group of two animals, two little folk, three elves, and five humans trudging at a fast gait along the rocky road that led north to the fabled Kingdom of Kurz. Koldin had been kind enough to conjure up another hundred pieces of gold for the immensely satisfied and grateful barkeep, while Azurad confined the large

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lady to secrecy, and revealed to her their quest. The trustworthy and loyal woman that she was, she jotted down their conversation on a page of her register book, ripped it out, and stuck it underneath a loose floorboard. She was very kind and liberal-minded about not complaining when they discovered a souvenir left by Speedwell. Since the floor of the tavern was the only suitable place for the unicorn to spend the night, she had no other place to bestow her gift. Baringer apologetically removed the untidy present outside and swept the floor as best he could. Selene, however, paid no heed to the smell, cleaning it up with a mop as she jingled the coins in her pocket with her chubby fingers, giggling merrily all the while. “I’ll take a pile of horse shit—*unicorn* shit, sorry—anyday, if it comes with all this gold and good company. Please come back anytime! All are welcome here.”

The road was a long and tiresome stretch, as the travelers soon discovered. There were few, if any, townships in this cold and dark area, fewer still of the familiar obelisks that dotted the countryside of Gaelwinn. The two they came across had no towns built around them, and they were, like the others, completely barren. They did however provide temporary shelter for the weary journeymen and women, and the few odds and ends they were able to dig out of the scattered rubble and wax within were worth the stay. Kieran no longer found it necessary to solely carry a bow and his quiver of arrows, since he unearthed a near-perfect spear from the rubble of the first, which he easily mastered. The rust that corroded the point of it was easily removed, revealing a formidable weapon. Galden had long since convinced Zeb to free the goblin, to his great discomfort and the goblin’s great glee. Ganasta proved his loyalty to his newfound comrades, however, and stayed with them. At the first obelisk, like Kieran, he discovered a huge battle-axe, which he wielded as if he had always done so. Galden even found himself a weapon. A straight and sharp sword was found underneath the huge metal disk that made one of the year markers of the melted candle. Some of the wax

had fastened the disk to the ground, but after drafting Kieran and Baringer to assist he acquired his sword. Azurad and Zeb were easily able to show the young man how to handle it, and soon the novice felt comfortable enough to wield the weapon in a battle.

Saris, Azurad, and Ganasta now led the troupe, the impish goblin constantly laying small rocks and twigs in the troll's path to make him trip, of which Zeb never came to expect, no matter how many times the goblin did it. Saris, by reading the others' thoughts and emotions, easily was able to point out certain landmarks and directions of travel, and with Azurad's and Ganasta's able assistance they found they were on the correct route. The map in Galdeen's old book corroborated their progress.

At one point of the trek Ganasta demanded that they all stop for at least an hour.

"What is your reason, goblin?" demanded Zeb, still annoyed at him. "It had better be a good one."

"Sshh!" Ganasta held his finger to his lips as he scanned the countryside with his immense eyes. "There are wee folk in these parts," he whispered, winking at the troll.

"I won't believe you for a second," bellowed the troll, advancing upon him with his fists raised. "You little..."

His sentence was cut short by what looked like a small bug whizzing about his head. It ran smack dab into his bloated proboscis, silencing Zeb instantly. "What in the world?" he growled, peeling the fluttering creature from his nose.

"Leave me alone!" rumbled an impossibly deep and resonant voice from the small creature. It appeared to be no larger than the troll's thumb, but it was an exact replica of an elfin girl, with the gossamer wings of a butterfly and the antennae to match. The deep and manly voice that emanated from the little creature's throat was louder than Zeb's own, and quite enough to startle the entire cast. "What do ya want with me, you big oaf!" she demanded, flailing out her tiny fists and kicking as he held her by her wings.

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"I told you there were wee folk around here," smugly asserted the goblin, puffing out his chest and smiling broadly at him. "Now I suggest you let her go before she kills you."

"Her? *Her!*" laughed Zeb, highly amused at the goblin's supposed jest. "She couldn't hurt a fly! Why..." For a second time in those few minutes Zeb's boisterous speech was cut short by the actions of the little creature. He had made the mistake of bringing her closer to his face so as to see her better. The tiny thing took advantage of her situation, planting a punch upon the troll's nose that sent him flying backward several paces.

"I told you so," sneered Ganasta as she flittered over to him to alight upon his outstretched hand. He turned amiably to the creature and began conversing with her in the strange tongue of the wee and little folk, the two of them buzzing back and forth like bees. As they concluded their tête à tête, Ganasta presented his cohort to the rest of the gathering. "May I have the honor of introducing my friend to my most esteemed companions?" he asked, bowing to Galden.

"Go ahead," Galden acquiesced, returning the goblin's courtly bow. He had picked up on the goblin's courtly manner in the presence of one who must be of regal bearing. This pixie must be someone important.

"I now have the honor of presenting to you the gracious and most lovely Tsingee Yingee Snordeap Knorrdouff."

"But you may call me Tsingee, for short," boomed the awful voice from his hand. "All that is, except for you," she continued, glaring angrily at Zeb, who had regained his footing and now came stumbling back to rejoin his fellow adventurers. "You may call me 'Mistress' Tsingee, if I let you call me at all."

"Pardon my rudeness and ignorance," faltered Galden, taking great care not to insult this pint-sized powerhouse, "but exactly... er... what *are* you?"

"Why, silly human, I'm a lutina!" she replied happily

emulating an excited little girl. "I can sing, too! You want to hear me?"

"I don't think we are deserving of your gracious serenades this night," spoke up Saris, extending his own trembling hand. Tsingee gingerly jumped from Ganasta's to his, and bounced impetuously upon it.

"That's okay," she rumbled. "Maybe later on."

"D-Does that mean you're coming with us?" queried Galden, his voice on the edge of uneasiness. He looked at Saris, who nodded sagely.

"Of course, simple human!" laughed the jarringly deep voice of the little faerie. "You don't think I'd let such weak and idiotic people such as you face Ullix alone, do you?"

Baringer stepped forward to retort the lutina's comment, but Galden laid his hand upon his friend's chest, halting him. "Don't try it," he warned, still smiling nervously at the mysterious wee folk. "So then," he addressed Tsingee, "I'll bet you're familiar with these parts, right?"

"Of course, stupid backward human," laughed Tsingee in her volcanic tone. "I know every road, every mushroom, every tree around!"

"Trees?" blurted out Nisqué incredulously. "You mean those things still exist?"

"Only the dead ones, foolish human," replied the faerie. "But since you are so kind, even though you are all impeded and simple, I will go along with you, and tell you where to travel, okay?"

"Ooooookay," exhaled Galden, drawing out the word hopelessly. "We're headed for Kurz."

"Kurz?" erupted the jarring voice. "What inna world do you want up in that dirty old shit-hole of a kingdom? Not even gnomes bother to go there, and those shit-eaters go everywhere!"

"Pardon me, your grace," peeped Ganasta, "but some of my very best friends are gnomes."

"Well, pardon me for mentioning that, goblin!" She spat out the word *goblin* as if it had a foul taste to it. "Enjoy

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visiting your friends for dinner, do you?”

“I’m very sorry for saying so, but...”

“That’s all very fine and interesting,” cut in Galden, “but if you’ll please, could you lead the way to Kurz?”

“Fastest, easiest, or shortest?” returned Tsingee.

Galden stared blankly at the small faerie, not knowing how to answer. Of course, the fastest route would get them all to the Dark Obelisk earlier, but then, it might not be the shortest. Of course, wouldn’t those two be the same? And the easiest route might not necessarily be the shortest or the fastest. His mind was muddled with the three different possibilities, as were those of his fellows.

“Um... What would you recommend, your grace?” he asked of the lutina.

“Why, nobody’s ever asked me which way I’d prefer,” spoke the mollified creature. “Well, you’re in luck! They all happen to be the same road. There’s not many of you bothersome humans around these parts to clutter up the space, and hardly any of those unsightly black towers. Lucky for you simpletons that I’m here to help you out. You *some-how* made the right decision by letting *me* lead you, which is not common among dumb things like you. I approve, and will grace you with my presence.”

“Thank you kindly,” mumbled Galden. “Now, if you don’t mind, let’s be on our way.” He bowed uncertainly at the little faerie, who returned the gesture, and the ever-growing assemblage continued on their way.

It was quite some time before most of them, but not all, became accustomed to the pixie’s deranged voice. They were grateful to the creature, as she apparently knew full well where she was going. Oft times she would lead them off the worn road and into the fungal underbrush, but the complaints and objections of the rest of the group would veer them back onto more reasonable paths. Ganasta, although he was reverent to the little creature, seemed not to be entirely afraid of it, if not simply being courteous to her. He would at times call her various names and slurs, and

the lutina would in turn curse at him, but no blows were exchanged. There was a mutual respect that transcended convention.

“She’s really harmless,” whispered the goblin to Koldin, who happened to be walking beside him. The goblin leaped to the half elf’s shoulder, and continued talking to him. “But only if you don’t touch her wings. She’ll bite your nose off if you touch her wings. Literally!”

“I thank you for the information,” whispered Koldin back, smiling broadly with his news. “Shall I pass that along to the others?”

“Not all of them,” replied Ganasta, stifling an impish giggle. “Especially not Zeb. Maybe the humans, but we can let the others believe what they want.” He then hopped off of Koldin’s shoulder to dance in front of them on the road.

Koldin straggled back a few paces, whispering the fact that the faerie was full of hot air to various members of the party. Giggling merrily, for this was the first truly amusing occurrence to befall them in a long while, they passed the interesting tidbit back and forth amongst each other, purposely leaving the troll and Kieran out of the secret.

The hours they spent on the road turned uneventfully into days, and, passing the nights under vacant mushrooms or in deserted huts and even towns, they progressed speedily towards Kurz. The infrequent passersby that they came upon during the trek said few words about the land to the north, only that it was rarely ever visited. They were more interested in their own wanderings to pay much attention to them, although one or two were intrigued by the oddities among them.

Towards noon of the twelfth day, they stopped a wandering peasant. She was all too happy to speak to them, apparently having no one else to talk to.

“Pardon us, madam,” said Baringer, working his charm on this singularly haggard member of the female gender. He held out his hand, and kissed hers guardedly as she laid

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her hand upon his. “Could you possibly direct us to the Kingdom of Kurz?”

The haggard old woman blushed noticeably beneath her ragged cowl and straggly hair. “Of course, young man. It’s right over yonder, past that hill.” She pointed her wraith-like finger northward, indicating a small mound with a deadwood forest atop it. “I’ll take ye there if ye want. I have no one else to help me along, so I might as well help you folks. Ketamon doesn’t help me anymore. He’s so lazy. Come on, don’t tarry, follow me. Yes, I knows the way. You all just follow me and I’ll take you where ye want to go. Old Gnydronne doesn’t mind at all, no sir!”

Koldin stopped dead in his tracks, putting his hand upon his brother’s chest to stop him. The troll needed no cause to halt, and the three passed a look of worry among themselves. Kieran paled, and Koldin closed his eye in disappointment. “What is she doing here?” he asked. “On this continent?”

“This is where we met her, isn’t it?” demanded the troll in a harsh whisper. “I forget...”

“No, this is not the place,” hissed Kieran angrily. “The hag employs magic to hound us. We have betrayed her and now she seeks the return of her investment.” He lowered his face and glared ahead at the doddering old woman who was leading Baringer by the hand. “I don’t like her touching him, either,” he thought to himself, his hot jealousy boiling beneath his skin.

As the muddled old peasant rambled on, her followers snickered mirthfully behind her back, twirling their fingers beside their heads.

“She seems to be a little touched, if you ask me,” whispered Azurad into Vortigurn’s pointed ear. The elf, very rarely doing so, smiled, and nodded to her.

During the stroll, Gnydronne offered both her tale and some mushrooms she had gathered to the travelers.

Her story was somewhat sad, but her steadfastness to hold onto her land was admirable. Over the years, she had

lost her entire family... either to death or desertion. She was not sure. Someone named Ketamon still lived with her, as they understood, but must be an awful lazy lout to abandon her to do all the work she did. Aside from him, she alone remained to lay claim over the few muddy acres of mushroom fields. Many people thought perhaps that she had lost her mind along with her family, but she insisted that her lunacy was all a cover-up. "Keeps the real loonies away from me, you know." She looked Galden up and down, pinching his arm as she did so. "You look familiar," she muttered, spitting to the side. "My son, that miscreant... he looked like you. Where is that child?"

"You'll be rewarded for your efforts," mentioned Saris politely to her. Try though he might, he could not read much of her mind; as mucked up as it was. He scowled in aggravation, knowing that even the most ruined mind was an open book to his seeing.

"Why, thank you, little boy," replied the old woman with a smile. "I already know." She winked at Saris and at the others.

Walking steadily over the hill, they soon were able to see a vast countryside below them, encrusted with thick forests of dead trees, all infested with mushrooms. A squawk from above from their raven harbinger turned their attention skyward.

"Kurz!" croaked Po, circling above them. "Due north!"

And lo, the companions beheld the abandoned castle of the eternal Queen Senna. There it stood, the large rocks of its walls still standing, a sentinel of its past glory to all who might see.

Koldin, Kieran and Zeb trailed behind as they followed. The old woman either did not recognize them, or chose not to. Regardless of the reason, they chose not to make their presence obvious to the daft creature.

of despair

Chapter 15

Thirluaine did not know what to do. The woman who practically became her mother these past few weeks down in the dungeon had been taken from her, her child was teething, the ghosts were coming apart with worry, and this boy... this young man whom Senna called her son, was so despondent that his emotion actually hurt her.

At first Valza'in pounded on the door, screaming the word "Ma" at the top of his lungs. Then he would run madly about the dingy cave, dragging the rope Senna had made behind him. After a while he gave up the theatrics, preferring instead to mope quietly in the farthest, darkest corner of the dungeon, the rope and the rag-blanket Senna had made constantly clutched in his hands.

Broceliande and Garid had given up quite some time ago in their search for the queen-mother. Broceliande now devoted her time to aiding Thirluaine in comforting Kaldorne, whose newly emerging teeth did not sit well with him. Her gossamer fingers massaged his gums, though she could not make herself substantial enough to be of much good. Garid no longer tarried with them anymore, preferring to keep a vigil at the base of the candle on the ground

level, the common ante room for the Obelisk.

The elfin mother did not know what to do, or how to handle her situation. So she just stayed with them in the dungeon, her only attentions devoted to mothering her infant. Luckily Loris and Pouldin were still considerate enough to supply her with warm water and decent food for both her and Val, and Kaldorne too. The guards missed their friend as much as the prisoners did.

Ever since she had become a ghost, Broceliande had looked upon Senna as her mother. Even before she was raped and killed on that dreaded night. Before she had been thrown into the dungeon, she lived with her parents, a wood chopper and his wife, in a great pine forest in a nearby town. Life was hard for her, toiling all the time at various chores, and her mother did not make things easier for her. Indeed, the woman spent most of Broceliande's teenage and young adult years bedridden with some illness that slowly ate away at her frail body. Broceliande was never allowed to go near her mother, and forbidden to go anywhere near her locked room. Only her father would bring in the woman's food and drink three times daily. He would make sure to feed and tend to his invalid wife, then heartlessly leave her, paying no regard to the traces of intelligence left in her eyes. How Broceliande wished she could be there with her mother, to comfort her and look into those soulful eyes.

But with the cataclysm came death and destruction all around, and the trees that her father had built his livelihood upon slowly were harvested for fuel. And later on Ullix's henchmen, sent out to retrieve willing and unwilling slaves for their master, captured her and her father, and—to her utter horror—parts of her mother, too. Her father struggled valiantly to ward off the foe, but was killed instead. Broceliande had fainted then, but later learned that his body too was taken apart and loaded with her mother's and many other people's body parts to be taken to the Obelisk. Broceliande herself was thrown into a dungeon for a plaything of the guards. Fortunately for her, she met Senna

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there, and the guards, caught up in their heinous work, paid little attention to her.

Senna immediately took the frightened and shaken girl under her wing, caring for her every need, and becoming for her the mother she only wished she had.

They spent nearly three years together before those guards mercilessly beat her up, tore off her clothes, and sated their sexual appetites with her defiled body. Only when she no longer struggled, when she lay lifeless under their sweating bulk, did they stop, throwing her useless body into the crevice that cracked along the back of the dungeon. Broceliande had called out Senna's name many times at first, but then ceased, focusing all her attentions on fighting the marauders.

Even after her death, Broceliande struggled against the blackness that tried to engulf her. She seethed with anger for both the guards and for the foster mother that did not raise a finger to help her. She fought her way back to the dungeon, almost being forced there by some will other than her own. It was there that she learned from Senna that the queen was powerless to prevent her death, and knew it, therefore holding herself back from the carnage, lest she risk it upon herself. Broceliande and Senna reconciled in time, and the ghost stayed with her ever since. She was trapped within the city walls, the dark evil of the Obelisk preventing her from straying past them.

Thirluaine listened to Broceliande's story attentively as Kaldorne slept fretfully in her arms. She wondered how in the world such a frail girl such as Broceliande could withstand such torments, even going so far as to come back to the place of her horrible death.

Broceliande also told her what she knew of Valza'in, and of Garid. The little boy had been thrown to the dungeon several decades later, and met a similar fate. The two had become fast friends, sharing many things in common, especially their current states. They were the only two ghosts they knew of in all the town. But now Garid avoided being

with his friends, eluding her as she made attempt to find him. Broceliande gave up trying to speak to him, too, eventually.

“When is this Time of Reckoning supposed to happen?” asked Thirluaine of the ghost as she concluded her tale.

“I only know it is soon,” replied the ghost, staring wistfully at the ceiling. “Five years ago, Garid and I asked around and found out it was the year four-hundred ninety-five. Senna mentioned something about the *day* occurring five years later... this year. Maybe it’s already begun.”

“Perhaps,” replied Thirluaine, looking sadly at Valza’in as he crouched silently in the corner. “Do you think he’s gotten any sleep lately?” she asked of the ghost.

Broceliande shook her head. “He just sits there, playing with that rope of his. He’s got that blanket, but all he does is hug it.”

“Well,” declared the elf, standing up and brushing off her bottom with a free hand, “Kaldorne and I are going to visit him. Will you join us?”

“I don’t know if he’ll let you...” started Broceliande, rising somewhat off the floor.

“I just don’t care,” she stated through gritted teeth, bustling herself over to Val. He looked up, his cried-out eyes red and with his weariness plainly evident in them. But he did not try to move. “Val,” spoke Thirluaine softly. “Kaldorne. Tired.” She pointed at him, then her baby. The simple communication was all Valza’in needed to set down the cord and extend his arms. Thirluaine deposited Kaldorne into them. By now he had woken, and was crying from the pain of his newly-formed teeth.

“Sshh,” comforted Valza’in, blowing softly into the baby’s ear. He held him close in his arms, rocking the infant gently as he hummed the old lullaby that they used to sing so frequently. He stuck his finger into his mouth, sucked it clean, and then placed it into Kaldorne’s, gently rubbing the baby’s gums. Kaldorne soon resumed his sleep in Val’s arms, a sight which constantly served to bewilder

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his mother. She always had such a difficult time soothing him to sleep, but his uncle Val had no trouble at all.

And soon Valza'in joined the baby in sleep, with Thirluaine sitting beside them crying softly, and the ghost hovering silently above.

the book of revelation

Chapter 16

Questionable circumstances were all that the initial adventurers had to guide them on their quest. For some reason the old blind man Saris knew that he and his adoptive daughter, and Nisqué, and the many others, were destined to go on the journey with them. But how? And was the elf-girl really his daughter? Those two were the most mysterious and intriguing members of the party, albeit the simplest and quietest. Maybe their simplicity and silence were part of a ruse so as to not draw any attention to them. Yes, it certainly was a good time to have a conversation with those two.

