

The Nowhere Stones

Robert Devine, 2020

[1]

Dierdre Cunningham walked down the sunny lane, nearly skipping with the prospect of a few weeks off from university. This old dirt road had always been one of her favorites growing up, she knew every tree and corner. The location of her parent's house in the southwest of England provided endless opportunities to wander, but this trail always came first. She roamed back and forth, by the creek, along the ancient stone wall, her summer dress blowing ahead of her as she went. Dappled light shone through gaps in the leaves above. Her hand brushed an irregular stone in the wall, giving her a small shock. The light shimmered for the briefest of moments, the greens became grey-greens then went back again. Shades and half-tones moved in her peripheral vision. Her ears popped. She stopped, taken by the feeling that something was amiss. Rocks do not normally collect static electricity. A moment later no trace of the feeling remained. The sun caught her eye through the trees and she started walking again.

She waved hello to the chicken on the road. She smelled the flowers. She replied Very well to the tiny man on the fence when he asked How do you do? She skipped. And stopped. The tiny man was gone. She was sure she had seen him, with his green vest, tweed jacket and smart fedora. And about one foot tall. The memory quickly began to fade.

A gentle breeze diverted her attention. What's that smell? A pungent odor assaulted her senses. Yuck, that smells like dead animal. A few steps down the path revealed the source. An enormous vat steamed beside a very old shed, just on the other side of the hedgerow. Two men tended it, one stoking the flames while the other fed in the hind leg of a horse. Grasping by the hoof and shin he stirred the vile concoction with it. Periodically he would withdraw the leg, paying close attention to the fat dripping off the far end.

"Rendering a bit slow."

"Flame's plenty hot."

"Too much a runner, this one."

"Mmm. Too lean."

Dierdre froze in her tracks. She had heard of horses being sent to the glue factory before, but never imagined it as a backyard industry.

How can they stand that smell? And what are they wearing? Fear washed over her as she realized nothing about their work looked even remotely modern. Every tool appeared hand-made. Every garment. And since when do we make roofs from hay?

Hang on, there's no shed around here, not for another mile down at the Broughmsby's. She stepped off the trail and hid behind a thicket.

"Down boy, what is it?" boomed a regal sounding voice from horseback. "You act as though on the scent of a fox."

An enormous dog bounded down the trail, coming to a stop exactly where she had been standing. He sniffed the ground and pawed excitedly.

"Think you've found some new quarry, eh? How you can smell anything through that rending is beyond me." He scrunched up his nose and kicked his heels into the horse. "Come on then, we have to get back."

Dierdre was very frightened now. Nobody rides horses around here dressed like that. Never mind having your dog off leash. What is going on?

[2]

Penirrell waved his hands, swirling darkness following in their wake. He guided the darkness into a wide, low bowl, pausing to watch it settle. Languid ripples slowed and became still. No reflection was to be seen in this pool. This pool is for taking, it gives nothing in return.

Penirrell chanted several sentences, his voice rising with each word. The darkness compressed into the volume of a small pea, quivering at the bottom of the bowl. He reached down with his left hand, placing his knuckles just beside the darkness. He opened the face of an ornate ring on his finger, willed the darkness inside, and sealed it shut. Satisfied, he went upstairs for dinner.

"Aphids will never know what hit them" he muttered as he climbed the stairs. Penirrell fancies himself a gardener, although by trade he is a practitioner of spells, third class. While sufficiently experienced to be a couple levels higher, he lacks the stomach for summonings, with all the sacrificing and other messy bits required by the Ordeals, so he contents himself among the junior ranks of The Order.

Aphids, on the other hand get the full force of darkness unleashed upon them. Penirrell knows conjuring, perhaps as well as any first class, and he relishes honing his skills on the little usurpers of strawberries. And raspberries. They deserve what they get.

[3]

Derrick Keanes felt along the wall in the dark. The old stone foundation down here in the cellar never got much attention nor updates, leaving most of it unlit. He was doing repairs on a section of pipe that ran the length of the wall, and was presently trying to find the leak. His hand dragged across a rough stone, giving him a small jolt.

"What the heck? Electrical is three feet up. Friggin old houses."

The house exuded old-world charm, the realtor had said, having been on this site for hundreds of years in the town of Sherborne. Nobody knew how old the house really was, but if the giant oak tree out front was any indication then multiple centuries was believable. Derrick fell in love with it and purchased it that same day. He still did love it, but had a ways to go before he could say he loved repairing it.

Derrick stopped in his tracks. What is on fire? What is that creaking noise upstairs? He ran back up the stairs, pausing near the top when he heard voices. Derrick lives alone.

"Fires getting low Alphonse, go and fetch some more wood" said an elderly female voice.

"I know, I know, the dry ones this time. I knows what I'm doing, Abigail," a male voice of similar age replied.

Steps approached the door to the cellar. Derrick's mind was reeling. I live alone, yet I hear voices that do not seem to be thieves. The old fireplace is functioning again, despite the broken flue. I have no firewood down here. This train of thought came to an abrupt end when the handle to the cellar door began to turn. Derrick ran back down the stairs, heading for the opposite corner of the cellar. He tripped over a large mound halfway across the room, swore, got back to his feet and sidled up to the far wall.

"What's that racket? Is that you Mr. Rat getting into our stores again? I swear I've half a mind to come down here with my pitchfork and sort you out."

Alphonse ambled down the stairs holding a lantern. He turned and walked to the center of the room to find the source of the commotion. Several large sacks sat on the floor, one had spilled a few potatoes and other root vegetables.

"Confound you rats!"

He hurriedly walked around the room looking for the little invaders. Derrick is approaching panic at this point. He backs up further against the wall until his whole back is in contact. He reaches back with his hands, laying both palms on the wall. Calmness washes over him. A thought enters his mind - become the stone wall. Briefly he cannot tell where his own body ends and the stone wall begins.

Alphonse reaches Derrick's location and pauses. He raises the lantern to eye level, looks directly at Derrick, then moves on.

"Come out ye little buggers. I'll find you yet!"

He walks over to the far wall, collects a few logs, and ascends the stairs. Derrick remains frozen for another minute or so. What was that? Why didn't he see me? Do people really wear night caps any more?

Derrick remained in the cellar for several more hours, until the house went quiet. It was well after dark when he crept back up the stairs. He pressed his ear to the door. Hearing nothing, he opened it silently and peered around the room. It looked like a museum vignette from the middle ages. There's even a spinning wheel by the window. Is this a prank? While you were busy we swapped out your decor with some lovely antiques and a couple of old codgers. Hmm, that does not seem likely. Graham and Phil would totally swap out my furniture for a laugh, but installing old people too? No way. I'll pop round and see exactly what Graham is up to.

Two steps out the front door changed everything. Oh my god. They can't have swapped every motor on the street for horses and carriages. I must be hallucinating. That shock I got down the basement must have been more powerful than it seemed. Am I in hospital, about to wake up?

"Who goes there? Outside the Donnington's place?" a gruff voice inquired.

Derrick looked left and right, but no one else was about. Does he mean me?

"Yes you, lookin' round like you've nothing to hide. Always means you do. Have something to hide, that is."

"I, er, seem to be a bit lost."

"Looks like. Dressed like that. Where are you from?"

"Here, or so I thought. Everything looks different now."

"Yeah, well, things change. You can't ever go back to the same place you left, eh?"

"I suppose not. My name is Derrick, and you are - ?"

"Wilkins, the night watchman in this village."

Derrick sensed an opportunity here and decided to take a chance.

"Oh thank heavens, it's you Wilkins. I was told to look for you. You'll set me right, they said. Can you direct me to the nearest lodging? Nothing fancy, I'm looking for the sort of place that I can wash a few dishes in exchange for some food and a cot. I don't have much." A desperate play for sure, but Derrick was certain his bank card would be of little use here.

"Derrick, you say." Wilkins squinted at him, then put on his best thinking face. He had learned this is the best way to convince people you can actually think. Strategic pauses and a furrowed brow imply one is considering intelligent things.

"Oh yes, the Pemberton lad. Come on then, Mrs. Fingle will have something for you."

[4]

Dierdre spent the rest of the day making her way back towards her parents' house. Along the way she saw nothing to boost her confidence that she had been imagining things. She was definitely somewhere *else*. Around the next bend a glimmer of hope returned, the tall grasses along the left side of the road looked as she remembered them, they seemed to beckon hello as they waved in the wind. They led right up to the intersection she was expecting, a left turn and another half mile and she'd be home! The excitement quickened her pace, she was very nearly running through the left turn. She stopped just in time to see a rider approaching.

"Come Woogins!"

The rider was looking behind him, calling to his dog. Dierdre ducked into a hedgerow before he turned his gaze this way, her sight now limited to a thin swath of road. Thundering hooves approached. Are horses always this loud? The dog ran into view and skidded to a halt, nearly getting clubbed by a hoof.

"Woogie! You know better than that. What's gotten into you?"

She recognized that voice, this is the same rider and dog-shaped enormity as before. Woogins?

Woogins dropped his nose to the earth and began earnestly sniffing. He was coming directly towards her.

"More game, eh Woogie?"

Woogins stopped at the gap in the hedgerow, then thrust his immense head inside. His nose was mere inches from her face. Intense fear washed over her, giving her a clarity of focus she did not know she had. A single thought dominated her mind - become transparent. Its source felt foreign, but she had no time to think about that. She embraced it and focused harder than she ever had, every cell in her body momentarily joined in harmony towards this goal. The beast fell silent. It gave a few desultory sniffs in her direction then turned away.

Dierdre remained frozen for several more minutes to make sure it was really gone. She looked down and gasped. She no longer saw own feet. Tree trunks and roots replaced her lower extremities. Leaves adorned every finger. A joyous breeze ruffled her hair. She swayed. Sunlight felt really good. Better than good. Even better than a massage at the fancy spa. I could get used to this.