Senna's castle was found to be empty and quite deserted, but various books and scrolls told them what they wanted to know, and Gnydronne did know a lot about the region's history. She told them all she had to know; about Senna and her castle, about Senna's descendants, about her own life, and things too unimportant to make mention of. They could tell from her scattered wits that she was not really an ancient princess of Erz, that Senna was not really her grandmother, and that she was merely crazed with some disease that addled her brain. Poor old woman.

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The castle itself housed a great many artifacts that caught the attention and wonder of the adventurers. The woven tapestries that hung in tatters on the stone and mortar walls, the rich chairs and sofas that now were rotted and covered with dust, and the other many things of royalty that now were things of peasantry lent the old castle a very sad ambiance... One of past glory now ruined. And one of shame and sorrow over the circumstances that led to its demise.

Speedwell's hooves clattered noisily as they entered the great anteroom of the castle. The huge oaken doors had long since rotted in the moist and humid climate of the land, and were pushed out of the way with ease, falling into mulch on the ground outside.

After having discovered that their quest was only still at its beginning, or perhaps more likely towards the middle, from the literature they found, the various members of the entourage set out on their own ways to explore the vast castle and to discover any mysteries and treasures that might have been left behind or missed by vandals and scavengers. Much of the contents had been plundered ages ago.

"Ketamon is probably sleeping again," muttered the old woman as she waved her hand over her head and waddled off down a hallway. "He was always such a lazy little boy. Never respecting his poor old mother, always trying to look out for my little boy."

"I thought Ketamon was her husband," mumbled Nisqué to Baringer. They watched the old crone stagger into the darkness. "Maybe I ought to look after her," she said. She smiled at Baringer and Galden, and trotted after Gnydronne. "I'll keep an eye on her. Don't worry."

"Be safe. Don't wander far," called Galden after her.

"I will. I promise."

And this gave Galden and Baringer the best opportunity to interrogate Saris and Vortigurn.

The two companions confronted them as they were resting upon one of the few pieces of furniture that had been

spared the ravages of time. They were in one of the chambers that lined the second floor, above a great and wide winding staircase. Most of the artifacts remaining in this room were in better condition than the rest, although these too were aged and worn.

Shoving the rotted boards as far as they would go, Baringer closed the large door behind them as they entered, as Saris had expected them to.

"I have been awaiting this," spoke the old man, remaining on the sofa. "I was growing concerned that you might put off these questions of yours until you quite forgot them."

"So you know why we're here," said Galden, brushing the dust off an armchair across the room from them and sitting upon it. Baringer found another and did the same. They both pulled the chairs forward and began their talk.

"Of course, my friends. I am an empath. I can feel emotions, I can read thoughts, and I can heal both the mind and the body. I have known of your suspicions from the day we set out in the rain from the tavern where we first met. I have known of the quest even before you discovered Senna's gown in your attic." Galden blushed hotly at this, and ducked his head. "Our meeting was no coincidence, as you may well have discovered."

"So what is it really?" asked Baringer, setting his chin to rest upon his fist. "What's going on?"

"Our story is not a long one," stated Saris. "Vortigurn and I come from the empire of Valinshae, north-west of here. Your ancestor, Senna, was a contemporary of mine. She and I were the two people sought out by Mannedor, the ancient and dead god of life and wisdom... of humankind. Senna he found, but I... Well, the demon Ullix found me first. He knew that Senna and I would pose a formidable threat to his regime of destruction and control, so it was his desire to eliminate us."

The old man stood, and walked about the room. "What do you know of science? Of gravity and physics; of electrons and molecules, of interstellar travel and transwarp technol-

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ogy? Nothing, I'll wager, yet those are but the smallest of universal concerns. Do you know that the sun exploded? Of course you do. It is the stuff of legends and bedtime stories. Do you know, also, that a universe cannot rotate in orbit about a dead sun? Of course not. Do you know that our world, Harlus, only exists to this very day because of the unexplainable force called magic? No, you couldn't. The concept is too alien to most minds; to mine even, sometimes. I cannot explain how magic works like I could explain to you the laws of photosynthesis; but without a sun, I'm afraid it would still be impossible to believe."

With words that staggered their minds, the old seer regaled them with laws of science, rules of physics that they believed were true, but could not understand. "It was the mage Ullix—the demon—who remained to keep the planet alive. With the death of each mage, their magic went to him and he used that power to control and to... to save. But we are all prisoners of his salvation.

"He blinded me and turned my skin this dark color you now behold. With this brand I was to be forever ostracized and banished from my land. Mannedor, with his dying breath, bestowed upon me the gifts of sight beyond sight, and empathy... gifts that Ullix's curse could not take from me; nor did he even know of them. But alone I could not stand a chance against Ullix's power, as could Senna. I have been forever searching for her, and I know that together we shall defeat him."

He reached his gnarled hand to grasp Vortigurn's shoulder, and she lovingly placed hers upon it.

"I found Vortigurn as a child, abandoned in a dying forest. There is no mystery about us. We are genuinely concerned with finding the lost queen of Kurz and defeating Ullix."

"So then," began Galden, intrigued by Saris' tale, "who is this Ullix that no one can defeat him?"

"Why, I thought you knew!" declared Saris, puffing out his cheeks indignantly. "Ullix is the god of evil and death!

One of the pantheon of Norbinda. He alone survived the cataclysm that destroyed all his fellow gods!”

• • •

Much to the relief of Kieran, Koldin and Zeb, old Dame Gnydronne became a faint memory once they left the castle. From Kurz, they made their way determinedly into the country of Monshera, skirting past the great Monshera Desert where Senna had allegedly buried the orb of wisdom, and to the township of Ineguile. The obelisk that had once dominated the lives of Ineguile’s inhabitants was nonexistent now, a vast, blackened empty space smoldering from the bonfires that the townsfolk lit there every night.

When asked why they upheld such a pagan ritual, the populace replied that their bonfires served as reminders and as warnings of the past domination that clamped down upon them, and of a symbol of hope... Hope in that the fire symbolizes light, the lost and last vestiges of a sun that no one could remember. Burning mushrooms made much smoke.

Galden, Baringer, Saris, Vortigurn, Nisqué, Speedwell, Po, Kieran, Koldin, Zeboblonuk, Ganasta, Azurad, and Tsingee passed through this town as they did the others in their path, staying only long enough to refresh their supplies and catch up on rest.

As they traveled northward, toward the far north and coast of Monshera, the weather became colder and wetter, patches of ice covering the ground in spots, and requiring heavier garments and protection for the travelers. Po no longer was free to soar in the skies above, and had to be concealed beneath the heavy furs of his master. Speedwell was covered with several blankets and had strips of cloth wrapped around her legs to keep the biting cold from stiffening her muscles. Ganasta and Tsingee, however, needed no protection from the climate and sauntered about as gaily as ever in their simple wee folk garb.

The port-side city of Ballinstone disclosed to them a simple fishing village, with a few ice-encrusted ships docked in the frigid waters of the Droilinn Sea. It was stormy above

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the icy waters, and waves crashed against the docks and piers that made up the edge of the wharves. The one boat that looked to be seaworthy was scheduled to cross the large strait between Ballinstone and the city of Streatour the very day they arrived, foul weather or not. The next was scheduled to depart when hell froze over. When they were told that by one of the ship captains that congregated in the taverns on the wharf, their decision was made to brave the angry swells and sail to Streatour.

Koldin concealed his wizardry within the folds of his cloak, producing the fares for all of the entourage to ferry with the ship. They were then ushered below deck into a confining space that luckily provided room for all gathered.

The voyage was a thankfully quick, but also rocky and violent one. Storms battered and tossed the ship to and fro across the ocean, and more than once various passengers were enlisted to assist in sailing the agitated vessel. Billowing seas washed over the strained and creaking deck of the boat, sending unfortunate lackeys into the churning brine.

At one point of the journey they almost neared land, although it was not the port city of Streatour. Ill-fated circumstance tore them away from the coast, though luckily still headed for Streatour. With some trying struggles they were finally able to make it to their destination, sadly with some casualties.

Galden and his companions were none the worse for wear, and departed from the hapless wreck that once was able to call itself a ship. That was its last journey across the strait. The old vessel would finally be allowed to retire to the watery depths once it was stripped of equipment and crew.

Buying new supplies and clean, warm clothes to replace the ones that became sodden with the brine that washed into their living space, they set out once again for the Obelisk of Darkness, now only a few days' journey ahead of them. The cost of such supplies was prohibitive, and only through the grace of Koldin's magic were they afforded.

Saris became more agitated now, and nervously spoke to them of the horrors that they might face in this desolate region. He also informed them of the need to free Senna, and join forces with her to finally confront Ullix. But to do that, they had to infiltrate the dark tower, remove her from it, and then attack anew the Obelisk, this time retrieving the orb of knowledge and dealing a hopefully fatal blow to the evil that resided within.

People were few and far between in this harried land, and progress was slow against the biting winds and torrid rains and snows that fell upon them. At times the darkness combined with the precipitation prevented them from seeing too much of a distance in any direction, and they constantly had to call out to each other to make sure none had been swept away or taken from them. Constant stops were called for, to regroup and rest.

And toward the end of their travels, they came upon the city walls of the Obelisk of Darkness. And for some strange reason, it did not snow there. It did not rain there. It was not windy there. It was not as biting cold. Galden and his friends found the city to be nothing out of the ordinary at all. Except for the fact that it was oppressed, and that they could feel the domination that the one remaining *survivor* exuded. The one last obelisk of time stood, looming above them, like the accusing finger of a confessor demanding punishment for their trespasses. The height of it was grand. It beckoned to them even before they saw the township.

Their heavy gear was thrown off, reverting back to their lighter original garments, and they set their wintry clothes together in the camp they made on the outskirts of the city. They then made plans for infiltrating the Obelisk, and rescuing Senna. Perhaps if they established communication with sympathetics within the domination of Ullix they could locate her whereabouts and free her, verifying in the process her very existence. And this they set out to do.

Galden, Baringer, Nisqué, and Azurad disguised themselves as commoners, slinking around the city in search of

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any who might be able to answer the unsettling questions directed at their master. No one they came across was willing to answer anything, and many of them harshly rebuked their queries, leading them to believe that this method of operations was not going to yield any fruits.

Until they met Maibin.

of aid...

Chapter 17

“Damn it all, Galden!” muttered Azurad as she hugged the dirty shawl about her shoulders. “You and your stupid ideas! I don’t like this at all! We should just attack the Obelisk and be done with it!”

“Saris said that...”

“I don’t care what that old man says! Since when do you place all your trust in him anyway?” retorted Azurad, cutting off Galden’s reply. The two of them, along with Baringer and Nisqué had been trudging through the streets of the small city for nearly two days now, their faces already becoming synonymous with the other beggars. They had confiscated some raggedly clothes from a trash heap outside the city and used these to conceal their true identities, and had been wandering through the town in search for any leads at all.

“With all these people knowing that we’ve been asking about Ullix and Senna, I’m surprised we’re still alive and walking,” worried Nisqué as they traipsed along the dirt street.

“They’re afraid to tell him,” said Baringer. “Everyone’s afraid of him. That’s why they’re not telling *us* anything.”

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"Even when you use your special persuasion on them," nickered Nisqué to Baringer, much to Galden's chagrin.

"Look, now," insisted Azurad. "We've covered nearly the entire town, so why don't we go back to the camp and start the charge?" The warrior-woman was not in the least enjoying this excursion, preferring violence over subterfuge.

"One final house," sighed Galden, pointing to the last shack that squatted somberly at the end of the street. "Then we can go back." Azurad shrugged indifferently, and huddled her shoulders, pretending to be old and decrepit. The others followed suit, and advanced upon the door of the hovel.

Nisqué rapped soundly upon the battered mushroom-wood door. It was quickly opened by a plain-looking young woman. She allowed merely a crack, and peered at them from behind it.

"What do you want? I have no money, and there's not enough food to go around. Why don't you bother someone else?"

She was about to close the door, when Baringer stuck his foot in it, preventing her.

"My turn," he whispered to the others, winking slyly at them. He removed the old brown cloak he had been wearing with a flourish and stood tall before the startled lass. "Pardon the intrusion, fair damsel, but we are in need of assistance." He placed his hands upon the door, pushing it open. "If I may?" he asked, allowing himself in.

"What do you want with my mother?" cried a child's voice from behind the flustered young woman. They all turned their eyes upon a little boy who had run out from hiding to stand before his mother.

"Please, leave us!" pleaded the woman. "I have too much to lose! Begone with your questions! If Ullix finds out..."

"You know of us?" asked Galden, astonished and assured that their actions were not very subversive at all, as they suspected.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you, good lady," Baringer

huffed, turning abruptly around to leave. "Maybe you and your stupid people *want* to live under that Hooded One's tyranny. That's perfectly fine with me!"

The three others followed him away from the house, glares of disgust and disappointment upon their faces.

"Wait," called the woman to them in a small voice. She opened the door further, motioning them to enter. "Please, I am sorry for treating you so rudely. If you can help us, I will do anything I can."

The morning sun broke upon the horizon, its rays surging outward to embrace the pink and orange cloud-filled sky, awakening the birds to their merry chirping and dances, and bringing light and warmth once again to the world even as it burned her eyes into blindness. That was the dream Maibin told them that recurred every night for the past five years. She told them so many things since they had set foot in her house; all her inhibitions lost as she let forth all her insecurities and knowledge that cluttered the far, dusty reaches of her mind, enlightening them to all the facts she knew.

"And I felt I had to tell you all these things," she said, holding onto her five-year old son in her lap. "But if the Hooded one ever finds out what I've done, he's sure to come after Pouldin and me... And Pouldin's father, too."

"And just where is Pouldin's father now, anyway?" asked Baringer, smiling at the boy, who stared at all four of them with widened eyes of wonder.

"His father is a dungeon guard inside the Obelisk. Pouldin here shares his father's name. He..."

Galden and his companions had jumped during her speech and were looking excitedly at each other and the startled mother.

"Dungeon guard, you say?" asked Galden excitedly. The coincidence of finding Maibin and learning of her husband's duties was too amazing. "The woman we are looking for is supposedly locked up in the dungeons! Do you suppose

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there is any way that we could get your husband to let us in, or somehow sneak her out?"

"He's not my husband," she murmured in reply. Galden apologized, and allowed her to continue. "Are you talking about that old woman who's always taking care of the other prisoners?" asked Maibin, sneaking another glance at the door, which she had made sure to be firmly locked. Galden nodded vehemently, as did the others. "Pouldin's always talking about her and her family every time he visits me. I think she just adopts anyone she talks to. Pouldin's sort of her 'adopted' son, too. Just like Loris, Pouldin's best friend. They talk to her every day. He tells me that she and her friends sing songs down there, and that she even has a few ghosts with her."

Galden, Baringer, Nisqué and Azurad were astounded with the good news. In one moment their hopes were verified, and their spirits soared. Senna was real! Their efforts would have been in vain if she were not, but she existed! They could hardly hold in their enthusiasm as they pumped the woman for anything she could relate to them about Pouldin and Senna. She in turn revealed to them how Pouldin was allowed to visit with her once a week, on behalf of their son, and that he always brought news of the enchanting queen. And Maibin expected Pouldin that very day.

In the silence that permeated the small house the six people waited nervously for the telltale rapping of knuckles upon the flimsy door of her scant domicile.

Maibin served them some cool water from an earthenware pitcher that sat upon the nearby kitchen table, one of the few furnishings in this small home. The water served to lubricate their parched throats, but did not calm their agitation and expectancy. Maibin fidgeted constantly, noticing as they waited various things that needed to be tidied up or straightened out.

"Please sit with us," admonished Galden firmly.

Every sound could be heard, from the sparse animals

that prowled the empty city streets to the infrequent person scuttling by on his own business.

And they heard the soft knock that finally awakened them from their stupor.

"That's him," breathed Maibin triumphantly. She rushed to the door, followed by her son, while the four strangers stood somberly within the shadows of the poorly lit hovel.

The front door opened to admit a tall, well-built individual. He had shortly cropped blond hair that matched the gold inlay that decorated his iron breastplate. He wore strong iron-mesh leggings and a tunic of the same material underneath his ornate chest-piece. Maibin closed the door swiftly behind him and locked it securely.

"Maibin," he sighed, holding her in his arms. He squatted down to embrace his son, but noticed their reticence. He rose slowly and peered about the room, whereupon his eyes landed on the four shadowed figures.

Upon sight of the intruders his hand went immediately to the scabbard on his belt and withdrew the sword concealed within.

"What are these people doing here?" demanded the man of Maibin, who stood behind him with their son.

"I let them in, Pouldin," answered the woman before any of the companions could answer. "They're here to speak to you about the woman in the dungeon."

Pouldin narrowed his eyes to slits, still brandishing the sword in his hand. "What business do you have with the Queen? No one outside of the city walls knows of her existence, and fewer still care about her."

"We care about her," spoke Galden solemnly. He stretched his arms outward to encompass his three companions. "These good people, and many others awaiting us outside the city limits, care for the only hope that our world has for freedom. They're here only on their faith that the Queen can save us; nothing more, nothing less."

"I have long known that the little mother is very powerful and mystical, but I knew nothing of her being the world's

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salvation,” retorted the big man, still apprehensive with them. Maibin clung to his arm and their son held onto his leg.

Maibin’s pleading eyes seared deep into Pouldin’s mind. “Please, listen to them. They only mean to help. They may be the only hope we have!”

“Listen to us,” ordered Azurad, standing up and advancing upon him. She tossed off her beggar’s rags and revealed her true and formidable appearance. “We have among us, in our camp beyond the township, a great many powerful beings. One of them is a contemporary of Senna, and it is only through the two of them that we can restore our world to its former glory. Your Mage Ullox holds not just you prisoner, but he dominates the rest of Harlus as well. Help us! Help us free our precious world from his evil grasp!”

Azurad’s speech stirred something deep within Pouldin’s soul, a feeling he dared not allow himself to feel before in his entire life. For the first time he felt a desire to be free, a goal to accomplish, a dream to follow. And this, combined with further conversation with the four rescuers, lured him into their dangerous world of hope.

Azurad, Galden, Baringer, and Nisqué related to him their individual and collective tales, and their plan to free Senna. He in turn informed them of the queen-mother’s disappearance and of the other inhabitants of the cell, and of Loris, his guard comrade. Most certainly these good people would be willing to aid them in their quest. He did not hesitate to join them as they departed the small house for their camp. Maibin and their son accompanied them, at the urging of Pouldin, and Galden assured them that they would be well protected at their camp.

Arrival at night. The perpetual night that enshrouded the decimated world. But their arrival was expected. Their compatriots had set up a well-fortified camp just beyond the edge of a small forest near the city but far enough removed as to be unnoticed in among the tall mushrooms of the forest. The huge mushrooms provided both concealment

from sight and cover from the elements; their immense caps providing a vast canopy, while the thick stalks provided a dense barrier against intrusion. Kieran and Koldin had done the majority of the clearing work, removing with both brawn and blade, as well as sorcery, certain fungal obstacles to clear a space for their temporary encampment. Vortigurn then assumed the form of a dragon and burned with her flame the open area to ensure that no unwanted pestilence might bother them. The removed mushrooms were utilized as well, their stalks intertwined about the circumference of their camp and the caps became construction material for their settlement. Within the first few hours of arrival they had set up a strong camp, and then set about accommodating it for dwelling. Zeb, Ganasta, and Tsingee set out in search of any of the wee and small folk that might frequent the area, but were unsuccessful in their search. Saris and Vortigurn prepared meals for the others, and the elf-brothers were constantly at work at strengthening the walls of their camp and honing the blades of their weapons. Po was enlisted to be on lookout, and was perched every once in a while on the various mushrooms at the edge of the forest. Speedwell had no task set out for her, and watched the proceedings with slight interest, blinking her long eyelashes as she watched.

When Galden and the others arrived with the three townspeople, they were met by Po at the edge of the forest, who then led them to their hideout. They were then briefed on the situation, causing great concern in Saris, who worried about Senna and their hopes for success. Her current presence was a great concern among the invaders, who—now that her existence had been readily verified by the dungeon guard—relied upon her aid to overcome Ullix's threat. They decided that they simply must find the queen, no matter what the cost.

Maibin and her son Pouldin were taken care of; situated in a primitive structure made of mushroom bark and Koldin's magic. As time was growing close to when Pouldin was to return to his post, preparations had to be made in

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haste, no time allowed for any delays. Koldin fashioned iron manacles from surrounding stones at the campsite, utilizing his mage ability to transform the stones into the angry chains. Created by Koldin's own magic, they needed no keys, since he could release them when he wished with merely a snap of his fingers. Once they were all shackled up together by the long chain, the next task was to transport such a large number of beings to the fortress of the Hooded One. It was Koldin once more who supplied the solution. Releasing Kieran and Baringer from the chains, he covered them with the illusion of outfits resembling that of Pouldin. He then placed the illusion of a burly war-horse over Speedwell, upon which Pouldin rode into the city, his "companions" prodding the unfortunate "prisoners" along behind him. Of all those who had set out to the Obelisk of Darkness, only Saris, Nisqué, and Po remained behind with Maibin and her son.

"Amazing," thought Saris aloud as the rest of the group set off for the Obelisk, "how a simple notion I placed in Galden's mind to discover the truth about his heritage could lead to the vanquishing of our worst enemy... And freedom for our world!" He mumbled something that the barmaid could not hear, and she turned to walk away... but her curiosity was piqued. "Your time has come, my brother."

Nisqué, disregarding his whispered murmuring, fed the fire with the small pieces of mushroom-wood, and Po huddled silently on the cap of a nearby mushroom.

of loss

Chapter 18

Much was the surprise of the populace of the village that surrounded the Obelisk at the spectacle that they beheld passing through the streets of their town. Even greater still was that of the squadron of soldiers that flanked the single entrance to the Obelisk. A large group of prisoners consisting of humans, elves, a troll and a goblin was lead toward them by three Obelisk soldiers, the one recognizable to them as Pouldin astride a swarthy war-horse. The guards instinctively raised their weapons in preparation for intrusion, although Pouldin waved at them and spoke.

“My companions and I are returning from our rounds gathering prisoners,” he lied, hoping that the dim-witted men might follow their ruse.

“Pouldin,” spoke one of the guards, joining the others as they lowered their weapons. “We were under the impression that you had just gone into the city to visit your woman earlier today. And where then are the others who were supposed to capture these infidels with you?”

“They have been killed,” sighed Pouldin, mockingly. He then changed attitudes, chiding them like children, “Hadn’t you heard, men? We were *all* called to duty to join these

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unfortunate men,” here he gesture to the disguised Baringer and Kieran, “in overcoming a strong sorcerer who threatened to prevent them from doing their duty! If it was not for me and the few others, we would have lost these prisoners as well as the poor men who *were* slain! Have you no shame? Let us through right this instant, or your punishment will be terrible!” He scolded the bewildered guards sufficiently enough to lower their guard and allow them safe passage into the black tower, while those remaining outside worried about incurring the wrath of the omnipotent demon that was their king and savior.

Once inside, the intruders did not breathe easier. Indeed, they had only just left the safety of the outside world and entered the unknown horrors of the Obelisk.

Pouldin gestured them to be quiet as he dismounted Speedwell. He then led Kieran and Baringer to drag the others in their shackles behind them down to the lower levels of the dungeon.

They passed unharassed through the ground-level of the keep, passing by guards and soldiers at their various duties. Fortunately for Vortigurn, she had transformed herself into the form of a brawny, hairy woodsman; otherwise she would likely have been labeled for purposes other than slavery.

The lower levels were ten times bleaker and darker than those above, each one yielding horrors and foul revulsion worse than the level above. Prisoners that were not conscribed to toil for the Hooded One were left to rot and die in these cells, the stench of their deaths permeating the very rock walls. Wails of torture, torment and neglect resounded through the vast halls of dungeons, and screams of pain and anger mixed terrifyingly into the horrid cacophony.

“What infernal magics dug these foul tunnels?” muttered Kieran, uncharacteristically awed and nervous.

It took quite some time to reach the lowest level, especially with Speedwell having to carefully navigate each step

of the stair-cases in order not to tumble down them. Once arriving there however, they were met by another guard. This individual had a shortly cropped beard and hair, and wore an outfit similar—but darker—to Pouldin's. He looked upon the menagerie with great interest, and then questioningly at his fellow guard.

"Why in the world have you brought more prisoners down here?" he demanded of Pouldin and the two others, whom he assumed to be guards as well. "Why... why are you even here? Now?"

Pouldin pressed his finger to his lips, indicating stealth, and motioned for Loris to unlock Senna's dungeon. Loris complied, although greatly perturbed and intrigued. He pushed the door inward, and Pouldin and his followers quickly rushed inside, dragging Loris with them. Once within, Koldin removed the disguises and shackles from the others, immensely surprising the inhabitants of the cell.

Valza'in, Thirluaine, and Broceliande jumped in surprise, while Kaldorne wailed in his mother's arms. Motioning for everyone to calm down, Pouldin hastily explained to everyone tightly assembled inside the small dungeon who did not know what was going on. Worried looks passed over the faces of the cell's inhabitants, and they instantly broke into a babble.

"This is treason," worried Loris, fretting. He had his hand on the dungeon door and constantly peered out in the hallway. "We'll be killed!" he hissed at Pouldin angrily. "Or worse..."

Broceliande spoke up, interrupting him. "Good people," she said, addressing the strangers, "we respect your plan, but Senna has been abducted from us, and we cannot find her. Nor can I, as well as another ghost that resides with us, leave the city walls, for we are trapped here just like the prisoners."

"Senna we shall have to search for once we have freed you," replied Galden. "Our friend Pouldin here has assured us that you would be willing to join us in our quest. Rescu-

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ing Senna's family is one step closer to rescuing Senna herself. She is the key to all our freedom from Ullix."

"As desirable as that sounds," interjected Thirluaine. "I cannot place my child in such danger as this plan would involve. Were it not for Kaldorne, I would gladly battle along side you."

It was at this moment that Kieran and his companions noticed that the one who had just spoke, and her baby as well, were elves, despite her shortly cropped hair. "Great stars!" gasped Kieran in revulsion, nearing Thirluaine. "What happened to your hair? It is so short! What have these monstrous humans done to you?"

Thirluaine pointed to Valza'in, who was crouched fearfully behind her. "It was woven along with Senna's hair into a rope. She said that we would need it. I have no idea how or why, though." She cast another distressed look at her baby, who had calmed down considerably once the others did. "I just cannot allow Kaldorne to be hurt..."

"I can save him," said a voice from above them. All heads craned back to witness another ghost float downward to them. This was Garid, as Broceliande was haste to explain. Once the large group of people had entered the dungeon, he could no longer remain in seclusion and rejoined his comrades. "Remember that tunnel I said I'd found in the crack?" he asked the guards and Thirluaine, pointing to the crevice in the back of the cave. "I can carry him through it, and outside of the castle. He's small enough for me to bring him through."

Thirluaine paled noticeably at his suggestion, trembling with concern. "But we throw all our trash and refuse... down that crack! It's... It's..."

"Possible," sighed Broceliande. She looked apologetically at the elf woman. "I followed Garid down there once. What he says is true. There is a way out to the surface. It goes down only a short way, and then it turns upward, and opens up at the base of the Obelisk, in a crack at its foundation. If you want," she added, "I can accompany them, just

to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

“Me too!” growled a horrendously deep and rumbling voice. Out from underneath the goblin’s cap flew a tiny faerie, fluttering her iridescent wings in the dimness. Galden introduced the lutina as Tsingee, and grimaced morosely as the tiny creature rumbled its horrid voice in a greeting to the startled prisoners.

“Please keep it down; be silent!” admonished Loris, peering out in panic at the dungeon hallway.

“And I will free you from your imprisonment,” came a soft voice from among the companions. Koldin stepped forward to greet Broceliande. “I am part mage,” he informed her. “The bastard son of the demon that has imprisoned you here. If you but take my hand once we depart the city limits, I will free you both from his eternal bondage.” He neglected to inform them of the anguish they would feel, deciding it would not be prudent to do so.

It was settled then, that the elf-child would be taken by the two ghosts and the lutina, along with the goblin, through the waste-chute to freedom, and the other inhabitants of the cell would accompany their rescuers in finding Senna. Thirluaine caringly wrapped Kaldorne in several blankets, and Koldin tapped the babe’s forehead, inducing a peaceful sleep upon the child. Then, with Thirluaine handing her child to Valza’in, and then he to the waiting hands of the two ghosts, Kaldorne was borne through the air of the cell, followed closely by Tsingee and Ganasta, and then down the dark tunnel that evolved from the crack in the floor.

Wiping away a tear of worry and gulping hard, the elf then turned to the others, and, setting a stiff upper lip, announced that she was ready to fight her way out.

Valza’in, who had taken an instant liking to Vortigurn, was standing now with the elfin girl, trying to communicate to her his intention to join them with his opulent eyes. Vortigurn, after finding out that this handsome young man spoke nothing she could understand, looked back into his eyes, registering and reciprocating his feelings toward her.

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At a gesture of haste from her companions, Vortigurn turned her back to Valza'in and, placing his hands upon her waist, dropped to all fours, perplexing her new friend. She pulled him down to sit upon her back, and once he had done so, changed herself into a large wolf, her lupine figure supporting Valza'in's weight with ease as she trotted swiftly after the others. Grasping the situation quickly, Valza'in sank down upon her back, holding tightly onto her shaggy fur, his rope coiled and slung over his shoulder.

Loris and Pouldin led them out of the dungeon and into the dark corridor, and up the stairs to the floors above. At each level, starting with the lowermost, the two guards unlocked the cells as quietly as they could, cautioning the prisoners to remain silent, and informing them that they would not be able to protect them should they decide to escape. Many did, however, as they had hoped, allowing for them a diversion to catch the other guards' attention. Their sacrifice was a necessary evil, as Koldin assured them over and over. The small group of heroes then mounted the last subterranean staircase to emerge upon the ground floor... Where a small battalion of soldiers awaited them, led by a tall woman dressed in a simple lavender gown.

"No!" cried Loris, shielding himself with his arms. "It's the Lady Avalzanet! All is lost!"

An explanation of his outburst was not necessary to inform the others that this woman was the right-hand henchwoman of Ullix—a powerful sorceress in her own right. A burst of magical energy came flying at them from her outstretched hand, scattering them about the wax-strewn floor of the Obelisk.

"You foolish intruders will not leave the tower alive," hissed the woman, her hands raised and glowing above her head. "Prepare to offer your pitiful souls to the god of death!" She let loose with another burst of furious power, nearly searing them to a crisp before they dashed out of its path. Swords raised, they now had to face the onslaught of both the armed guards and the evil witch. As Baringer dispatched

one of the guards, he tossed the fallen soldier's sword to Thirluaine.

"Can you use this?" he cried, eluding both a sword thrust and a fireball at the same time.

"Easily!" exulted the elf-woman as she sliced into the wall of soldiers with the blade, spilling enemy blood around her. A mother foremost, she was a warrior first, and no stranger to bloodshed and swordplay.

"Loris and Pouldin!" growled the sorceress whom they called the Lady Avalzanet. "How disappointing. Though I am not surprised that such valued servants of our lord should choose to fight against our might. Haven't you been coddling *the prisoner* for all these years? I fear I have no other option... than to kill you." She strode uninhibited amidst the battle toward Pouldin, who stared affixed in his spot at the tall woman. She raised her hands in preparation to annihilate the stunned guard when Loris hurled himself upon his friend, knocking him away and taking his place.

"Not this day, foul witch!" he cried, thrusting his sword into the surprised woman's chest. Gurgling blood and clutching at the blade, Avalzanet collapsed and fell to the floor. With her last erg of strength, she grasped Loris' legs in a death grip, sending waves of magical power through his body. Before the horrified eyes of all gathered, Loris exploded, sending blood, bone and flesh spattering all over them.

Recovering from the shock before the others, Koldin removed his eye-patch. He directed his sight upon each of the guards, the beam of mage-fire slicing through their bodies, rending them in twain as it sliced through them.

Shouting to the others to make haste in leaving the tower, Koldin pulled at Pouldin, who was rooted to the floor, staring in disbelief at the two boots that remained of his friend, clutched in the hands of the unconscious Avalzanet. Koldin succeeded in dragging the stunned guard along, and they all headed speedily for the entrance, where they met no further resistance... yet.

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Galden was about to bring up the rear, when a notion sprouted in his mind. "Hold it, Baringer!" he ordered his friend. "Let's take this woman with us. Maybe she can direct us to Senna! As a hostage!"

"What, man?" sputtered Baringer, staring in disbelief at his blood spattered friend. "Are you mad? Come on!" He grabbed Galden's arm and pulled at him.

"No!" Galden said, pulling away and squatting down to regard the large woman's body. "Saris can keep her at bay with his powers! Don't ask me how I know, I just do! Come on!" The foreign notion fairly burned in his mind.

The two men, carrying the unconscious form of Avalzanet between them, brought up the rear of the fleeing companions, emerging out into the stagnant air of the city. Running at full pace along the main street of the town, they passed bewildered and frightened townspeople, who dashed inside their homes, slamming and locking their doors and windows behind them. And still no resistance.

At the edge of the city, they were met by the two ghosts, the two wee folk, and Kaldorne. Po was circling above, agitatedly flapping his wings in distress. Thirluaine scooped Kaldorne from Broceliande's arms into her own, discarding the soiled blankets as she followed the others out across the desolate mud field to the forest beyond.

Koldin alone did not follow them immediately, as did the two ghosts.

"Take my hands," he whispered urgently to them after he tore off the gloves that concealed his deformed hands. Something about their scaly features made Broceliande and Garid recoil. "Hurry!" he ordered, grabbing their immaterial appendages in his own.

Instantly, waves of remembrance that the two ghosts had suppressed came cascading down upon them, recalling how the disembodied figure of Ullix had grasped their hands in his own the instant they died, confining them in death as he had in life to the boundaries of his domain. Those same hands—or hands like them—were again upon

their own, and the pain of memory was excruciation supreme to them.

Koldin began pulling the wailing spirits after him, their surreal figures distorting and flickering dangerously as they passed through the enchanted barrier that had for so many years entrapped them. Kieran stopped his flight to look back upon his brother. The deafening wails tore at his soul, but fear for his beloved brother tore at his heart. "Brother!" he cried out in alarm.

Koldin had almost succeeded in pulling them past the barrier when an arrow came slicing through the cold air, heading straight for and embedding itself deep within his throat.

Screaming in agony, Koldin fell backward, pulling the two struggling ghosts finally out of their prison.

"Koldin!" wailed Kieran, dashing back to his expiring brother. He put his hand on Koldin's chest, then pulled it back with a jerk.

"No, my brother," gurgled Koldin as blood drooled from the corners of his mouth. "Go... now... with our friends. Your duty is with them now. Leave me to my d-death." Koldin raised his trembling hand to point in the direction of their camp. A beam of white light emanated from his finger, shooting toward the area. "Go now. The camp is protected from... detection. It is my last... act. Be good... brother... I love..." His last words slid from his throat as both his elfin and his mage eye closed, releasing his spirit to soar the heavens.

Yells of anger brought Kieran back to his senses, and he joined the two ghosts as they sped for the forest. Too late, he remembered to bring Koldin's body with him. There was no turning back now, for the surviving squadron of guards had already swarmed upon Koldin's lifeless body, plundering his clothes and dragging it back to the Obelisk with them.

"No! Bastards!" he screamed out, massive sobs wracking his body as he ran. His vision was blurred with the salty tears that obliterated his sight and coursed down his face.

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“Koldin! B-Brother, no...” His words tore from his throat, burning.

A hand reached behind his arm as he stumbled; a hand that bolstered him and prodded him to keep running. Vortigurn, her own face streaked with tears, pulled her elfin comrade with her as they tore after their friends to the safety of the mushroom forest.

Once Kieran, Vortigurn and the ghosts had arrived at the camp, a dome of white energy sprouted from a sphere floating in the air above them, completely concealing them from their enemies’ pursuit. Falling to the ground in exhaustion, they turned to see their pursuers coming upon their abode.

Too tired to run any further, they wielded their arms, prepared to do further damage to the enemy ranks. But to their utter amazement, the soldiers passed through their enchanted camp; like phantoms they continued on through the forest, materializing again once they emerged on the other side of the camp.

“Where’s Koldin?” questioned Nisque once they had overcome their fear. She looked imploringly at Kieran as he crumpled to the ground screaming. She stared wide-eyed at the ghosts. Tears welled in her eyes and her lips began to tremble. “Where’s...”

Kieran slapped his hands against his head. Hands that were covered in his brother’s blood; hands that tore at his hair in anguish as he cried pitifully. Baringer tried to comfort the elf, but Kieran swatted him away, jutting his elbow into him. Nisque’s eyes spilled their despair as she realized the fate that befell her friend. “No,” she whimpered in a small, small voice, swooning backwards. Galden caught her in his arms, and she crumpled within them, sobbing hysterically.

Pouldin embraced his family in his strong arms, having removed the blood-stained armor. Valza’in and Vortigurn were sitting on the ground, their backs against a mushroom stalk, arms embracing each other as they stared around

them like frightened children. Azurad busily began cleaning herself and Pouldin's armor, as well as offering water from the stream that wound around one edge of the camp. The warrior inside her was steeled to the brutality of warfare, and she had seen worse; but the reactions of her companions tore at her heart, and she had to busy herself to prevent from crying as well.

Baringer, unable to comfort Kieran, joined Saris in toiling with the heavy form of Avalzanet. She was not fat, but her great height and immense bone structure weighted the woman down. The two gave up on trying to move her, and Baringer straddled the sorceress while Saris placed his hands upon her forehead.

"This woman has been mesmerized... confounded," he whispered incredulously as he healed with his other hand the wound in her abdomen.

"What does that mean?" asked Baringer, still holding her down even though she did not move.

"This woman... this child... has been put under the spell of our adversary," grunted the old man, placing the first two fingers of both his hands upon the sides of her head. She wore a tight skull-cap that came down past her ears in the back, but this lavender cap did not prevent Saris from probing her mind. "I can free her from Ullix's control. She will then be of great assistance to us. It is she..." he continued, lowering his voice to a murmur just audible enough for Baringer to hear it. "She is the final member of our quest."

A small group of the companions gathered around Saris and Baringer, watching intently as the old man's hands glowed upon Avalzanet's head. The woman began thrashing in pain, struggling now to free herself from Saris and Baringer. The latter held her down, preventing her from writhing out of Saris' healing hands.

A black cloud began to emerge from the woman's opened mouth instead of the scream that she had started. It coalesced into a hideous, demonic form, leering at them

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angrily before it was dispelled from their encampment by Koldin's final protective spell... sucked up to the orb from which the dome sprung, and then out to dissipate in the winds. The woman instantly stopped struggling, and instead opened her eyes to look into those of Baringer's.

"Goodness," she sighed dreamily as she gazed amorously at the young man astride her supine body. "What good luck have the gods brought me?" Her smile withered as she looked about her. She began to tremble in fear, and clutched at Baringer's wrists. "Where am I?"

Apparently Avalzanet and the Lady Avalzenet were two entirely different people; the prior being suppressed by the presence of the latter. Hasty explanations were made. "The last I remember I was sitting with my grandmother in her hut. Now this?"