A new thought came to the fore - when is dinner? Oh right, I've not eaten since breakfast. What am I going to do about that? Moments later all trace of her arboreal appearance vanished. She looked at her hand, flexing the fingers this way and that, not knowing what to think. She poked her head out of the hedgerow. Looking left and right she saw the road was empty. She started walking towards her parent's house again, this time without any idea what she might find.

[5]

Derrick's best plan was to buy time to figure out what is going on. After several days all he has figured out is that folks in this era work bloody hard. He returned to his cot exhausted every night, no closer to an idea for getting back home. On the bright side Mrs. Fingle has no shortage of work, so there is no imminent threat of being homeless here.

Unless she finds my secret soap stash, he thought. Derrick was having a hard time adjusting to wood as an eating surface. Every bowl and plate is a veritable bacteria farm, full of cracks and unwashable bits. He had tried washing them thoroughly with an appropriate amount of soap, but that only earned him a rap on the ear from Mrs. Fingle for being wasteful. He learned to secret away just enough soap for his own 'crockery'. Or would that be 'oakery'? Well if I can't find a way back home at least I can ensure I don't die from dysentary or whatever one gets here.

The stone disguise trick intrigued him when he could spare a few mental cycles. When nobody was around he would stand nonchalantly against the wall and place his hand on it, holding a broom in his other hand to keep up appearances. At first he could only muster the energy to hide a finger or two, but after a few days he could reliably camouflage his entire arm. Today he set the goal of camouflaging his torso, settling into the now-familiar inner calm.

Curiously this ability did not trouble him. It seemed par for the course in this strange land. If powers existed that could transport him here then perhaps something existed within him as well.

Footsteps at the door interrupted him. Mrs. Fingle conversed with another person, both of them entering just as he started sweeping.

“Him, there. He’s the one as came by a while back. Seems a good lad.”

Derrick’s stomach plummeted. Thus far he had managed to fly completely under the radar of anyone but Mrs. Fingle and the watchman Wilkins. This cannot be good.

A hooded man sized him up in a glance. He exuded calm power. Derrick involuntarily flexed the hand he had just been camouflaging, feeling a slight tingle. The man glanced directly at his hand, a slight smile crossing his face.

“Thank you, Mrs. Fingle. May I have a few moments with the lad?”

Derrick’s stomach fell further.

“Be my guest, just don’t turn him into anything what can’t do the cleaning. He’s useful, that one.”

“You have my word, Mrs. Fingle.”

[6]

The rider notices that Mister Woogins is jumpy. Twice he has caught the scent of something, yet it continues to elude. His cagey behavior indicates he knows it is still out there, should we let him run?

Just at that moment a harbinger goose trumpeted, which is commonly held as an ominous sign here. The rider took that as confirmation that he should let the great hound root out the intruder.

“Come Woogie! Pursuit on! Go!”

Mister Woogins bounded back the way they had come.

Dierdre walked warily down the road. The chance of meeting someone grows with each step towards the village. She was desperately trying to think of a story to explain her presence when she realized she was still wearing clothes from back home. After the encounter at the hedgerow and her leafy attire she wondered what else she could do. She envisioned peasant attire from a renaissance faire years ago. Nothing happened. She grew still. A now familiar small voice spoke in her mind: Become the peasant. She felt a subtle shift. It worked! I hope this looks close enough to the real article.

She passed several intersections that vaguely feel like they are in the right place. A few steps later she sees the oak! There it is, the oak at the center of town, albeit a

slightly different shape. There is something about an oak tree that just says 'home'. Hope fills her momentarily. This pleases her even though she knows it is irrational. Hope feels better inside than terror.

Thundering hooves approach from behind. Oh no! Nowhere to hide this time.

The rider brings the horse to a stop with dramatic flair just as Woogins lowers his head, snarling.

"A-ha, what have we here?"

Dierdre racks her brain. What will I say?

"Woogie!" She blurts out, to her own surprise. "Woogie oogie oogie is such a good boy."

Woogins stops snarling and cocks an ear, now curious. He settles on his haunches.

"Does Woogie need a tummy rub?"

Thump thump thump. His tail betrays him. It has been simply ages since he had a good tummy rub. Ever since the nice young maid left the manor to get married it has only been brushies from the stable hand. She had been the one to name him, having been given free rein with what they thought was the runt of the litter. Later when his tracking abilities outpaced his siblings, the name had already taken.

Whoomp! Woogins flops to his side and raises two enormous paws in the air.

Annoyed at losing center stage, the rider intervenes.

"Now see here, there will be no tummy rubs! Young lady – I am Haversham P. Dubuque, III. I demand that you identify yourself!"

“Woogie oogie! I’ve missed you!” She carries on vigorously rubbing his belly.

“I’m Dierdre of Somteron. I’m sorry I don’t recall you. How shall I address you?”

Now that is more like it, he thinks.

“You can call me Haversham the Third, if you please.” He has been trying for years to get that to catch on, to no avail.

“That’s quite a mouthful, is Hav ok?” She thought better of proposing Sham.

The rider sighed, deflated.

“Yes, that’s what everyone else calls me. Back to business – why are you here?”

“I’m afraid I’m a bit lost. Somerton is not as I remember it.”