Once the woman was allowed to rise, she was surprised to find herself in the sorcerous garb she now wore, and even more surprised to find that she had been duped by Ullix into becoming his henchwoman.

"But that's impossible!" she blurted out as they informed her of how long Ullix had been in power. "Why, it was just sunrise when those soldiers came upon me... I..." The realization of the time lapse came instantly upon her. She looked upward at the sunless sky, a tear of misery trickling down her cheek. "Y-you mean there is... no longer... a sun?"

Hundreds of lives were lost at the hands of her alter ego, and it was a concept not to be borne by her newly freed mind. She simply could *not* accept that she had been responsible for any carnage, especially at the levels that her memory slowly began to recall bits and pieces of. Mentally, she was still an innocent girl, despite physically being a woman. Saris knew that he needed to reconcile her two lives if she would be any help to their army at all.

Nods from the others confirmed her fears, and she looked at Pouldin. "And I... I... I *k-killed* his friend?" she blubbered, falling to her knees. Pouldin glared at her, no sympathy at all registering upon his finely chiseled features

as he stared unrelentingly at her, clutching his son close.

And so the night passed in gloom. Kieran glumly sharpened the blade of his spear and each of his arrows continually, over and over again, and not even Azurad nor Baringer could bring him out of his depression. Even though they had won a small victory, the battle had only just begun.

Eventually the group of would-be saviors fell into troubled sleep, interrupted at times by wails of anguish from Kieran, or grunts of anger as Pouldin thrashed about in his nightmare. Only Saris and the fairy-folk remained awake, conversing in hushed whispers with the Lady Avalzanet as she revealed to the healer the exact position of Senna and Ullix, and of the candle.

And in his Obelisk, in a simple room on the very ground floor that they had fought the battle on, Ullix grinned contemptuously at Senna as she sat silent upon a stool. Her hands were bound behind her, and her feet were tied to the stool, which in turn was mounted to the floor by years and years of wax build-up... from somewhere within the Obelisk. Though she wore no gag, she was silent, and did not look at the demon before her.

A knock on the metal door of the small room coerced Ullix to open it, admitting a sentry.

Bowing low before the demon, the man spoke in a trembling voice. "Great Mage. We have another body for you. I think that you will..."

Ullix pushed the guard away with his hand, hurling the man against the wall where his body slumped lifeless to the floor.

Ullix left the room, finding lain before him on the ground the lifeless form of his bastard son, the half-elf Koldin.

a book of days growing shorter

Chapter 19

Baringer gazed with smiling eyes upon Galden and Nisqué approvingly, scratching at the stubble that had amassed upon his chin since their departure from Kaelmorde. The two were lying in each other's embrace as Baringer awoke that morning, as were Vortigurn and the young man from the dungeon. Baringer was intrigued by this boy. Wild as he was, he seemed to possess a wisdom and innocence that people his own age had already long since lost. Somehow Vortigurn shared that innocence, her childlike frame and delicate skin nestled softly upon Valza'in's lithe body. Baringer, late sleeper and early riser that he was, had witnessed Kieran cry himself to sleep with the protective and uncharacteristically gentle arms of Azurad cradling his head in her lap. What a strong woman she was, and how capable to change her mien like that. And Pouldin and his small family were all huddled together under a mushroom cap at the edge of the camp. Baringer assumed that the big man was already awake, but he made no sign to prove it to the adventurer. Perhaps he did not wish to awaken his family so early. Zeb, Ganasta, Tsingee, Po, and Speedwell had been awake for quite some time now,

and it seemed that the troll and the wee folk never did need any sleep at all. They and the two animals were alertly keeping watch at the edges of the camp, their keen eyes taking everything in... from the smallest gust of wind to any wild animal that might happen to pass through Koldin's protective field.

The others began stirring now, awakening from a much deserved rest. Thirluaine was roused by the hungry cries of Kaldorne, and allowed the child to feed before the others could be disrupted from their slumber. Galden and Nisqué followed suit, with the young barmaid hastily pushing herself away from Galden in embarrassment. She immediately fidgeted about the dwindled fire, renewing it, and cooking various breakfast foods over it in her handy frying pan. She was soon joined by Vortigurn and Valza'in, who had never before seen such a wondrous cooking utensil. Pretending as if she knew nothing of the previous night, Nisqué tried to put on a cheerful face, showing the boy how she cooked the meals, and allowing him to help. Ganasta and Tsingee had gathered for them some eggs from the town, using their stealth and abilities to amass quite a plentiful amount. Nisqué commented aloud that the two imps must have either enchanted the chickens or frightened them into laying so many. Either way she was able to prepare for them a plenitude of omeletes, adding to them certain spices she had in her pack along with various mushrooms and tubers that the goblin and lutina had also gathered during the night.

"Mind you, I realize how very considerate that was of you... to think of everyone else." Nisqué winked at them, causing Tsingee to huff in indignation and flutter off angrily.

Once their hunger had been sated, they sat in a circle about the fire to discuss their plan of action.

"We know that we can no longer sneak into the Obelisk, since Pouldin is now known as a traitor," spoke Galden. He gulped, pausing to ensure his words were formed correctly.

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"I, um... therefore propose a direct attack upon the Obelisk, which is by now carefully guarded. That's obvious."

"It is?" questioned Azurad, glancing menacingly at him. "And what makes you the expert?"

"With what happened yesterday, they'd be stupid not to erect a stronger guard. It's just common sense. Besides," he retorted impudently, "I'm the leader!"

"What?" gulped Azurad, drawing her eyebrows into an angry knot. "And who made you that leader? I thought we were all in this together! As equals!"

Galden tried to sputter a protest, when Saris raised his hands in a gesture of silence. "I asked Galden to lead us, and indeed he has led this quest from the very beginning until now," he informed the entire gathering. He lowered his arms and replaced them to their inert position on his lap. "And now, we must all work together as equals, as Azurad says."

"You chose *me*?" questioned Galden, his perplexity gripping his mind like a vise. "But... How?"

"I placed all the notions of this quest in your mind, Galden," replied the blind man, his face a blank register of no emotion. "I made you read the book in your parents' trunk. I caused you to hold Senna's gown against your skin. I brought you and your friend Baringer to us in the tavern. Those whom we told you were following us were Ullix's henchmen, sent forth to prevent us, and inevitably you, from achieving our goal. In short, I have guided your every move."

Turning to face Zeb and Kieran, the old man continued. "The dark knights pursued you because you betrayed a member of the Royal Family of Erz, one of the direct bloodline of the Queen. The Crown Princess Ganydronne. Yes; *Princess*. Once you came into contact with her, you were tainted with the same magic that Mannedor blessed her family with. There was no removing it, so continued contact with a scion of the Queen could do no further damage."

"A scion... of the Queen...?" repeated Kieran slowly, looking about the group. His eyes rested upon Galden, recalling

what Saris had said about the book and the gown. Galden was blushing hotly, and had closed his eyes in aggravation. "This... *human*... is..." He shook his head in revulsion, not bothering to finish the sentence.

Galden was devastated by Saris' speech. Up until now he had thought of himself as the one in control, making the difficult decisions and leading them past the obstacles in their path. *I'll prove it to you*, he thought to himself. *I'll prove that I'm a leader. You're wrong...*

"I've no doubt of that," said Saris with a smile, reading his thoughts. "All our actions were in preparation for your growth and victory. The scion of the queen is blessed by Mannedor. Please," he then said, "let us continue with the plans. I do believe you were suggesting an attack upon the Obelisk guard?"

Galden, quite shaken from his hard lesson, continued speaking, his confidence returning to him as he witnessed the nods of approval from his compatriots. With input from the warriors and those privy to the Obelisk's interior, a plan was agreed upon by all gathered, including Azurad, who only meant to question his leadership, not his ideas.

"I am a soldier," she stated, "and I demand that my commander be a leader; not a child hoping to be one." She nodded in his direction and clasped her hands before her face in a salute of obeisance. "I will follow your command."

A nervous pause followed her statement as everyone peered at each other. Unable to stand the nervous tension, Nisqué mimicked the salute and added, "I will, too."

Their action set off a cascade of salutes from everyone involved, not the least being Kieran, who clasped his hands in salute but spoke nothing.

The last to join was Baringer, who had been sitting with his friend, leaning back on his arms. "I'm not saluting you, you arrogant ass," he muttered, watching the raven flutter about the mushroom tops. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe in you. I don't need to prove that to you with any military salutes. You'll always be my retarded friend." He

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winked at Galden when he saw his friend balling up his fist. “My *best* friend,” he added hastily, smiling absently. “But still an idiot.”

Her memories restored by Saris, the Lady Avalzanet had revealed to them the locations of Senna and Ullix, as well as that of the five-century candle. She imparted to them the importance of that calendar, and that its final flame marked the end of an era. Saris had been able to restore the years she had spent as the demon’s familiar, helping her to come to terms with all that had passed when she was under Ullix’s sway. She was all too eager to reveal what she knew to the others, hoping in some small way to be penitent. Though Pouldin felt no warmth toward her, the others accepted her, questioning her as to what era was to end with the final sputtering of the candle’s wick. To that she could not reply, saying only that the Hooded One only spoke of the great importance that time held.

“At... at times, he would be angry about it, and... at times he was very sad about it, and would retreat for days to be in the candle room in the center of the Obelisk.” She shook her head, incredulous at her own memories, experiencing them anew from the perspective of her previous self. “Sometimes,” she added hesitantly, “sometimes he was happy about it. I know that sounds strange, but... but he really... seemed to be looking forward to it. Even though it meant his destruction. At least, that’s what I believe...”

They decided to head for the room that held the nearly-spent candle and the two powerful beings next, sending their most powerful warriors in to retrieve Senna while the others held off any prospective attacks from remaining guards. With a lack of better strategy, brute force would have to suffice. Pouldin suggested that he might be able to convince the soldiers of the army to join forces with them, but he said that this would be possible only if victory was guaranteed.

“I guarantee victory then,” spoke Saris. “You can tell your fellows that Ullix’s sworn enemy has promised that. Tell

them that his own brother is waiting to destroy his evil reign. That will carry enough credence for them.”

Only the crackling of the fire could be heard in the clearing among the giant mushrooms. The fact that Saris considered himself the Hooded One’s sworn enemy implied a great deal of power. Claiming to be Ullix’s own sibling was more than any of them could comprehend immediately, and Galden and his friends wondered what his statement meant.

“Ul... Ullix,” coughed Thirluaine, startled by a cry from her son, “is the god of death and destruction. According to what we have learned... what you have told us...”

“And if Ullix is the god of death...” continued Azurad, taking hold of the elf’s train of thought, “and if you are his brother...”

“What does that make you?” demanded Baringer, finishing it. His eyes were nearly bulging from his head and a vein in his forehead throbbed noticeably. His nostrils flared as he breathed heavily, his confusion being replaced with fear.

“An old man,” responded Saris in a controlled whisper. “A very, very old man.” He looked directly into Baringer’s eyes, mesmerizing him with his own blank ones. “Be calm. Please.”

Vortigurn clasped Saris’ hand in hers, squeezing it tight. “You are still my father, are you not?” Her voice trembled, her accent sharpening her speech.

“I am. I always shall be.”

Avalzanet still retained her powerful sorcerous abilities, which gave hope to the nervous attackers. In her current state of mind, however, she did not retain the same control over them, though her confidence was not shaken. She also promised to persuade the soldiers to join ranks with them, but that she had to do so quickly, for Galden stressed that her assistance was imperative in freeing Senna.

“We’ll need the most powerful among us,” he said, close to tears. The revelations were coming hard and fast at him, and his young mind was reeling with the implications. Fear

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knotted up in his chest. *I never meant for it to come to this*, he thought inwardly, not caring if Saris read his thoughts or not. *I'm just a kid... this is too much...*

"What *did* you mean for this to come to?" demanded Saris, a tint of anger in his voice. "You are here. Accept it and move on."

Galden swallowed hard, letting out a sigh. His head sagged as he looked at the old man.

"My leader," whispered Azurad, reminding him. It was enough to strengthen his resolve, and he sat up straight, gritting his teeth.

It was settled then, that they would carry out their plan in only an hour's time, giving their enemy little time to rest from last night's onslaught. The guards posed no great threat, unlike their master. Thirluaine insisted upon remaining at the camp with her son, Maibin and her son, Garid, who preferred to stay away from the battle, and Saris, who insisted that he had to stay as well.

"But we'll *need* you there with us," implored Galden. "You... you're..."

"No," replied the old man calmly. "You will need me here. That is the way it shall be."

As they were finished with the plotting, they sat glumly about the fire, staring blankly at one another. Maibin, her son, Thirluaine, her son, and Saris rose from the circle and gathered together at the edge of the dome, where the mushroom shelter had been thrown together. Again a thick and oppressive silence permeated the clearing.

"Why did they take my brother?" asked Kieran, suddenly breaking the silence. All eyes turned upon him, and then to the wizened empath, who seemed to know the answer to all their questions, voiced or not.

"My brother Ullix is the god of death," replied Saris, unmoving as he sat beneath the huge mushroom cap. "He has the ability to re-animate the dead. He will most assuredly pit your undead sibling against you to test your fortitude. Be prepared for such."

“He speaks the truth,” added Broceliande as she floated above their heads. “The Hooded One has taken many body parts and put them together to create an army of monsters. I fear that my parents... Or at least parts of my parents, may well be among them. If those... parts... can have lasted all these centuries. That is the only thing I fear.” She looked glumly at the angered elf. “But I doubt he has taken your brother apart. He only dissects those who have dysfunctioning parts.” The ghost did not know whether her speech was reassuring or not, for Kieran now wore a grimly determined face in the place of the shocked and angry one. If she could vomit, she would have done so. If she could have sighed or fainted, she would have.

The waiting was no longer necessary. They all declared that they were quite ready to engage in battle. Baringer and Galden had their swords, as did Azurad and Pouldin. Zeboblonuk carried with him both a short-sword and a spear, and Kieran wielded his spear and his bow. Ganasta proudly displayed the large battle axe that he had somehow managed to conceal—impossibly by the others’ judgment—in the pocket of his trousers. Speedwell needed only her horn and her hooves to do damage, while Po was adept in utilizing his talons and his beak to tear at the throats of his enemies.

Vortigurn’s fighting ability went without saying, since she could transform herself into any and all varieties of fighting creatures. Valza’in trusted implicitly in his long and iron-tough rope, his animalistic growls of determination convincing them that this wild boy from the dungeon would be an asset to their band of warriors. Avalzanet had already displayed to them her magical abilities, and needed no proof of her power... only her accuracy. Tsingee once again used Zeb as a model to show those unfamiliar with her how she could send the troll, or any other assailant, hurtling backwards with her hazardous punch. This did not serve at all to strengthen the ties of friendship between the two, and in fact made Thirluaine quite sure that there was no love lost

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between them... but their comical antics were short lived. Broceliande revealed to them her abilities to enshroud a large area in her diaphanous body, and that she could wield a light weapon in a battle now that she had a reason to. Solidifying her hand was a monumental effort of will, but she did it. Azurad without question immediately produced a dagger and handed it to the apparition. Nisqué, too, volunteered her services, although Galden doubted her fighting abilities.

“You’ll see some skulls crack open once they meet the base of my frying pan!” she exulted nervously, displaying the cast-iron skillet above her head. “I can hold my own in any battle! You just wait and see, you... you... you *man!*” She lowered her weapon, to the resigned and approving nod of their leader.

Once again, they set forth from their camp towards the Obelisk of Darkness.

Emerging from the protective canopy of the fungal forest, they could easily see the entire city spread out below them; their current altitude being slightly higher than that of the town. Far in the distance was the northern sea, though it was too far off to be seen on the horizon.

Large battalions of what appeared to be soldiers were positioned all around the walled city, within and without, and another huge squadron was planted in front of the Obelisk’s entrance. Such was an example of the power wielded by the corruption that had turned this world black with night.

With Galden in the lead, followed closely behind by his close friend and companion Baringer, they trudged imposingly down the hillside to advance upon the first obstacle to the Obelisk. Their small group against a vast army. It was hopeless.

It was now that Kieran, Zeb, and Ganasta realized that they were very much a part of this war, and that their presence had been expected and prepared for early on in the adventure. As Saris had said, the dark knights and shadow

dragons were the undead minions of Ullix, hunting them specifically. And there before them were these shades of former human, goblin, troll and elfin bodies, only the skeletal remains of those whose original flesh was too emaciated or decayed to be taken apart and reused by the god of death. The dark knights astride their shadow dragons awaited their arrival with the fire of Ullix's evil burning in their empty eye sockets. Waiting for these infidels to fall into their awaiting arms of death.

But Galden and his companions were prepared for these evils. "Let's go," he ordered, breaking into a run. With shouts of anger, the rest of his companions joined him, their cries shattering the eerie silence.

They met the horrendous wraiths with swords raised and determination strong. The swordsmen lashed out with their sabers, striking heavy blows upon the volatile creatures. More than once crunching and cracking sounds were heard as Vortigurn turned into a huge dragon and flattened the emaciated knights under her huge feet. Her fiery dragon's breath charred the remains of these beings, roasting them like nuts over the fire. Then weapons such as Nisqué's frying pan or Ganasta's battle axe would make short work of dispatching these brittle things, sending their dust and shard remains falling to the ground.

But the dark knights were not without strength of their own. In numbers far too great to count, they, too, slashed at the companions with their weapons, while the various beasts that made up the shadow dragons bit, kicked, and otherwise fought them as well. Gashes and cuts, scrapes and bruises were all too common on the faces, chests, arms and legs of those seeking Ullix's destruction.

Without warning, a beam of purple light swelled from the center of their party, and spread outward like ripples in water. As the light touched the dark knights and their steeds, the diabolic life animated those shells left them, and they fell unmoving to the ground, charring the earth about them and littering the area with the rusted armor and weapons.

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“You know what to do,” ordered Galden to Vortigurn in dragon form. To ensure that none of the skeletal remains could be re-animated after Avalzanet’s death beam cut them down, they had to be destroyed beyond salvage. As the invaders cleared out, the dragon’s massive scaly feet came down upon the piles of the dead, pounding them into ash.

By all means, the battle had just begun. They had just gained entry into the city walls when another ghastly sight met them. Scattered here and there among the houses and streets were the torn and bloodied bodies of some of the townspeople. . . Children and adults alike, with no regard to age or status. Galden, Baringer, Azurad, and Nisqué recognized with rising revulsion the slaughtered bodies of children that they had seen playing with each other in the streets, and the older residents of the town that were kind enough to give them a handout when they acted as beggars. And now, razed among the carnage, their kindness could never be repaid.

“I now am forever indebted to you, good people,” spoke Pouldin to his aghast companions, “for if you had not taken Maibin and my son with us, they would be as dead as our neighbors!”

The small group of invaders moved along the street toward the Obelisk looming above them. They huddled together for protection; but the comfort of their company was also of great import. The winds blew from the north, carrying with them the frigid cold of the frozen sea.

“I d-don’t remember it being th-this c-cold... It’s tt-oo quiet,” whimpered Nisqué, huddling her shivering body close to Galden’s. “Is... is everyone dead?”

“I don’t believe so,” replied Avalzanet as she strode confidently at the head of the group. “Ullix needs people to do the harvesting and other work about the town. He would not kill all of his subjects. He... he could not.”

“Where are these monsters you told us about?” asked Ganasta of Broceliande. The ghost shook her head unknowingly at the goblin, but again Avalzanet spoke.

“We are but on the edge of the town. I know Ullix, and I know that he is prepared for our arrival. You can be quite sure that his monsters are scattered about the houses and alleys. The closer we get, the more we’ll be faced with.” She looked over her shoulder at Galden, frowning as she did so. “Remember—he’s expecting this. He... he wants this.”

“Why should we believe you?” demanded Pouldin in a harsh whisper, glaring balefully at the sorceress. “You were Ullix’s right hand woman, and you killed Loris!”

“You should believe me because I am no longer under Ullix’s enchantment, and because you have no choice!” she snapped. She was still the young woman who was raised on a fruit orchard, who attended dances and social gatherings with her friends; who respected the grandmother she lived with and knew how to use a weaving loom and cross-stitch. His harsh words pained her, but she bit her lip. Continuing, she added, “The human guards will be the ones positioned around the Obelisk. Ullix will have done so because he knows we will try to convince them to join forces with us. By having them positioned at the base of the tower and the monsters around them, there’s more of a chance for these monsters to prevent us from gaining entrance to his Obelisk, and convincing his back-up human army from allying themselves with us.”

“Is that all that we should expect?” asked Galden warily. “I mean, there might be something you left out...”

“Why?” demanded Baringer, disregarding Galden’s question. “*Why* is he fighting us if he wants this to happen? I just don’t understand this.”

Avalzanet raised one of her eyebrows and regarded Galden and Baringer not with contempt, but not without it. “We are well prepared, and I have told you what I know and what I expect. If there is anything else that I feel is important to this mission, I will reveal it to you.”

“Sounds to me like she’s still got a little bit of that Ullix nastiness left in her,” whispered Ganasta to Tsingee. The lutina giggled monstrously and nodded her tiny head.

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“Then we’d best be on our way,” sighed Galden, taking a deep breath and striding forward into the silent town. They could see the Obelisk looming ahead of them, beckoning for them to come nearer and taste its poison. Enticing them to draw near, so that it could sting them with the barbs that waited uneasily at its base.

“Why should we even fight?” demanded Baringer in a whisper, but his complaint was ignored, and he fell silent.

Silently the agitated group of heroes and heroines slunk forward, adhering themselves closely to the sides of the buildings, their weapons and shields raised to defend themselves. They traveled in a pack, with the stronger and heavier armed holding up the lead and the rear, while those considered less powerful or more valuable to their company stayed toward the center of the group.

And then something hurled itself violently out of the window of the house they were slithering by, scattering them as it lashed its taloned appendages at them. Po immediately took to the air, as did Tsingee. The others reformed their band and placed themselves in a protective circle.

The thing stopped lashing out from where it had fallen, and with deliberate slowness rose to its full height, revealing a disgusting and distorted assailant. Its body was entire patchwork, with black and rotting body parts crudely mismatched with others. For a torso, the thing had the muscular chest and midsection of a male elf. Although it was darkened with rot as the rest of the body was, it was pale in comparison to the black and snarling head resting upon its neck. The left half of the head was that of what looked to have once been a young woman’s, while the other half meshed onto it was that of an old male goblin’s. The two halves were tied together with some dark twine that wrapped around it tightly, leaving harsh creases in the skin. The eyes were rotted, but the bulbous masses still swiveled in the sockets, glaring directly at them. But by far the most formidable aspects of this patchwork monster were its arms and legs.

It had seven of them, ranging in variety from those of a human to the hind legs of a dragon. They were joined to the elfin torso on its sides, enabling it to scuttle toward them like a centipede and attack and evade the thrusts of their weapons.

It attacked them straight away, giving them no time for their shock to register, parrying blows assailed toward it, each one missing its target. A frying pan managed to thwack the side of its head, sending it sideways somewhat and loosening the twine, but none the worse for wear. Likewise other weapons fell at it, not causing much damage.

This one creature would have been enough to keep them in battle for hours had it not been for the two companions that had taken flight. Po fluttered wildly into the thing's face, successfully removing with his talons both the human's eye and a large portion of its neck that fell away when the twine came loose. The creature brushed Po away with its flailing arms as the head fell sideways, but the raven's attack created enough of a diversion for Ganasta's battle-axe to chop into the thing's back, while Tsingee planted a hurtling punch into the creature's midsection.

The axe came through the creature's body from the lutina's impact, and it sailed backward, its body meeting the stone wall of a house nearby. It shattered the building, sending the rocks and bricks to the ground. The blow shattered the monster's body as well, the various parts falling apart as if the force that held them together was destroyed with the creature's second death.

Their hearts beating madly and their bodies mired with the ichor that flowed from the monster's veins, they brushed what mess they could from themselves and continued onward.

"This is going to take some getting used too," muttered Baringer to Galden after they had successfully dispatched several other similar beings before they had come to the base of the Obelisk. By that time, they were sorely fatigued from battle, and wore upon them several cuts and scrapes.

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But they were determined to continue.

To Avalzanet's dismay, they were not greeted by the waiting army of human guards that she had expected. The men were there, but instead of standing ready with their weapons drawn, each and everyone of them were sprawled upon the ground, several of them missing heads, arms, and legs... quite dead.

"No use in convincing these folks to join us," shrugged Ganasta, picking his way across the fallen bodies to the open door of the Obelisk.

"Wait, goblin," pleaded the former aide of the evil mage. "Please do not dash inside. You cannot know what awaits us. This must be a trap! The Hooded One would not set up such a formidable defense and then just slaughter them and invite us in!"

"What else can we do?" asked the goblin, a disturbing serious look on his face. "You said so yourself. 'He's looking forward to this', right?" His logic was simple, and did not stand to be argued with. Turning back to the Obelisk, he continued into the door, followed by the others.

Ganasta, Tsingee, Po and Zeboblonuk found themselves in a vast subterranean cavern. Try as they might, they could not find any trace at all of their companions. The four of them were alone in this black and sodden cave. The walls and ceiling that rose high above them sweated the same rancid ichor that composed the blood of the monsters they had attacked outside. As it dripped into large puddles on the cavern's floor, the four oddities had to maneuver to avoid being splattered by the mysterious goo.

"What in the world are we doing here?" questioned the rumbling voice of the pixie. "We entered the Obelisk, but I didn't expect this! What sort of enchantment are we under?"

"The evil mage has tried to separate us," growled the troll, dodging another drop of slime. "There must be a way to get to him. This looks like some maze... I think I see

another tunnel leading off somewhere at the other side of this cave.”

“He’s delaying us,” murmured Tsingee.

“Tunnel!” croaked the raven above them. He darted past drops of ichor as he flew toward the cave entrance. The others followed suit, and soon came upon the tunnel. Entering it, they would have been lost had it not been for their obvious differences from normal humans. Their eyes, being those of a raven, two wee folk, and the animalistic ones of the troll, enabled them to see somewhat in the tenebrous tunnel. Avoiding the slime that drooled from the rocky walls, they soon emerged upon another cavern similar to the one that they had first encountered upon their entrance to the Obelisk.

“This is getting us nowhere!” shouted Zeb at the top of his lungs upon emerging from a tunnel into the seventeenth cavern.

“The perfect trap to prevent us from getting to him,” muttered Ganasta under his breath, but loud enough for his companions to hear. “Our abilities are useless here. Tsingee can’t punch a monster to pieces. I can’t attack anyone with my axe, and you can’t kill anything with your weapons, either. We’re stuck.”

• • •

Kieran, Broceliande, and Azurad found themselves in a vast, burning desert. Though light bombarded them from above, no sun was visible. This was a red, evil light, burning them as it seared the sands below their feet.

“What happened?” stuttered Azurad, catching herself from falling backward into the hot sand. Her eyes burned and she was as blinded as her companions. None of their visions had adjusted yet, and they were completely disoriented.

“In all the centuries I have spent in the Obelisk, I have never come across anything close to this!” muttered Broceliande, in awe at her surroundings. She had been able

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to open her eyes sooner than the others, unable to feel the pain associated with the sudden blaring light.

“We are in an enchantment!” blurted Kieran, forcing his eyes open to gaze at the desert. “Can’t you tell? Nothing like this exists in our world! Open your eyes! This is not real!”

“Yes,” whispered Azurad. “A place like this does exist... or... it *did*.”

“What do you mean, woman?” demanded the elf of the warrior.

“We are in the Monshera Desert.”

• • •

Baringer, Avalzanet, and Pouldin found their new location once they entered the portal of the Obelisk to be that of a small, blackened room. The burnt remains of an immense candle’s wick lay embedded in a thick layer of wax that covered the floor. Beyond them, at the other side of the room from which they entered was situated a door.

“This doesn’t look like the Obelisk...” murmured Baringer, looking about him and craning his neck backward to look at the low ceiling. “I thought it was bigger...”

“The guard and I have spent many years in the tower,” spoke Avalzanet in an awed whisper. “But... Never have I... Wait!” she cried, in mid-sentence. “Somehow Ullix has worked an enchantment upon us. That would explain the absence of our allies. We have been teleported to a room in the Obelisk... And judging by the amount of wax upon the floor, I’d say we’re extremely close to the eternal candle.”

“But *that’s* the candle, isn’t it?” demanded Baringer, pointing to the mess on the floor.

“Fool. Look at the ceiling. How could the candle have been in a room this small?” Baringer shrugged, not knowing any better.

“What’s so important about being merely *close* to the eternal candle?” Pouldin wanted to know. “Our goal here

is to defeat Ullix.”

“We also set out,” clarified Baringer, “Galden and I, to find the Orb of Knowledge, too. He and I never intended to wage a full-scale battle against the god of death. If we’d known that...”

“But it’s too late to be concerned with *if*,” said Avalzanet. “We must think of the present now, and of what we must do with it. The sphere is somewhere in the Obelisk, but to find it, we must defeat Ullix, and where the candle is, so is the Hooded One. If you want to rescue Senna, then come with me!”

“I notice that the wax—and the dirt within it—comes from underneath that door,” said Pouldin, pointing at the door opposite their position. “Perhaps if we open the door, we can find this candle and confront Ullix. The others might already be there fighting him, and we could just stand here and not know.”

“Don’t you think we would hear it?” demanded Baringer.

“Not with his magic preventing us from doing so,” whispered Avalzanet.

“But it may also be a trap,” added Baringer, addressing the guard. “Maybe Ullix is waiting for us to open that door so he can fry us and make us into dark knights or take us apart and make monsters out of us.”

“Ullix may not realize that he no longer controls me,” mused Avalzanet. “Perhaps if I lead...”

“Maybe he *does* know that you’ve been cleansed of him,” argued Baringer back.

“But my magic, and your might... We could fight him,” suggested the sorceress.

“The three of us don’t have a *chance* against him. We need the others.” Baringer glumly stared at the door. The simple, flimsy fibers that made up the rotted wood were the only things holding them from going through it. They could have easily torn right through the fragile boards, but they did not. It sufficiently held the three people back from doing their duty.

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A large, stone sun-dial poked its form out of Baringer's newly plowed field. Speedwell pranced angrily about it, her horn menacingly scraping against it, sending sparks into the earth below it. Galden and Nisqué looked upon the spectacle in wonderment. They had expected to enter the ground floor of the Obelisk, not the mushroom field back in Kaelmorde.

"Where are we?" asked Nisqué, clinging to Galden's arms. She looked into Galden's eyes with her big, brown soft ones. Her lips trembled and the pan she held fell to the ground.

Galden returned her look, shaking his head. "I think we're... we're back in Kaelmorde, where I come from. This is Baringer's field. He... he just plowed it, and he showed me that stone thing that he dug up." He pointed to the sun-dial. "He said something about how Speedwell... How it agitated her. But... How did we get here?"

"I'm afraid," she said, laying her head upon his shoulders as he held her close. She put her hands to his chest and into the rough cloth of his shirt. Galden tried to pull back from her advances, but found himself charmed by the young woman standing so close to him, and the presence of the ivory unicorn did something to him... Made him feel pinpricks of arousal all over his body as the downy hair that covered the skin of his arms rose to goosebumps.

"You know," whispered Nisqué alluringly, "People say that unicorns bring love..." She had succumbed to the spell woven over them, though Galden tried hard to resist. She was oblivious of her own actions, Galden realized.

Galden could not bring himself to divert his attention from the girl clinging to his body and the unicorn prancing in front of them. Slowly he raised his hands to her hair, running his fingers through it as he pressed it against his nose to smell the soft fragrance she wore.

Nisqué had fully unbuttoned Galden's shirt now, and pulled it and the vest off his shoulders and let them fall to the dirt. She ran her fingers over his chest and stomach, kissing him over and over again on his face, shoulders, and chest. He in turn pulled the blouse from her body, his fingers rummaging over her soft skin, finding places only a woman had, and that he had never before encountered. He pressed his lips against hers, and their world exploded with passion, sending them to the ground, the cool soil that would one day hopefully bear the fruits of Baringer's labors.

Speedwell ceased her prancing to gaze upon the slowly writhing figures on the ground before her, unable to call to them... Unable to stop them from falling into Ullix's trap.

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A pit of fire opened up under Valza'in and Vortigurn as they plummeted through the darkness. The flames lapped hungrily upward at them, and they could already feel the unbearable heat.

"Val!" screamed Vortigurn. The boy had been falling right beside her, and was groping frantically to get to her. The fall had separated them, and they were now streaming downward several meters apart.

Vortigurn shifted her form to that of a winged great cat. She tried to maneuver herself closer to her new friend, but was unable to do so successfully with their velocity and the narrowness of the pit.

Valza'in, hastily tossing the rope from his shoulder, began to swing it beside him, the fall impeding his efforts. But with a mighty throw he managed to get the rope within reach of Vortigurn's mouth, and she clamped her jaw shut upon it. She then flapped her mighty wings frantically, pulling herself and Valza'in upward from the hungry pyre below them. The flames lapped at his heels, but Valza'in deftly climbed up the rope with the speed and agility of desperation, and then onto the great cat's broad shoulders,

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taking special care to avoid the large wings. He wrapped his legs tightly about her large body, and with great effort coiled the rope around his shoulder again.

They were about to fly up and out of whatever pit they had fallen into when the winged tiger and her rider encountered the ceiling of the pit. Vortigurn stopped her ascent immediately, and circled in the air below the rocky dome, pawing at the rocky walls to keep from falling downward. Unable to speak in her current form, she growled at the ceiling, gnashing her fangs menacingly at it. Val understood her intentions, and hurled his lariat at a rocky outcropping that jutted from the pit's wall. He then swung upward and over to it, perching precariously on the ledge. As he watched, Vortigurn's body glowingly shifted into that of an incredibly immense serpent, whose coils kept her from falling downward by pressing against the walls. With her serpentine head, she began pressing upward with all her might, causing small cracks to appear. Valza'in shielded his face with one hand. He quickly tied one end of the rope to his waist, and the other to the serrated tail of the serpent— to which he clung to with all his strength. The serpent's head broke through the rocky ceiling, sending a shower of rocks and dust to the fiery pit below them. The force of her pressure sent the two flying upward, and Vortigurn had to press her coils against the walls as she did before, to protect herself and Valza'in from falling into the lava that awaited below.

She could not see an opening above her, but she kept struggling upward, going through the same routine with her serpentine body to eliminate the several barriers that presented themselves as they ascended. Just how deep below the surface were they?

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Kieran refused to move from the spot in which they stood.

"I am well aware of how hot you believe the sand is," he replied to Azurad's complaints. But he just squatted upon the dune and stared after the fleeting form of Broceliande.

They had sent the ghost to scout out the area, and to see what dangers might lurk beyond the dunes and in the heavy fumes that steamed forth from the hot sand.

"If we let down our guard, we could be attacked at any time out here, and no one would know what became of us." She had pulled a cloak about herself, despite the intense heat. The skin of her arms and the back of her neck was blistering from the intense light. "We can keep our guard up as we travel!" hissed the warrior woman, pacing nervously about the sand.

"And if we travel off in the distance, we might become separated from the exact area where we were transported from. No. Only the ghost can safely scout the desert."

Azurad angrily folded her arms over her chest, huffing and puffing about the injustices of having an obstinate elf to keep her company. But she also realized that she could not press too hard with this elf, for he had just suffered through one of the worst torments imaginable, and might be volatile toward her should she provoke him too much.

Their patience was soon rewarded. Broceliande came upon them so suddenly that they were startled by her appearance. She had a look of worry inscribed upon her gaunt features, and her eyes relayed a message of urgency.

"There are several monsters heading this way," she moaned, turning her head back to see if they still followed her. She kept transferring the dagger from hand to hand, willing herself to remain solid enough not to drop it, let alone wield it.

"Monsters?" repeated the elf, standing and stretching to get the ache of dry heat out of his bones. "Like those that we confronted in the city?"

"The same," replied the ghost. "And they're right behi..."

Her warning was interrupted as a dark, hairy figure came hurtling through her ethereal body, its sharp claws

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extended for the two warrior's throats. It had appeared from nowhere, and they were unprepared for the sudden arrival. They jumped aside just in time to avoid the creature's flailing claws; but one such talon caught in Kieran's hair, pulling him down to the sand. Azurad instantly chopped off the hand that was now reached for the elf's neck, and then turned her blade upon the creature's neck. She severed this instantly, expecting the monster to fall back dead,

"Good lords on high!" wailed Broceliande from above, her wails distracting them from their current situation. She was pointing frantically at the monster's severed head and back to the *second* head that sat further back upon its hairy shoulders. The two turned to regard the creature, looks of disgust and revulsion upon their faces. Upon the burly body of a fat humanoid, with several different arms attached to it, as well as legs and other appendages, sat the emaciated and rotting head of an old woman, while the one that had been just severed and lay on the sand was that of an old man. Although both were very far gone, they could still recognize the fine facial structure of the female's skull and the one piercing eye that remained in the male's as those of Broceliande's. Her parents.

The creature leaped to its feet, its arms and claws lashing out at them. Though the ghost was too petrified with fear to move—and seemed to begin to dissipate—Azurad and Kieran fought valiantly against it, cutting off the arms with her sword and piercing its tanned hide with his spear and his arrows. With a gurgling roar of anguish, the undead monster finally fell to the ichor-stained sand, the body parts that remained upon it falling off as the magic that held it together and brought it infernal life was drained forcefully from it.

Sighing with relief, the two warriors sluggishly dug a hole in the sand to bury the filthy remains, at the urgings of Broceliande. Once the two heads, along with an arm that Broceliande had insisted was her father's were buried, the look of anguish faded from her face.

“They are with peace now,” she sighed, her graceful but ethereal body undulating in the slight wind like a banner.

Their respite was short lived. For as they were looking at the ghost, a clawed, scaly hand cut through the very air behind her. It caught the ghost about her neck, somehow able to choke the spirit. Unable to pass through the hand that held her, Broceliande began to pull at it. Her face grew thinner and more gaunt, and her entire being began to shake and fade. She then, somehow, even though being a ghost, fainted and fell to the sand where her body once again coalesced into her original form.

The body of Koldin stepped forward through a fold in the very air to greet his one-time companions.

“Grtns, dur brzzhr... valood warrer,” he gurgled. They could see the deep gash in his throat, the blood having long since coagulated upon it, as did the blood that had drooled from his mouth, his eyes, and his ears. He had both gloves and his eye-patch removed, and presented to them a truly horrific sight.

“Hw quint its to finlly see you agn,” spoke that which was once Koldin. As he spoke, reminders of the blood that used to course through his veins and saliva from his mouth drooled in rivulets from the open gash in his throat, as well as the corners of his mouth. He had pointed his hand directly at them, the clawed finger beginning to glow with the mage-power that somehow still remained in his dead body. “Pty thut t mst end luk thsss.” A beam of green light burst forth from the digit, searing past them as they dashed out of its path.

Kieran, though distraught and tired, managed to continually evade the undead’s attacks, though he could never bring himself to defend himself against what once was his brother. He steely gritted himself, tensing his entire body for defense, and avoiding to look directly at the undead.

All the memories of their life together came rushing back upon him now. All the times when his mutant brother would be teased because of his being the bastard son of a mage,

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and how he, too, was teased as the “brother of the bastard!” All the times when Koldin would “punish” him for being bad. He had done that so many times! And it would always embarrass him whenever Koldin would do it in public, and then treat him as if he had never harmed him, so that other people would be sympathetic to *him*, and not Kieran. Anger began to seethe within the elf’s soul as he darted back and forth with Azurad to avoid the fire hell-bent upon them from the dead elf-mage’s fingers.