“I do not recognize you, yet you claim to know my hound. This does not help your case, there are spies about. Do you think me a fool? Your story does not hold water. You shall return to my father’s court with me.”

“If I could just try to find my parents’ house” she spoke, fear rising in her chest. She moved to stand.

The sound of ringing steel froze her in her tracks. She risked a glance at the rider. All mirth was gone from his face. He deftly pointed his sword at her chest. Mister Woogins noted the change, and promptly resumed snarling, although perhaps not quite as fiercely as before.

Uh-oh. I don’t like this.

“You will accompany me now.”

He shifted his sword to his left hand, extending his right towards her. She grabbed it and was pulled onto the horse so quickly she caught her breath. Hav is no

sham, apparently. She now sat behind him on a very nice saddle. He quickly bound her hands to his waist, 'to prevent any spy shenanigans'.

“Come Woogie, to the court!”

They galloped and galumphed away.

[7]

Derrick and Penirrell ascended a steep road leading to a hilltop village surrounded by imposing walls.

“Why are you offering to help me?” Derrick asked.

Penirrell chuckled mildly.

“How can you be sure my intention is to help?”

Derrick was taken aback. He was so sure this man had come to help him. He had given Mrs. Fingle such a compelling reason for needing my assistance. Everything felt right. Yet not one word was spoken about the nature of the task. Derrick felt a chill at this oversight.

Realizing he had nothing specific to say in reply, he went with his intuition.

“I felt a calmness when you entered. I took this to describe your intent.”

“Learn to listen to that voice. My intention is indeed beneficial, but I can assure you the path ahead will be anything but calm. My name is Penirrell.”

“I’m Derrick. From Sherborne.”

They passed through the town gates with a wave of Penirrell’s robed hand. The guards nodded silently at him and paid them no more attention. The street climbed sharply up a winding road lined with stone houses, shops and other buildings whose function Derrick could not identify. The village seemed a great deal larger than the one

in which he is staying, and of better construction. While focused looking upwards he tripped on a stone, nearly falling. Looking down he realized the street is cobbled with regularly shaped stones. Upscale indeed.

They walked another fifteen minutes before arriving at a street bounded by houses down the left side and a magnificent view to the right, overlooking much of the town and the land beyond. Penirrell led them to a plain door under a small awning. Derrick watched him open the door with a gesture that looked like the turning of a key, but was in fact a small spell. He felt a slight tingle on his forearm nearest to Penirrell, the hairs standing on end. He moved it slightly to see if the effect would change.

“If you didn’t feel that I’d have been worried I got the wrong lad” he said with a grin.

Derrick hesitated before stepping across the threshold. He moved to speak, then closed his mouth. He had no idea what to ask. His inner voice suggested he get inside before anyone else notices his presence. In for a penny, I suppose. He strode through the door, then watched it swing shut of its own accord. He followed Penirrell down a flight of spiral stairs to an ornate room full of exquisite furniture and artifacts. In the center stood a long, sturdy table covered with bottles, dishes, notebooks and countless other objects he could not identify.

“Welcome to my study, Derrick of Sherborne. I will hazard a guess your Sherborne does not resemble ours.”

“So you know what is going on then? About why, er how, or whatever I’m doing here?” he stammered in his excitement.

“I know some of the goings on, but not all. I felt you practicing when I visited Mrs. Fingle’s village. I was there collecting herbs from the market at the time.”

“You could feel that? I wasn’t even doing very much.”

“Your results may have been meager but the power you drew was not. As you gain skill you will be able to perform your action undetected. Which form are you?”

“Form?”

“Leaf or Clay. The stones always summon two at a time. One more strongly aligns with things that grow, which we call Leaf. The other with materials acted upon, Clay.”

“Whoa. Clay. I’m clay. I was practicing blending into a stone wall when you and Mrs. Fingle came in.”

“Correction. You were practicing being a stone wall. In fact you can become a great many things, and in due time you will need them all.”

Derrick’s mind reeled at this new information. I was summoned? Becoming stone?

“That would explain why the old guy in my basement couldn’t see me, even when standing two feet away with a lantern. I’d had a hunch, but I thought it was some strange camouflage. Or perhaps he has bad eyesight.”

“His eyesight is not stellar, but enough to see you had you not become part of the wall. So you live at that house in your Sherborne, you say?”

“Yes, I bought it a year or so ago.”

“Splendid! We do not always get a land owner among the called. This will prove beneficial later. Now to work, we have much to do.”

[8]

Dierdre, Hav and Mister Woogins approached an imposing manor perched atop a small rise, surrounded by a stone wall. Dierdre peered around Hav's shoulder to get a glimpse as they neared the gate, a difficult task given her bindings. Hav's broad shoulders and imposing height forced her to lean as far to the side as she could.

"Don't get any ideas."

"I just want to see where we are going."

She decided en route not to attempt escape via her newly discovered powers. She had played the scenario in her mind but there were too many risks. The easy part would be turning her arms into skinny branches and sliding them out of the restraints. After that the plan falls apart.