Kieran raised his sword to smite his evil brother and kill him, but stopped. He realized that this was his beloved brother that he was trying to kill. The brother that had so many times comforted him in times of trial... When his wife and his two daughters were killed in the war... When their people were slaughtered and they were the only two left to escape with their lives. He remembered all the times when his *brother*, Koldin, had saved them from perils, and of how his *brother* loved him, and how he loved his brother. The intimacy they shared was peculiar to them alone, and though it seemed aberrant to others, it was their special bond. And he realized that this creature was *not* his brother. He realized this as he finally brought the blade down upon the undead thing’s head, slicing it full down the middle, cutting it in half, and letting the blood and other things inside it splatter out and slither to the sand. Boiling in the heat.

“You have done well,” hissed a soft, gentle... almost hypnotic voice. Kieran, Broceliande, and Azurad looked up to see the demonic façade of Ullix leering at them from beneath his hood. “And you are punctual. Your mother would have been proud of you. Had she survived your brother’s birth.”

They were standing in the ground-floor room of the Obelisk. In it were the still-burning remains of a gigantic candle that spread its heat in waves about them, a regal woman bound to a chair, and the god of death standing before them.

A rumbling noise from below them caused them to wit-

ness a giant snake emerge from a hole newly broken in floor close by, instantly reverting to the shape of Vortigurn, with Valza'in pulled up behind her. From that very same hole flew Po and Tsingee, with Zeboblonuk and Ganasta clambering up out of it behind them.

A door at one side of the vast chamber opened, admitting Baringer, Avalzanet, and Pouldin, while Speedwell, with Nisqué and Galden riding upon her back came charging in through the front entrance.

"You have all done well," repeated the demonic voice from the Hooded One. He turned about to regard each one in particular. "And you are all here at the right time."

They all were facing him, surrounding him in a full circle, their weapons drawn, their battle stances poised. "You have each overcome your own special obstacle. For that I will reward you. You may all join forces with me, and become the most powerful and feared people on our black planet! It is time for you to become the new gods of Harlus."

...of valor and sacrifice

Chapter 20

It had cost Speedwell a small amount of dignity to shove the sweating bodies of Galden and Nisqué apart with her hooves, and only by pointing her horn at Galden's midsection and aiming her hooves at Nisqué's shins did the unicorn prevent the two from falling further under Ullix's enchantment. At horn-point, she forced them to don their clothes, and then, with them upon her back, ran blindly for the sun-dial. Her sharp horn was aimed directly at the flat tableau atop it as she galloped madly across the muddy field. The instant she made impact with it, they found themselves in the Obelisk.

Vortigurn and Valza'in relentlessly and wearily continued their perilous upward ascent. For them there was no change; only continuous and repetitive upward movement, tiring them out. And soon emerged in the same room.

Zeb, Tsingee, Ganasta, and Po did the same, continuing onward untiringly avoiding the slime that threatened to sear them as it fell.

Baringer, Avalzanet, and Pouldin finally decided that to open the door was their only chance to find their opponent, and did so.

They were all clustered about Ullix now, staring in disbelief at the utter evil that stood before them, propositioning them to join with him in his evil ways.

With his arms folded across his chest, the demon now facing them stared at each individual, looking into the depths of their souls, looking through their earthly forms to see the spirit that dwelt within.

“Avalzanet,” spoke the honeyed voice to the sorceress. “You were once my follower, my consort. You may become so... once more.” On cloven hooves he strode toward her, extending his hand as if to lead her away.

“Never,” replied the tall woman nervously, staring with disbelief at the creature to whom she had been at one time subservient to. She backed away from him, stumbling over piles of dried wax as she did so.

Ullix sighed and jutted out his lower jaw. “Then I fear I must remove the spell of immortality I placed upon you. Should you decide to continue this foolish spat, you will wither and die at the ripe old age of five-hundred and nineteen years. I do not believe that to be an especially pleasant experience. The flesh will fall from your bones as you live to feel every pain of dying. Your bones will scrape against each other as your youth fades.” His voice rose higher as she clenched his outstretched hand into a fist and shook it toward her. “Your body will fail, and you will feel it all!”

Avalzanet shuddered in fear, realizing that Ullix’s threat was real. She could once again be feared and worshipped, live forever in the Obelisk, backed by the very god of death. Never to see the sun again. “I would rather die in agony than spend eternity in darkness with you,” she cried, her face twitching in anguish as she sealed her own doom. A solitary tear fell from her eye and coursed down her cheek. “I’d rather die...”

“So be it,” acquiesced the Hooded One. He lowered his clenched fist to his side, tearing away from her the life essence he had given her centuries ago. She could feel the essence rended from her, and the pain dropped her to her

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knees. She clutched at her chest, already feeling weaker by the second. “Did he take my magic?” she wondered, then fell into a fit of coughing.

Ullix then turned to Tsingee, Ganasta, and Zeboblonuk. “The three of you have no business with human affairs. Your kind has lived unharassed in this world. Why do you meddle with me? When have I meddled in the affairs of the fairy folk?”

“You are evil!” growled the pixie, punching the palm of her hand menacingly. “And we don’t like you!” Her wings thrummed as she darted about the chamber, flying dangerously close to him then speeding away.

“The light you stole was *our* light too,” insisted Ganasta darkly.

“Ah, how simple,” laughed the demon, sighing. “It was not I who took the light, if you recall your history lessons. Pity that your innocence will be destroyed along with the rest of your friends... The ones who are foolish enough to defy me. You,” he said, pointing to Kieran, “you can once again see your brother alive, and not re-animated as he was when you fought him. I will grant that gift to you... In return for your obedience and allegiance. What say you?”

“You cannot tempt me,” Kieran whispered through his clenched teeth. He stared at the cloven hooves that showed beneath the demon’s robes. He wondered what Ullix looked like, but dashed the thought from his mind. The stagnant blood of his brother still stained the blade of his unsheathed sword, which was aimed directly at the black-hearted monster.

Azurad and Pouldin proved to be just as obstinate as their fellow warrior. “Don’t speak to me,” hissed the warrior woman as she glared angrily. “Do not!”

“The lovely Broceliande,” soothed the unsettling voice, passing them by. “Do you remember the day of your death?” Broceliande was unfazed and hovered silently with her companions. “I remember it,” spoke Ullix. “I remember the exact date it happened. I remember how the guards tied

your lovely, long hair into a knot and nailed it to the door. I remember how they tore off your clothes. They did not remove them, they *tore* them off. Do you recall how it hurt your shoulders and your back? I remember how they pressed their heavy, dirty, sweating bodies on top of you, crushing your ribs and bones, cutting and scratching your smooth skin... Do you remember that day?" He pointed to a large disc embedded in the dried wax that had been scooped up long ago and piled against the far wall. "It was in that year," he explained. "I made sure to leave that wax here. You need not thank me for keeping that waste here. It was the least I could do for you." He folded his hands across his chest and continued. "The wax is normally removed and discarded. But that wax. *That* wax... that wax can restore your body and your life. Do you want it?"

The ghost remained unmoved by his talk. The only movement from her shimmering body was passing the dagger from one hand to the other as she struggled to keep herself corporeal.

He then looked at Baringer, Po, Galden, and Nisqué. "You four have so *much* to lose," he said to them, holding out his hands comfortingly. "I can tell you all you wish to know, I can answer all your questions. I can give you the power and the fame that you have always sought after. You will rule alongside me from the very top of the Obelisk! Everything you see will be yours! Come with me! Join me!"

Galden realized that the demon's temptations were not his only weapons. He knew that the creature was just wasting time, using it to read their minds and discover their weaknesses. But *why* was he delaying? What was his intention? Did he want to be defeated, or did he want to defeat them? Already he could notice slight signs of aging upon the fair face of Avalzanet. But he said nothing, nor did his companions. The demon had spoken to nearly all of them now, but his gaze almost purposefully passed over the forms of Valza'in, Vortigurn, and Speedwell. Why was that? *Why did he skip them, and not us? What's so different with...?*

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The mage seemed to sense Galden's concern, and turned to the three that he had previously omitted. As the Hooded One glared uneasily at them, the companions could see the monster wring his hands beneath the folds of his vast sleeves.

"You can have all the riches in the world!" he exulted to Vortigurn and Val together. "I will give you entire kingdoms to rule over... To play with as you see fit! You only need to ally yourselves with me!"

Valza'in raised his eyebrow in confusion. He looked at Vortigurn and shook his head, not being able to understand the demon's words, but comprehending the evil one's intentions. His gaze returned to the bound woman sitting in the chair—his mother. She looked back at him, and shook her head, "no". He turned to Vortigurn and nudged her to speak their shared query.

"Why?" asked the elf simply, staring with wide, innocent eyes at the mage. Her youthful companion copied her blank stare, agitating the mage.

"Because you can be better than these infidels you travel with! You can become all powerful and crush those simpletons beneath your feet! What say you?"

The two remained silent, but Speedwell snorted in distaste and stomped her hooves on the dirty wax.

Ullix could see that his threats and promises would gain him no ground. He did not need them anyway. The time was drawing near. The *time*. These minuscule insects would not be swayed by temptation, nor by threat. Of course, the Lady Avalzanet was fighting hard with her sorcerous powers to avert the onslaught of age. He allowed her that much. It would amuse him to see her attempt to fight him, despite the ravages of time. She was perspiring with concentration, but otherwise seemed unfazed.

"Well then," sighed the mage, feigning admittance of defeat. "I believe you will just have to battle me. What a shame that you do not agree to my terms. Your lives would be so much better off!" Soon. Very soon. The time was near.

“Ah, well. Come then. Be my guests.” He opened his arms wide, welcoming their onslaught.

Galden looked curiously at the mage, and then at each of his companions. What terrible fate was he leading them into? He could not remember what Avalzanet had said. Did she say he *wanted* to be defeated? Or was it that he was anticipating the confrontation? Would they all die because of some stupid idea he had? No. Saris was the one who insisted that the others join. He even *knew* that they would join, and had prepared for them. How convenient. But now they had to free Senna, sitting forlorn and docile in the chair—and why did he just now acknowledge her? Wasn’t she in that chair when they entered the room?—and somehow wage war with this all-powerful god of death. Just his name brought fear into the hearts of people, calling to mind all manners of demise at the scaly, clawed hands of the Hooded One.

The demon looked once more at the motley crew gathered about him. “You may even have your Queen Senna if you wish,” he waved one hand in the direction of the ensnared queen and the ropes binding her instantly fell to the floor, freeing her from their constricting bonds. She rose and dashed to where Valza’in stood with waiting arms. Holding him close to her, she turned to glare at the demon.

“You have waited for this moment for five centuries. You think that this will be your ultimate victory, but it will not. You do not know what will happen here today, demon,” she declared. “I do.”

“Then keep it to yourself woman, for we both know that I shall defeat the lot of you!” derided the mage. He once again regained his composure, and waited patiently for them to deal the first blow. “It is time for me to return to Norbinda, and rule the cosmos from my former throne. I alone will be the king of the gods!”

Not knowing what to do and tired of waiting, Vortigurn was the first of them to take action. Her body shimmered iridescently as she shifted her form to that of a fire-drake,

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and from that she assumed the form of a dragon. She loomed ominously above the mage, but did nothing else. Ullix was unfazed by her display. She still hesitated.

“You have no hope to defeat me,” he laughed derisively. “To defeat a god, one must be a god. The only one here that comes close to even being a god is Senna... only *touched* by a god... who is now dead. And now look at you, dear old queen-mother. Standing there with your adopted son, your regal hair shorn short like that of a boy’s, while his hair is longer than yours! Come now. You must have realized that to defeat me you would have needed the old blind-man Saris. Without my dear brother you are no match for my might.”

The concept hit Galden like a ton of bricks. Saris’ revelation returned to his mind. For this very reason Saris had kept his presence unknown. That was why he had stayed behind at the camp. That’s why the dark knights were following him when they first met. They had no interest in Vortigurn. Ullix did not care about the elf-maiden. It was apparent that Saris had some kind of plan, as did Senna. Was there some sort of communication between the two? Were plans made five hundred years ago? What was important now was that he push all thoughts of the old seer... the old deity... from his mind. He only hoped the others had done so as well.

Baringer, too, realized full well that Saris had in him some wondrous power. Ullix’s statement only confirmed that by calling him his brother. What was Saris planning? Would he show up unexpectedly and then throw the mage off his balance? Or would he attack him from the camp? Perhaps the healer would appear when the demon’s attention was diverted and strike the fatal blow upon him. Perhaps... perhaps Ullix knew exactly where Saris was, and was awaiting his entrance.

“Everyone!” shouted Baringer suddenly, startling himself and the others as they stood with sweaty palms and frightened faces around their foe. “Attack him *now*! He’s

trying to confuse us! We can defeat him!” Baringer only hoped that his suspicions about Saris were true as he ran madly with his sword raised for the demon’s chest.

Ullix easily swatted him away with his scaled hand, but Baringer’s action set off a chain reaction with his companions, calling them to arms. A stream of fire spurted from Vortigurn’s throat, bathing the Hooded One in it. He in turn raised his hands and sent the fire back at her, causing her to stumble backward as her own fire seared her scaly flesh.

Avalzanet spread her fingers apart in an arcane gesture, chanting an incantation while Tsingee and Zeb assaulted the mage with their fists and weapons. It was a heartening sight to see the evil one tumble back from the lutina’s blows, but they knew that he was in no way losing any strength or sustaining any damage. An immense ball of searing blue flame burst from Avalzanet’s outspread hands and headed directly for the demon. It struck him with a ear-shattering explosion, sending his cloak and gown up in flames.

Gasping at the flaming figure flailing before them, they were even more astonished to see the form that emerged from the burning fire. Ullix stepped forward, shedding the vestiges of his burnt garments. His figure was that of a man’s, overly and hideously muscled, with black and silver scales covering his entire figure. His face resembled that of a man, but with pointed nose, ears, and chin, curled horns, and slanted, fiery eyes. A barbed tail lashed behind him, sending sparks flying as it met with the stone floor.

“On my world, I was known as Pan, Tragos Oide, the Goat-God,” he growled, throwing off the still smouldering sleeve that remained on his arm. “I was a benign deity, and people worshipped me, though I was servant to the king of us all. When my brethren departed that world for Norbinda, I departed my old ways. None survived the trek; none but me. I remained victorious against gods whose powers eclipse your own! We will now see who comes out victorious,” he hissed angrily. He jerked his left arm up, sending a

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blast of razor-sharp daggers flying at them. Pouldin was able to raise his shield, and Broceliande spread out her ghostly body, its cloudy shape maintaining just enough form to deflect a few of the missiles. The others dashed to evade the assault, leaving Azurad behind to defend herself.

Kieran had tugged her arm to elude the daggers as they evaded them, but she had remained steadfast, forcing him to throw himself to the floor of the massive chamber. Azurad felt each cut as the blades embedded deep within the flesh of her arms, legs, chest, and face. Bleeding heavily, she stumbled forward, her sword flashing brilliantly in the mage-light as it slashed down upon Ullix's head.

Unable to move fast enough, the blade sliced off one of the hideously deformed horns, and bit into his shoulder, sending forth a steaming spurt of blood. But it paled in comparison to the blood that flowed from Azurad as she lay struggling upon the ground at his feet. The blades were burrowing into her body, cutting through muscle, tendon, bone, and organ. Though she was in pain, she was unable to scream, for her vocal cords had been severed. Pan—Tragos Oide—Ullix laughed evilly, kicking her lifeless body aside with his ungulate foot. She shuddered violently as one of the daggers emerged from the back of her neck, having severed her spinal cord. The dagger fell to the floor, swallowed up by the vast ocean of blood that had once flowed through Azurad's body.

A cast-iron skillet came crashing down upon the back of Ullix's head with shattering force, sending the demon sprawling over the body he had just killed. Nisqué speedily backed off, allowing Pouldin's metal clad boot to kick forcefully into the mage's head.

Bone was heard loudly cracking and crunching within his head, and his right ear hung from the mangled flesh. Ullix jumped to his hooved feet and leered madly at them as he ripped off the useless ear and threw it. The projectile twisted and grew, and unfolded into a vile, bloodthirsty flying snake. As it flapped its wings at them, Tsingee valiantly

flew forward to confront it, her power-packed punch ready to do damage. She placed a well-aimed blow at the serpent's head, sending it splattering on the ceiling above. She then looked defiantly back at Ullix, who passed his hand over the side of his head. Removing the clawed talons, they could all see that a new ear had replaced the destroyed one, no doubt the shattered cranium as well.

Before she could recover from her indignation and surprise, the same hand that had healed his head shot out and grabbed her in mid-air.

"No!" screamed the rumbling voice, no longer comical in its desperation.

The entire time Tsingee was in their company, she was a source of amusement. Had they the audacity to, they would have laughed heartily at her antics. She was a child's fantasy, a creature of immature daydreams, and innocent play. "Please!" she screamed in a sweet, delicate voice—her *real* voice—that momentarily surprised and deeply pained her friends. It sounded like far off bells delicately ringing in harmony... desperate harmony. Plaintive and tragic and harrowed harmony. "Help m—"

Ullix's fist clenched upon her small frame, crushing it like a flower. Her frail bones snapped to splinters beneath his grasp, and her body was torn and ripped asunder as her blood dripped from between his fingers. Ullix threw the mottled mass of faerie flesh to the floor and stepped on it, grinding it to a pulp beneath his hooved foot.

"**NO!**" The goblin sobbed and fell to his knees; another creature of childlike fancy rendered in his torment.

"If Saris has chosen a time to come forward," worried Baringer, "I certainly hope that time is now." He cringed in horror and dismay at the bloody messes that used to be the two powerful and valiant warrior-women of their troupe.

"Coward!" hissed Pouldin through clenched teeth. "You strike down at the women of our band! Are you so weak that you must use a lady for your kill? That you must destroy a fairy? The very heart of innocence!"

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On their own, the others had begun to share Baringer's suspicion, and his eye-gestures and hasty whispers informed them all that they had to stall for time, for Saris.

Zeboblonuk dashed forward to throw his weight against that of the disrobed demon, but fell under the mighty fist of him, his helmet jammed down over his brow, and he lay unconscious on the floor of the tower, bleeding from his ears and nose.

Concentrating upon the impending victory that awaited him, Ullix failed to notice a lithe, skulking figure stalking him from behind. Too late was his reaction to turn as Valza'in jumped out from the shadows and leapt upon his back.

"Worm!" hissed the mage, struggling with one hand to loosen the boy's grip around his neck while the other raked its talons across Val's unprotected arms. "You shall die miserably for this!" The demon felt pain from the boy's touch. There seemed to be a taint of fear in the demon's voice, but his actions belied it. The sharp point at the end of his barbed tail shot up and pierced the skin of Valza'in's back. The boy cried out in pain, loosened his strangle-hold, and fell back onto the floor.

There was instant silence. In his fury Ullix had neglected to realize that they had traversed the floor of the vast room, nearing ever so slowly the mass of molten wax that remained of the candle. In his ire Ullix had stumbled backward, and Valza'in fell directly into the slowly solidifying liquid. The flame was extinguished by the boy's body and the wax that splashed against him.

Struggling frantically to free himself from the heavy wax that clung to his skin and burned in his wounds, Valza'in screamed in pain and thrashed madly about. The poison from Ullix's barbed tail was quickly spreading throughout his body, and caused him to convulse in torment. He thrashed his anguished body about in the burning wax, and splashed the molten substance onto the others in his frantic efforts to free himself. Trying to hoist himself up,

he thrust a hand downward into it, but instead of pushing his weight up on it, he withdrew his wax-covered hand, a murky round object in it, which he flung violently as he managed to remove himself from the mire.