Jumping off a galloping horse without harm seems unlikely. A leg injury would render her helpless in this land. Dierdre is a good runner and wants to protect this ability. Further, if she gets to the ground unharmed she is no better off. Even the very fastest cannot outrun a skilled horse rider and a trained hunting dog. Finally there is the issue of what people might think of her odd ability upon her recapture. Would they

consider her a heretic and burn her at the stake? No, she decided, she would keep that ace card hidden until it could be played without chance of detection.

So it was with resignation that Dierdre steeled herself to meet Hav's father. Outwardly she chose to present an attitude of eager curiosity, portraying an innocent young lady with nothing to hide. She also knew that the Cunningham name existed in southwest England for centuries, thanks to an ancestry search, and hoped this reality was similar enough to her own to share that trait.

The guards opened the gate quickly, in time such that the horse need not break stride. Dierdre noted this nonchalant competence, and worried if the rest of the court is as well-drilled she will find few opportunities to escape.

They dismounted in a stable most people would be happy to call home. Hav casually handed the reins to a smartly dressed stable hand, who led the horse and Mister Woogins away.

"Do not consider anything foolish. I should warn you I am the first sword in my father's realm."

"I would not insult you as such, good sir. Further, it is easy enough to verify I carry no weapons."

"My lady it would be inappropriate."

"Oh good heavens, I did not mean to imply you. A female servant, of course could perform the task."

Hav showed mild surprise at this statement. He assumed she had intended to use romance to gain favor. It seems she is earnest about her innocence. He cocked an eyebrow and questioned if he should subject her to his father's court.

"Hmm, perhaps ..."

"Welcome back Hav, sir. I see you brought a captive" the captain of the guards noted upon seeing the restraints he held. Hav could ill afford to lose face in front of Captain Stamford, the man who has been captain since before Hav was born and has his father's full confidence. He reminds Hav of this often.

"Yes Stamford, observant as ever. Woogins and I found her wandering the road into town. Claims she is from Somerton, but I've not heard of her before."

"To the holding cell. His Lordship is dealing with pressing matters of state and cannot be disturbed for the rest of the day," Stamford said in a manner that left no room for negotiation. Hav knew this tone, and had learned as a young lad not to cross it.

"Right, then, I'll see to it," Hav offered, and led her away.

Stamford glanced suspiciously at Hav before returning to the manor.

"Hav, sir, surely you don't need to lock me up. I'm no threat to anyone."

"At this point it is a matter of protocol, now that your presence has been duly noted," he said with the slightest trace of remorse.

Dierdre dropped her shoulders, deflated, and walked silently along.

A deep, throaty growl greeted them at the cellar. On the other side of the grate sat an enormous bearded man, visibly drunk. He perked up at the sight of Dierdre.

"Send her in! Such a pretty lass!"

“Sorry Hav. Just got him a half hour ago, for fighting,” said the keeper.

“And winning too, I might add!” bellowed the drunk.

“Proper dungeon is all that is left,” he said while looking at his feet and fingering the keys nervously.

Hav did not like the choices. The dungeon is no place for a lady, spy or not. The alternative is to move the brute to the dungeon. Hav has seen him in action, he is quite handy with his fists. Several guards would be necessary for the the task.

“Is the bedroom in the east wing still unoccupied?”

“Yes sir, s’far as I know.”

“That will suffice. The key, please.”

“Are you sure sir? Stamford will likely object.”

“No doubt he will. I will handle that.”

Hav led her through a side door of the manor and up a flight of stairs, past the curious glances of several staff persons. At the top of the stairs Dierdre saw luxurious carpeting running the length of a hallway lined with doors. Hav stopped at the first one and waved one of the female staff over.

“Heather, please do me a favor and ensure nobody goes in or out. Dierdre is awaiting court but the dungeons seemed inappropriate.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Hav led Dierdre inside and spoke in a low tone.

“Please do not do anything untoward here. If you break the rules of the manor the dungeon will be your next quarters. Of that you can be certain.”

Dierdre swallowed, and nodded. Her eyes began to water slightly.

“Thank you. For your kindness.”

Hav nodded once then exited.

The lock clicked shut.

[9]

Derrick wandered around Penirrell's study, looking at the vast array of curious objects lining every shelf and many of the surfaces. A precisely written label sat in front of each item on the shelves.

"Why is this one called The Carafe of Unpleasant Outcomes?"

"Hmm, oh yes, that one. Its forebearer was intended as the Cauldron of Doom. I do not consider myself a purveyor of doom, but I was asked by a colleague to help complete its journey."

"Journey?"

"Yes. You see every object that is intended to perform a specific task must be directed as such. Sometimes the raw materials are already strongly directed, other times you start with a blank slate. The journey describes the object's transformation."

"So you pour lots of energy into an object and it becomes a new thing? Does it change appearance?"

"Generally not, they look the same to unaided sight. Yes, to your first query, lots of focused power must be added. This is necessary for building up to truly enormous spells. Each day you generate as much power as you can, deposit it into the object, then use that as the starting point the next day. Day over day it grows until you are done."

"That sounds dangerous."

“Quite so.”

“What happens if someone steals an artifact as a way to use your stored power against you?”