Catching the sphere, Baringer held it in his hands and stared into its opalescent depths, his eyes transfixed upon its shifting depths. But clarity interrupted his gaze, and he dropped it forthwith, realizing too late what he had touched and what it did to him.

Senna paid no attention to the sphere, knowing full well that it was the long sought-after Orb of Knowledge. Instead she dashed over to Val and cradled his head in her lap. She immediately began picking the wax away from the gashes on his back and arms. His wounds were already pale and discolored, and the skin pulled away from the cuts, presenting a horrific sight.

“Damn you, demon!” she whispered through her tears as her son began slipping away. “Not again,” she whimpered. Closing her eyes, she threw her head back and sucked in a deep breath. The others, expecting her to wail mournfully, were surprised when instead she called out. “Saris! Now is the time! Come forth!”

“Shut up, witch!” shouted the demon, springing forward to flay her with his talons. Before he could come in contact with her crouching form, Vortigurn intercepted him, changing her body into that of a humongous bear, and slamming the mage to the ground beneath her. But her actions were of no avail. With one quick thrust, the poisoned barb of his tail shot upward and deeply embedded itself within her ursine chest. As he pulled it out, Vortigurn slumped to the ground next to Senna and Valza’in, reverting to her natural shape. Senna pulled her to her, holding both of them close.

“Come, then, brother!” hissed Ullix. “I gave you life! I alone created you, my brothers and sisters, and I alone destroyed our home. It is time to finish it! Come! I am ready for more!” Ullix laughed at the disheveled group before him. Elves, humans, and fairy folk. With nothing to stop him.

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He was invincible. He arched his glistening body backward, his mocking laughter deriding them into humility.

But Senna had put herself into action. She stood, ensuring that the fallen elf-girl lay beside her son—Vortigurn's beloved—and removed the wax and blood-soaked rope from around his shoulder. She tied the end of it around her waist, made a lariat out of the other end, and then stooped to pick up the wax-encrusted orb. By simply staring at it, the wax dripped off of the sphere, and within her hand rested the coveted answers to all questions. She then turned to face the door, through which Saris had hobbled, unharassed and unfettered. In time nonexistent, he found his way to her, standing at the door one instant and at her side the very next. She in turn tied the center length of the rope around his waist, and then allowed him to place his wizened hand upon the orb. Then, with her free hand, she swung the lariat and shot the noose about Ullix's body.

Although her entire actions took place in mere seconds—a last gift of speed from the long-passed god—it seemed like an eternity to her. All her life spent in captivity led up to this this moment. The fate of their world rested upon her shoulders, as well as those of Saris. And Ullix's as well. He pulled and tugged at the rope that bound him to his two contemporaries, but to no avail. The rope was like steel, forged with faith, with the love of two mothers, with the pride of a people, and with the hope of a child.

“Touch the orb, my brother, my creator,” commanded Saris to the demon. The old man and Senna were steadily pulling Pan—Ullix closer to them, and extended the orb in their free hands. The demon cringed in fear as he was uncontrollably drawn forward, but could not free himself no matter how hard he struggled. “Stop! You cannot do this! I will not allow it!” He craned his body backwards, trying to avert contact with the glowing sphere, but Senna's strong hand reached out and grasped his wrist with the strength of iron. She pressed the goat-god's fingers against the undulating crystal ball, joining theirs.

An ear-splitting wail arose, first from the sphere, then growing louder, emanating from the very bowels of the earth. The cacophony was so incredibly loud that it sent the planet's entire populace reeling in shock. Waves crashed onto cities, mountains crumbled, continents shifted and islands sank. The Obelisk's high walls began to shudder and crack, and large pieces of the tower fell to the ground within and outside of it.

"Hurry!" shouted Baringer to the others as he picked up both Valza'in and Vortigurn in his strong arms. "Let's get the hell out of here! The whole tower is going to fall!"

Galden stooped down to help Nisqué back to her feet from where she had fallen to gently pick up the smashed lutina, and the others followed them as they dashed from the candle room out to the township beyond the Obelisk walls. Kieran knelt to pick up Azurad's shredded and bloody form, and Pouldin, steeling himself against the hatred he felt for Avalzanet, aided the swiftly aging sorceress out of the Obelisk. She cried out in pain as he slung her arm over his shoulder, but she did not resist even when they both heard the bone of her fore-arm snap.

The group, led by Galden and Nisqué, dashed madly from the Obelisk's looming presence. On and on they ran, down the dark streets of the city and through the city gates... Out into the welcoming countryside, and to their camp in the mushroom forest beyond.

The Obelisk was glowing, and bright beams of light shot out from the doorways and windows dotting its exterior. The light shone across the land, extending past the coast to the north, spreading across the continent to the south, and across the entire planet.

Stopping at the edge of the forest, they all turned around to see the Obelisk exploding in violent fury, sending a fiery burst of energy soaring upward into the dark sky, showering sparks and debris to fall upon the city below it. The light sailed through the night sky, upward to an astounding height and burning away the clouds in its path; then veer-

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ing sideways, flying past the horizon in the west... leaving in its wake a clear path in the sky, while rain fell down in torrents on either side of the swath. Then it was gone.

Everyone gathered around Valza'in and Vortigurn. Crying uncrotrollably, Thirluaine and Maibin still managed their best to cool their feverish foreheads and had covered their bodies with several of the blankets that the guards had initially confiscated for Kaldorne. Then they lay the woven blanket Senna had made for Val over the both of them, soothing Val immensely though having no effect on the elf-maiden. Her shaking grew worse, as did his.

Azurad's body and what remained of Tsingee were placed by Kieran and Nisqué upon the flat cap of a nearby low mushroom. Kieran covered them with her regal cape, setting her sword and the dagger Broceliande had returned at her side. He wiped the blood from Azurad's face, and arranged her hair neatly about it, framing her still beautiful and tragic visage.

"Well, everyone," said a cheerfully disturbing voice. "I guess it's up to me to solve your problems!"

They turned to stare at Ganasta, who had trailed behind them as they fled the Obelisk. He grinned madly as he withdrew another thing impossibly too large to fit into his pockets. It was round, they could tell, but the cloth around it disguised it from their view. Ganasta proudly set it on the ground, and let the cloth fall away from it. Baringer knew what it was, and his knowledge was confirmed as they all once again beheld the great Orb of Knowledge.

"I won't even ask you how you got it," mumbled Zeb, still recovering from the nasty blow he had suffered.

"One touch," spoke Ganasta, "and all your questions are answered! Use it on Val and Vortigurn! It'll heal them!" He was laughing hideously, the torment he had experienced addling his already tenuous grasp on reality.

Galden, the unsure and disturbed leader of the group, looked solemnly at the goblin. "No," he said, shaking his head and choking on a sob. "If they touch it, they will lose

their innocence. I can't let that happen to them. My..." he swallowed hard and paused. What was she to him? The grandmother of his grandmother's grandmother ten times back? More? "My... ancestor would not have wanted that, and I don't think they do, either."

"What would you rather them have?" asked the indignant goblin. "Life or innocence?" He was holding the orb in his small hands, lifting it above his head almost in a gesture of reverence, stained with madness and anguish.

Galden looked down at Valza'in and Vortigurn. Their eyes were drooping, and their bodies were relaxing as the poison took its toll upon them. Val struggled against contorting his face in pain to smile at him. Galden could see that they had stopped struggling against the poison.

"You know the answer," Galden replied, tears coursing down his cheeks. How many had died? How many more will? He looked once again at the two friends as they lay near death on the ground. Valza'in weakly raised a hand and placed his fingertips gently on Vortigurn's lips, and then back to his. The girl smiled gratefully, and repeated his gesture of love with agonizing slowness. Valza'in then looked at Avalzanet, who was now stooped with age, and seemed near death as well. Beyond death. He motioned for her to sit next to them, which—with Pouldin's assistance—she did. The sickening sound of bones snapping hurt their ears and tore at their souls, but the ancient woman did not cry out.

"Ma," he whispered almost incoherently, pointing his trembling finger to the horizon. The old sorceress turned her head to look at the sky at which he pointed. Though her eyes were clouded over and sightless, she saw.

"Thank you dear," she murmured as she placed her hand gently over the boy's forehead. She then slowly fell to lie down beside the two.

Nisqué knelt and reached to touch the sorceress, but Galden pulled her back. "Don't," he said. "Don't. It'll just hurt her more." Both were crying unabashedly, powerless to help someone in so much pain, both suffering for it.

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“Look,” whispered Broceliande after a pause. “Look,” she repeated when none could tear their eyes away from the three prone figures at their feet. “Look!”

The rest of the awe-struck entourage looked to where she pointed, at the horizon, not knowing what to expect, but fully realizing that something was about to happen.

And before their very eyes,
the Sun
rose
behind the clouds,
bathing
the entire world
in its loving,
life-giving
warmth.

The last thing that Avalzanet, Vortigurn, and Valza'in laid eyes upon before they died.

a book of
days

...nothing...

And so it came to pass that the group of elves, humans, animals, and little people gave a proper burial to their fallen comrades, setting up a spectacle for the entire dead population of city of the Obelisk to behold, lighting up the entire mushroom forest with their funeral pyre.

Kieran's eyes were the first to see in the new light, and in time the others were able to see, though the light was blinding and painful. It was a welcome pain.

They then left forever the damned region, taking with them the orb once again enshrouded within the rags that Ganasta had brought it to them.

It was held with reverence, a constant beacon of what sacrifices were made for its recovery and safe-keeping, and of the hope that it embodied within the hearts and minds of those who waged battle for it.

They led the people of the emaciated city, those very few who had escaped and remained alive after the demon's ravages, to neighboring villages. There was so much panic, so much confusion brought on by the sudden brilliance that the additional people blended in without undue attention. There they lived out the rest of their lives regaling others with tales of a host of creatures who at last put an end to the darkness and destroyed the demon who enslaved the world.

Time proceeded slowly following the restoration of Norbinda, the sun. In all respects, what vegetation there grew on Harlus *should* have withered in the unfamiliar sunlight. Mushrooms and fungi would have dried up, and the foodstores gone barren—making life unbearable and nigh intolerable. The moisture on the planet's surface would have turned to steam and seared the inhabitants alive. New wind currents, ocean currents, seasons and climates would have wreaked havoc and caused further catastrophe. All of that and more *should* have happened... but did not. Though Ullix's magic was now gone—the magic that kept the planet alive was gone—it was only due to the last remaining vestiges of that very same magic that the transition from a doomed and dark planet to a brightly-lit planet thriving with life was made possible. With its dying breaths, the mystic force that had kept the dying planet alive in turn held its hand until it was strong enough to survive on its own... free, independent, alive. Then could the magic die knowing that Harlus would survive without it.

Galden and his companions set out for the southern coast, crossing over the Umbrannon Pass to Balluirc, a port city on the coast of Gaelwinn, and then onward to Galden's and Baringer's home of Kaelmorde.

None chose to depart from the company. The world had changed, and they were together when it had. They chose to remain together and enter the new era as comrades.

There in Kaelmorde they settled down in peace, together in what harmony their association could afford, enjoying each sunrise and sunset and the glorious growth they brought with them, together. The bright light from the great ball of fire burned at first the eyes so unaccustomed to it, but eventually they learned to revel in the brightness, and to cultivate the many crops that sprung from long-dormant seeds now fully awakened by the light. As magic slowly died, soon plants began to grow; flowers, grasses, grains, shrubbery, weeds, trees, fruits, vegetables... Slowly but surely, creating a new Harlus for its inhabitants all over again.

Rebirth.

Kieran set aside his anger and confusion, and built a house next to Baringer's, on the land that the young man kindly gave to him; joining the young farmer as he tilled his fields... Yielding now grains and vegetables instead of the same-old mushrooms they were all accustomed to. The sun-dial in the field proved a valuable tool in collecting time, replacing the useless obelisks with their candles. Kieran and Baringer eventually joined their two homes together into one, creating both a home that they could share, as well as a large gathering place where their companions always felt welcome; eventually adding more rooms and a second floor to become an inn. It came to symbolize the birth of equality among them all, borne from two very different people who came to care for each other very deeply. When Selene traveled to see her friends in Kaelmorde, it was at The Inn of the Half-Elf that she made her home. When Dame Ganydrone was fetched to finally ease into the slumber from which she would never awaken, it was at that very same Inn where she closed her eyes forever.

Nisqué and Galden were married, as were Pouldin and Maibin. Broceliande and Garid, choosing to remain on that world with their friends, took up haunting their homes, their friendly presence adding a touch of quaintness to their abodes.

Galden himself was pleasantly surprised to find no sign of his uncle Pat upon their return, though his mother scolded him to no end. "When you didn't come home," she sobbed, happily, angrily, "I worried. When the days... the months passed, I tried... I tried so hard not to give up." Pat had left her to her distress, and had not been heard from. He was not missed, especially with a veritable army to take his place in the Galden household. A household that was soon joined by twin children from the union of Nisqué and Galden.

Thirluaine and Kieran became close friends, and Kieran took a great liking to Kaldorne, whom he reared as his own

son. Kaldorne grew up in the Inn knowing the ex-mercenary elf as his loving father, and Thirluaine grew to love him as her brother. And since Kieran and Baringer had become near inseperable, to Galden's slight chagrin, Baringer was Kaldorne's *other* father. The one who shared with him the depths of great wisdom and the heights of great abandon. The Inn of the Half-Elf welcomed family and friends from near and far, and on cold nights when Kaldorne stared—curiously and familiarly—up at the length of rope coiled above the great fire place, precious memories stirred and stories were told and retold.

Galden's greatest disappointment was that, having gone through so much trouble, he never once got to meet his matriarch, Senna... At least, not formally. He fought with her, saw her... saw what she looked like, heard what she sounded like. She was the reason for—at least so he thought—the entire quest and all their sacrifice. But he knew that their sacrifices had not been in vain. Look at what they had accomplished.

And one day, as Nisqué and Broceliande were sorting through and arranging all the old clothes and momentos in the attic of the old Galden house, she uncovered the Orb of Knowledge buried along with Senna's old dress and the book of days in the old trunk. She placed it on the floor where it sat under a beam of light that filtered through a small window. Unwrapping it, she gingerly brushed her fingertips against the cold smoothness of it, much to the ghost's timid protests.

Nothing happened. The orb sparkled in the light, and sat heavily on the old floorboards, but beyond that, nothing was evident. Nothing occurred.

Nisqué bit her lip and smiled at the ghost, who shook her head in argument. She then lay her hand flat against its surface.

Nothing happened.

“So that’s why we set out on the adventure,” she murmured, turning to the ghost. “All the sacrifices and battle... it all had meaning.”

“And what was that?” ventured the ghost timidly.

“That we all had to... No, we *have* to make our own decisions, to live our lives as we see fit. And be happy with it.” She looked upon Broceliande, an all-knowing, wise expression upon her face. “We cannot force people to be good instead of evil. If...” she juggled the thoughts in her mind, dazzled at the clarity she now felt but still unable to form the right words. “If.. all the people on... on a ship crowded to one side, it would capsize.” She smiled at her friend, and spoke with more confidence.

“Magic is fading, and in time we will fade with it. What was our reality will become the stuff of legends.” The words became heavy now, and weighted with wisdom that she had not earned but wielded nonetheless. “Logic, science and reason will earn their place in society... as dark becoming... now light arrived.”

She repeated, “We must all live our own lives, and be happy.” She cupped the crystal ball in her hands, gazing intently into its opalescent depths. Broceliande reached out to brush her own ethereal hands against it. The two women touched the great sphere at the same time.

Nothing happened.

Or maybe something did. Maybe everything did. But that’s another story.

dark becoming...

light arrived

epilogue

And so began the age of brilliance. What was once black was now light. Evil had been subdued, and tranquility reigned anew. In harmony now lived the people of Harlus, and in harmony now lived the New Gods.

Devoted Loris, gleaming in his full armor of gold for all to see in the northern sky, guards over the downtrodden, abused, neglected, and poor. Azurad, dispenser of justice, grants favor to those in battle. Tsingee Yingee Snordeap Knorrdoof, concealed amongst the flittering butterflies, faeries, and flowers and hidden out beyond the faintest stars on the southern horizon enriches the plants and growing things, bringing rich bloom and harvest. Lady Avalzanet presides over the magical essence of youth, granting to those who possess it the presence of her comrade Valza'in. Valza'in embodies and is forever innocent, reveling and existing in the laughter of children and the tears of joy, and existing in a cluster of bright stars with a string of faint stars extending from it. Vortigurn guards and walks with the wild animals of the forest and the tame ones of the towns—her pets. Koldin walks with the pariah, his arm comfortingly about his shoulders, his heart with their own. Even old Dame Ganydronne resides within the great ball of fire, forever watching over the old and homeless, while Broceliande has chosen to exist throughout eternity as the goddess of love and beauty; her stars clustered just above the eastern horizon. Senna guarantees peace and harmony as she oversees the doings of her contemporaries as queen of

the gods, dwelling with Ganydrone in Norbinda. Saris ensures health to those who deserve it, and grants miracles of curing when he so wills. And Pan—Ullix—Tragos Oide... the goat god... guarantees the endurance of the others. He provides the means by which they must continue their work. Ullix is the god of death.

The Gods are home again, and that is good. The sun is once more the abode of the Holy Twelve, and will remain so for all time. For, you see, they each fought or contributed in some way to allow for the new beginning, and the wisdom they gained in their previous existences has allowed them to rise above the previous generation of deities.

And each month, upon the emergence of the full face of each of the twelve restored and representative moons, the histories of the gods are honored with the lighting of a vast candle made to burn for one month, yielding at its demise, within the waxy base, a brilliant crystal ball.

So we leave Harlus: A planet still entrenched in the old ways, but a planet nonetheless destined to join the great cosmic expanses.