“Straight to the point. The stones always call the clever ones. Most of us encode some of ourselves into the spell, so that none other can unlock it. Some take it a step further and instruct the power to be released destructively if accessed by anyone else.”

“Ouch. A magical booby trap. Can you tell if an artifact is rigged to explode?”

“It depends on the skill of the maker, and of the reader. Which brings us back to the cauldron. We did our utmost to reveal its secrets, eventually convincing ourselves it was not rigged. To be fair, it was already strongly directed as a focal point multiplier, but we detected no ‘traps’ as you called them.”

“We began the journey in the usual manner by gathering energy. I felt the slightest errant vibration, like a single string out of tune among many instruments. I voiced my concern, but my colleague assured me all was well. Next we blended the energies and poured them into the cauldron.”

“The dissonance rose sharply in my mind, so much so that I raised a shield spell reflexively. My colleague’s faith in his abilities prevented him detecting it. The blast removed his head entirely from the premises.”

Derrick winced at the thought.

“And the carafe?”

“Made from the fragments.”

“Why do you keep it?”

“The fingerprint of its maker remains. One day I may return the favor” he said,
his eyes narrowing.

Derrick leaned back involuntarily, fear visible on his face.

“Sensible lad.”

“But if you stole it from another were they wrong to rig it?”

“It was gifted to my friend by someone known to him. I never found out who.”

[10]

Penirrell saw Derrick home, and returned to his study. "Good heavens, we haven't had a calling in years. Things must be farther along than I realized. Let's see what's going on, eh Pudding?"

A plump tabby cat stretched and jumped off a velvety pillow onto the stone floor. She strode across the room and sat beside him.

Penirrell chanted before his pedestal, robed arms moving slowly across the bowl. Shimmering darkness flowed in, creating a mirrored surface.

"Spirits of Terra Firma, I call to thee for aid." A low rumble filled the room. Several books fell over on their shelves. Pudding hissed and hid under Penirrell's desk. Oak appeals to all in times of danger.

A large form rose out of the bowl. It resembled a granite column with a wide, flat face.

"Who dares awaken me from my sacred - oh, hi Penirrell, why didn't you say it was you?"

"Oh you know me Mica, I cannot abide that sort of grandiosity in my work. Goes to one's head, it does. Do not want to be pompous."

"Ah, I suppose you're right. Most of your lot are so insufferable. You are a breath of fresh dirt. Could you perhaps drop a hint next time though, would save me having to put on the stern face. It takes effort, that."

"Mmm, yes. I shall add a lower case 'p' next time, right at the end of the spell"
Penirrell said with the slightest hint of sarcasm. He watched the earth spirit's face for a reaction.

"That will do nicely. And now to business."

Oh dear, that went right by her. Now I have to figure out how to do that.

[11]

A few days later Pennirell rapped urgently on Mrs. Fingle's door at dawn. Hearing no one else about Derrick went to see who is calling. He sleeps closest to the door so he is always the first to be woken by deliveries or sales people. He peered through the eyehole and was surprised to see Pennirell. He opened the door.

"Get dressed quickly. We must go at once. It seems your compatriot has landed in the care of a less-than-welcoming host."

"What? Oh, right. Not a drill. Moving."

Derrick was dressed and out the door in ninety seconds with his pack. Pennirell had him practice moving on short notice with essential provisions.

"So where is he? Where are we going?"

"She is at the manor of Lord Dubuque, held as a possible spy."

"That sounds bad. What will they do to her?"

"Unless she can convince his Lordship of her innocence she will be given quarters in the dungeon. Permanently."

Derrick inhaled sharply.

“We cannot risk that outcome. His dungeons harbor wards against powers of my sort. Breaking her out of there would be an ordeal. A very public ordeal that we can ill afford. We must prevent her going to trial.”

“Is he that bad? What is his story, is he evil or corrupt?”

“No, he is just, but lacks any semblance of humanity or compassion. He deals with any perceived threat consistently – with maximum punishment. The younger Dubuque, Haverhsam III can be reasoned with. He seems to have a fine heart. Not so with the elder.”

They arrived at the manor about seven in the morning, giving them about an hour before any proceedings might occur. Just before the last corner leading to the gate Pennirell changed his robe to be that of a doctor. Derrick’s appearance was similarly altered to be his orderly.

“State your business” one of the two gate guards growled.

“I am healer Fulton, here to see Mrs. Bram. She summoned me about a stomach ailment.”

“No record of that here.”

“It was very late that she sent word. Your list was probably already written. I don’t mind waiting if you need to send someone to verify.”

The other guard recognized him. Pennirell had spent years building personas like this for just such occasions, his appearance altered for each.

“Nah, go on. I’ve seen you before. Squire, take Mr. Fulton back to the kitchens.”

“Aye, Sir.”

A young lad of perhaps fourteen led them down a well kept stone path that led to around to the back entrance of the kitchen. Mrs. Bram was waiting.

“Oh thank heavens you’re here, I’ve such dreadful cramps, have you got anything for that?” she gushed. Mrs. Bram stood about five feet tall, not quite coming up to about Pennirell’s shoulder. She had a wide, kind face and wore her hair tied back. She wiped her hands on a smudged apron. She turned to the young squire.