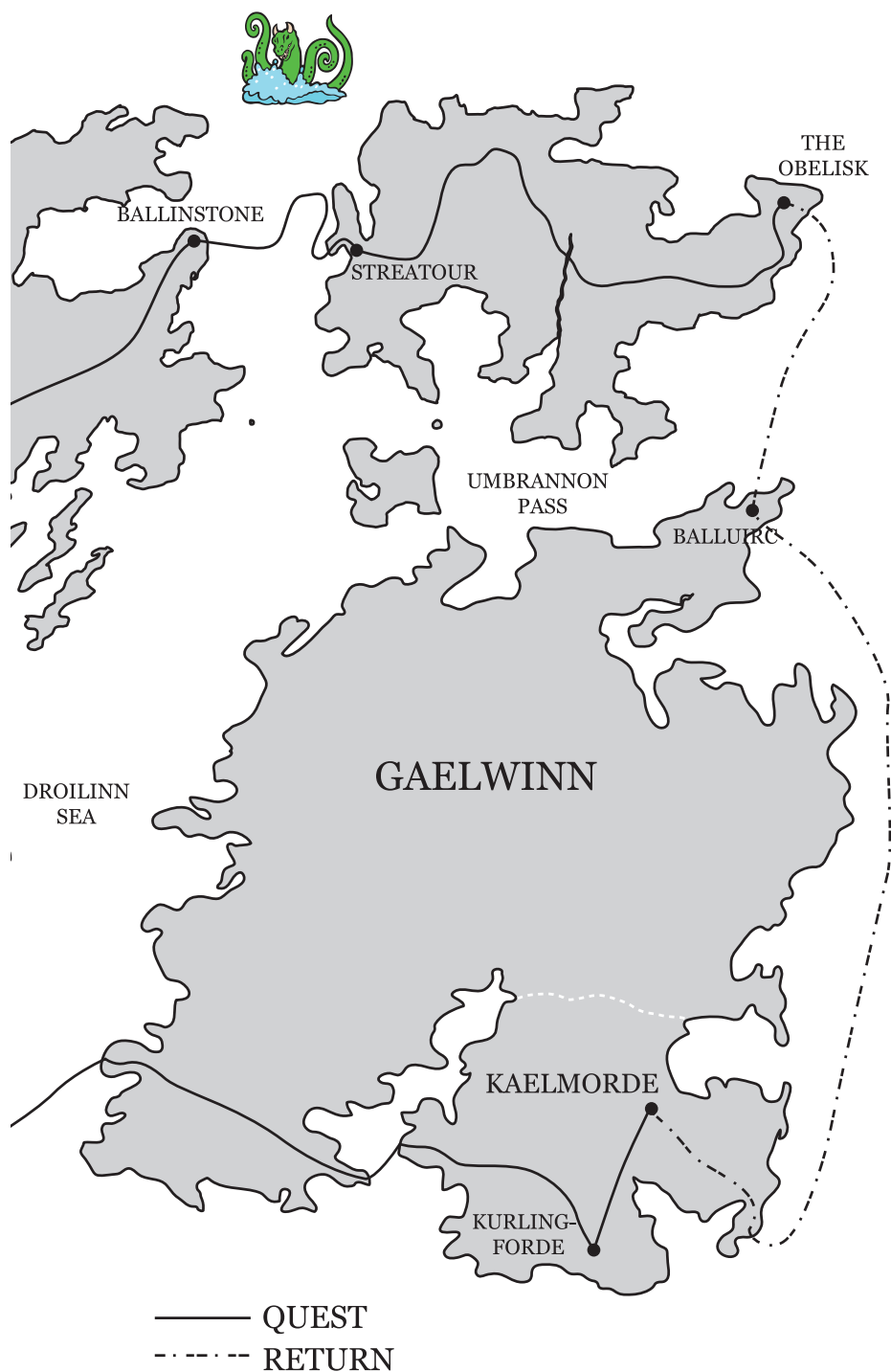
Drawings of the
Many Characters
of
Dark Becoming

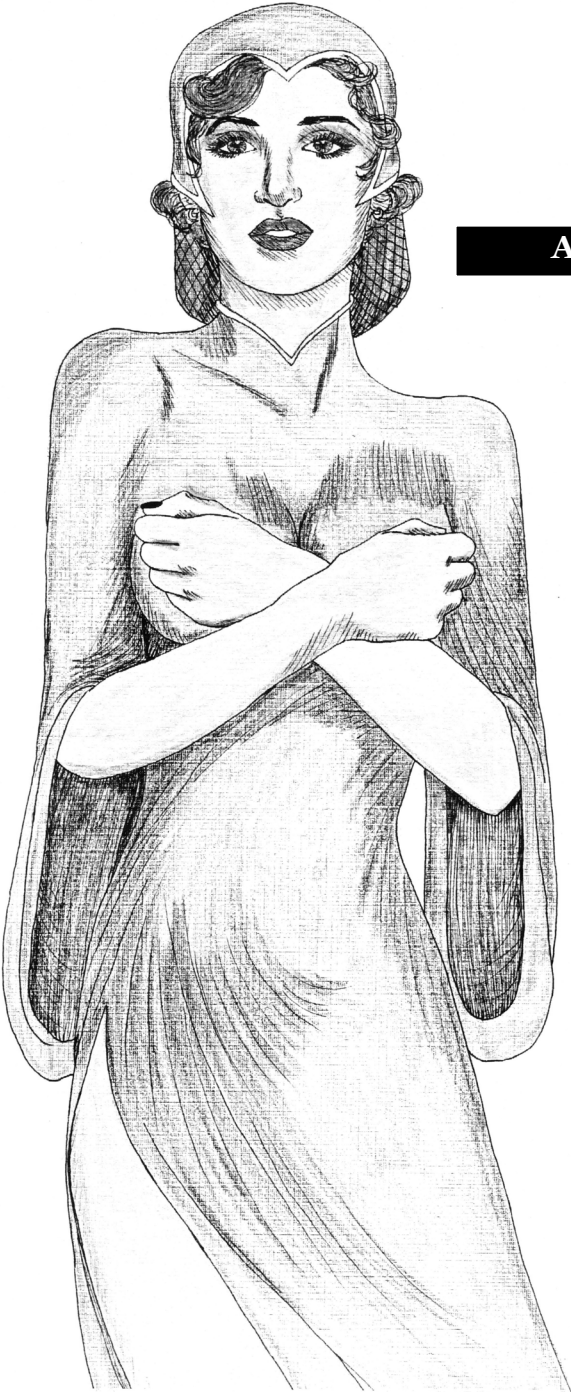
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Drawn by
Marcus D. Mébes
1992, 1994,
and some redrawn in 2006.

Map originally sketched by Derek Block, 1992,
redrawn and enhanced
by Marcus D. Mébes in August, 2006.



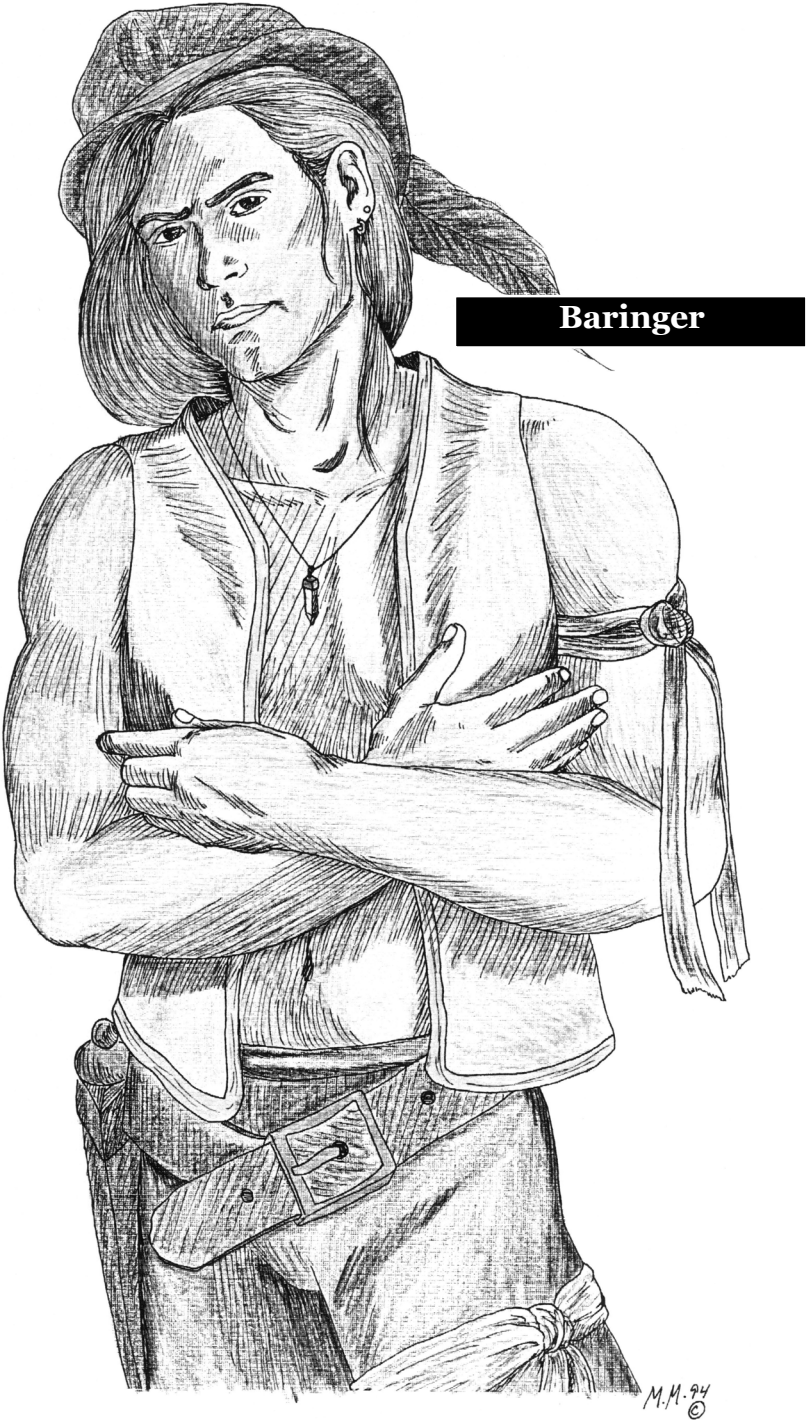




Avalzanet

Azurad







Broceliande



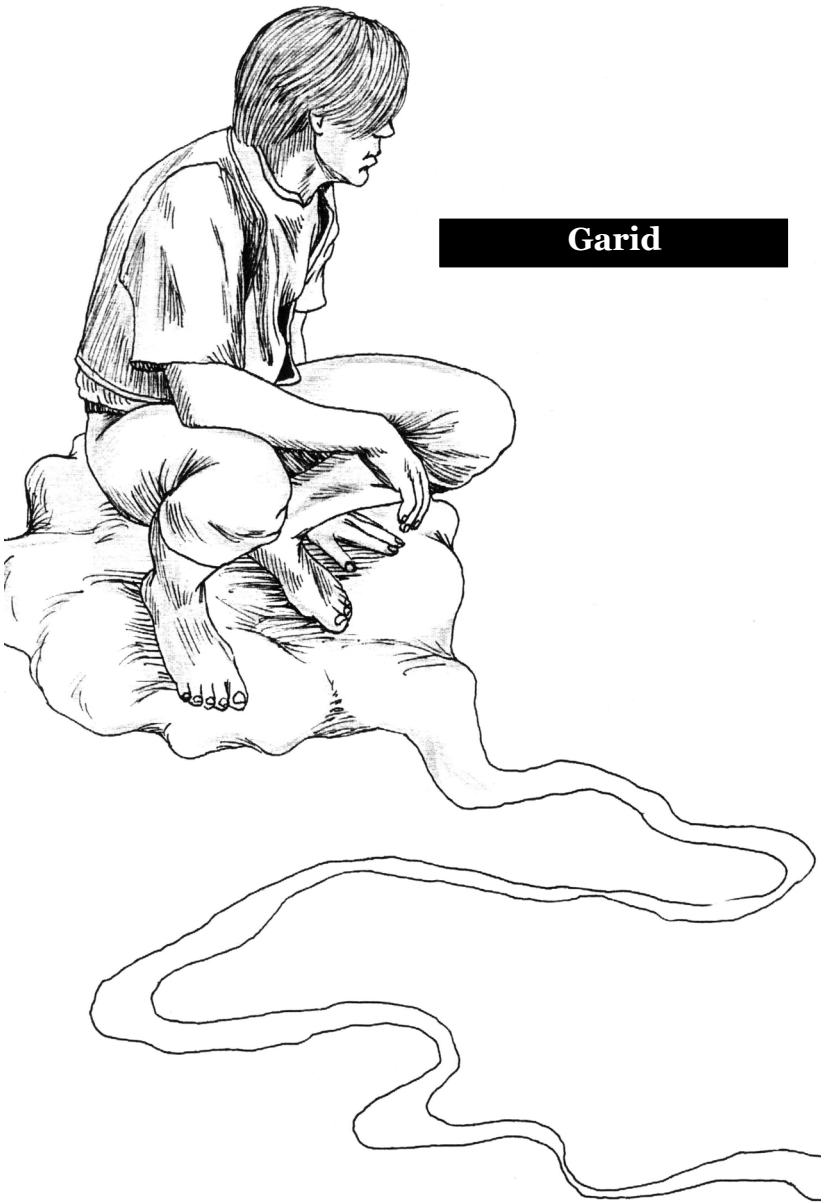
Galden

Ganasta



Ganydronne





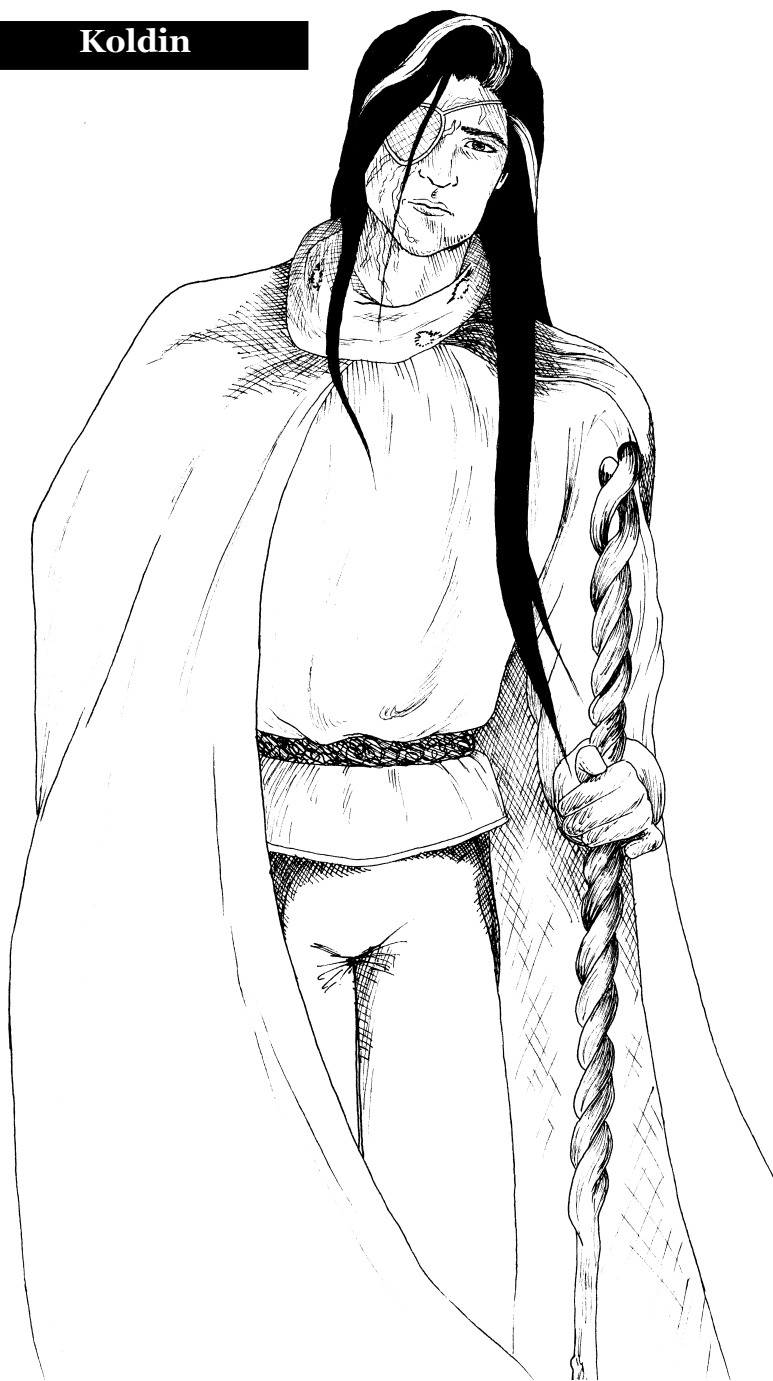
Kaydrith





Kieran

Koldin



Loris



Maibin





Nisqué

Pouldin





Saris

Senna





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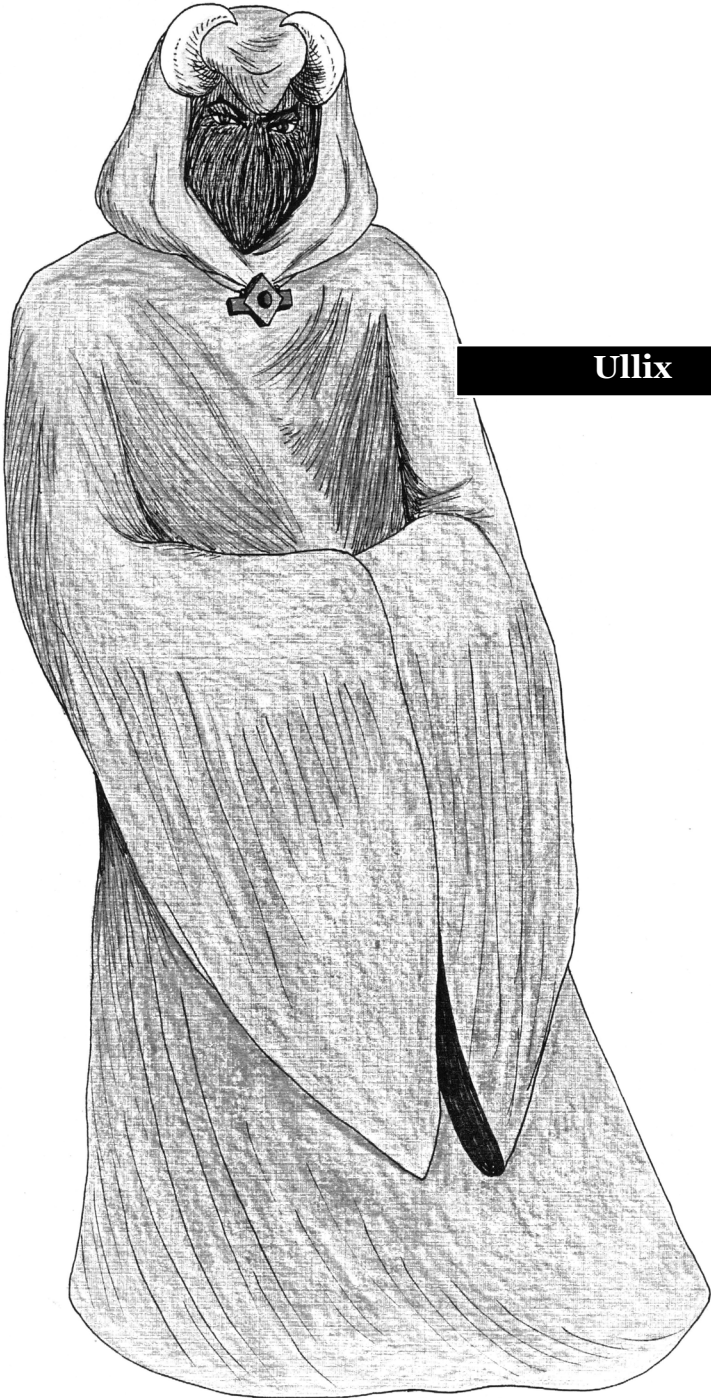
Speedwell

Thirluaine





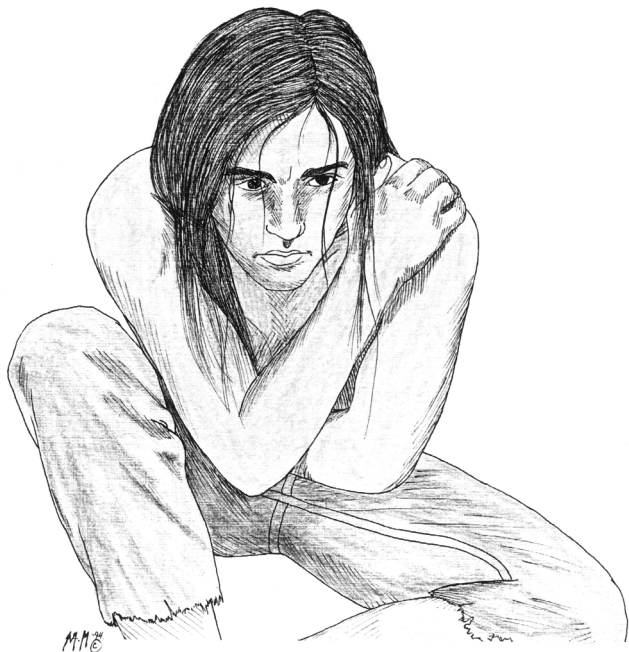
Tsingee



Ullix

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Valza'in



Vortigurn



Zeboblonuk



end