“Thank you laddie, I can see him out when we’re done.” With that he turned and walked back towards the gatehouse.

They entered the kitchen, then she directed them into a small side room. She sat behind a desk covered with various stacks – lists of food stores, shifts, recipes, ledger books, quills and countless other items. She motioned them to sit then leaned forward.

“She’s in the east bedroom, last one in the east wing by the servant stairs. Hav’s got the key. He has someone stationed at the door too. He only gives me the key to deliver meals. No way to do anything while I have the key, or I’m a goner for sure.”

“Mmm, yes. We must ensure Hav has the key when we move, to keep the focus off you. How much time do we have until her trial?”

“Three o’clock.”

“Right, here’s the plan.”

Dierdre stared out the window, thinking about the grass in the meadow beyond the manor walls. It just grows freely, no knowledge of troubles like these. She imagined walking barefoot in the meadow, then thought of home. She turned away – No this

won't get me anywhere, I must keep working on my story to get me out of here. A knock on the door interrupted her train of thought.

Mrs. Bram appeared, carrying a tray laden with food, water and tea. She stepped in, closing the door behind her. She moved to set the tray down and noticed that last night's dinner had hardly been touched.

"You've got to eat, keep up your strength."

"I know, I've no appetite lately. Stomach is all in knots."

"Well, if I may be so bold" Mrs Bram said in a lowered voice, "you'll need your strength. You'll want all of this breakfast."

She set the tray down, then pointed to an apple-sized rock that was placed beside the tea. She touched it, then touched her nose conspiratorially, winked, and was gone.

That was odd. Was she trying to help me? Shall I smash a window with the rock? No, that makes no sense – I'd be caught before I'd gotten ten feet. I'd never even make it to the manor wall. She picked up the stone, hefting it to see how it might throw. Just then the stone vibrated, startling her. She dropped it and stepped back.

"Ow" came from the stone.

Derrick stood up, immediately putting a finger to his lips indicating silence. Dierdre gasped, then reached for a chair to steady herself.

"I'm here to help" he whispered. "I'm like you, not from here. The thing you can do with trees, I can do with stone."

Dierdre considered this.

"Tell me something from your time."

“Don’t jump the turnstiles at the Tubes, they take a dim view of that. Chelsea football club is horrible this year, got levelled by Man U.”

“Ohmygod,” she blurted out, covering her mouth.

“Come to the window. See that man down there? He is our way out.”

“How? Does he have disguises for us... oh, I see. How are we to get down then?”

“Can you transform on the fly, literally?”

“I don’t know, maybe.”

“We can’t take chances. You first then. You’ll transform into a small tree or shrub, perhaps forearm sized. I’ll drop you down to Pennirell, er, the guy down there. Then I’ll transform as I fall out the window. He’ll carry us and inform when we can transform safely back.”

Dierdre nodded slowly. “I can do that.” She hesitated. “I was about to ask how I can trust you, but what are the odds, I mean, you’re from my time.”

“Yeah, and for extra incentive, Pennirell estimates your chance of acquittal at about ten percent. Failing that lands you in the dungeons, and we may not be able to break you out of there.”

“Right,” she said, steeling herself. She became a small oak sapling, about a foot high. Derrick pried a window open and dropped her gently. Once she had been picked up he climbed onto the sill, balancing slightly outward. He was now glad for Pennirell’s seemingly harsh training. He rocked forward, past the point of no return then became the apple-sized rock again. He felt himself hit the earth as a soft thud, then movement.

“Two in the hand and one is a bush” Pennirell muttered, chuckling slightly. He rejoined Mrs. Bram in the kitchen. He gave Derrick the signal to transform back. Mrs. Bram saw them both to the gate. There they made a point of signing out on the registry in front of the guards, ensuring that multiple witnesses saw the healer Fulton and his orderly depart exactly as they had entered.

About a quarter mile down the road Pennirell spoke.

“Young lady it is not safe to become yourself until we reach my study. We should have a couple hours until they check on you for lunch, but we cannot afford to take chances.

[12]

Dierdre peered around Pennirell's study, clearly fascinated.

"I'm famished" she spoke without thinking about how it may come across.

Pennirell smiled, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, er, sorry. Did that come out sounding like an order?" she added sheepishly.

"Not at all. I anticipated as much, realizing you had little chance to enjoy his Lordship's hospitality this morning at breakfast," he added with a subtle grin.

"Yeah what's the story there – serving stones for breakfast! What kind of place is he running?" Derrick chimed in, laughing.

Dierdre laughed so hard her sides hurt, releasing some of the stress that had been accumulating the past week.

"God, it feels good to laugh."

"Breathe deeply now, child, for this is the calm before the storm."

Dierdre was about to ask what he meant, but just then a servant brought in steaming plates of pasta with garlic bread. Food never smelled so good.

"The tomatoes are from my own garden," Pennirell added with a hint of pride.

"Well you're a better gardener than my dad," Dierdre replied. "Even with a fancy greenhouse and drip hydration system he can hardly get anything to grow."

"Drip hydration?" he asked, clearly interested.

“Little plastic tubes, er, bendy tubes with wee holes in them. You route them around and through the plants. Water drips out just where it is needed, with none to waste.

Pennirell clapped his hands, smiling.

“Magnificent! I dearly hope after this ordeal you can teach me more about these bendy tubes and drip hydration.”

For the next week Pennirell trained them intensively. Dierdre lodged at Pennirell's to remain out of sight, whereas Derrick returned to Mrs. Fingle's each night to keep up appearances. Some lessons were enjoyable, most difficult, and a very few were quite dangerous. They both understood the necessity, but fast transforming in order to avoid a hurled knife is just not a fun way to spend a Friday evening. During the days Pennirell would often disappear for a few hours, returning with arcane items or information. He started including them when summoning friendly spirits or forces of nature. Gradually they started to become ready.

[13]

The door opened onto a vast windswept plain. Stones of various sizes dotted the landscape. Dierdre shrugged her cloak tightly about her. The stone door closed silently behind her.

“It will reopen when the time is right” Pennirell had said.

“How would it know? It’s just stone.”

“The spell will react appropriately, much like the forces of weather. Pressure and temperature changes can cause dew to form in the morning. It’s just water, how would it know? Yet it works. The spell reacts to different temperatures and pressures.”

Dierdre knew this, even believed it, but she still shuddered a bit when the door vanished after sealing shut.

Go a minimum of thirty paces east then begin looking for the notched rock. The hardscrabble ground crunched softly with each step. After a few minutes of searching she located it. She touched it with a leafy finger.

Derrick materialized, stretching as he stood up.

“That was fast. I thought you were days behind.”

“I was, er, am. It has been three days since you departed.”

“It felt like a minute or two in that deep state of total stone.”

“Slept like a rock, did you?” She asked with a wry grin.

“I guess so” he replied, shaking his head.

“No watching the kettle then, unless you’re fully you.”

“Right,” he added while staring into the distance, still stunned that he perceived so little time passing after his subterranean journey here courtesy of Mica.

“What’s our heading then?” he asked.

“Where stones may fall or leaves may blow.”

“That’s it?”

“Afraid so.”

They looked around in each direction but saw nothing to match the cryptic description.

“For stones to fall you’d need hills, right? Preferably steep ones,” Derrick offered, pointing to distant peaks.

Dierdre nodded solemnly, fear beginning to show on her face. Those peaks are far. Too far. They started moving.

After several hours of walking they were no closer.

“How on earth are we supposed to get there? Pennirell said to move quickly and carry few supplies.”

“How on earth...” Derrick pondered.

“What if we’re not on earth?”

“Normal rules would not apply.”

“I’ve had the thought before,” she said, “but pushed it aside. It’s too much to think about, the idea that this isn’t earth.”

“Me too. Well, if it’s not our earth, it is still an earth, albeit with different physical laws.”

“That last bit is certainly true” Dierdre said, looking at her hand. Just then a fierce wind blew from behind.

“I have an idea.”

The oak leaf settled at the edge of a large ravine. A small pebble rolled out of a corner that was furled. Derrick and Dierdre stood up, both shaking off the buzzing sensation that accompanied transformations.

“Are we there?” Derrick wondered aloud.

“Look for a path. The cave entrance is in a cliff face, but should have a path.”

“Does this pile of bones constitute a cairn?”

“Are those human?”

Derrick held his forearm next to one of the bones for scale.

“Quite possibly. Very old, from the looks of it.”

The ground rumbled, rising in waves that flowed as through liquid.

“I feel it. Now.” Derrick said urgently.

Dierdre snaked an arm around him and became an oak in seconds, roots penetrating the soil. The wave passed underneath, rocking the tree violently, then receded into the distance.

“Did it detect you?”

“No. That was a seeker meant to destroy my type on contact. You got me off the ground in time.”

“Would that thing have really killed you?”

“I’d be in million tiny bits by now if it had touched me.”

Dierdre nodded, looking around.

“This keeps getting more real,” she added.

“Yeah.”

Just past the cairn a trail descended sharply into the chasm. Barely more than a few inches wide and savagely steep it did not look fit for humans. Loose, sandy rock comprised its surface. Devoid of vegetation there were no hand holds, a slip would mean a certain fall thousands of feet down.

“Can you do it?”

“I think so,” Derrick replied, peering over the edge.

“What if another one of those pulses comes by?”

“We’ll trade roles in hurry.”

Dierdre bit her lip.

Derrick transformed his legs from the knee down into rock with each step, merging with the bedrock beneath the sandy surface. Dierdre walked behind, her hands on his shoulders for support. Walking in this mode required intense focus.

A few hundred feet down they came upon a small ledge. Derrick wanted a break. He breathed a sigh of relief and stepped unaided onto the flat rock. It gave way before he could say a word. Dierdre's hands were still on his shoulders. She moved without thought, glad for Pennirell's seemingly cruel training. She whipped a branch around his waist and dug her roots into the near-vertical wall, becoming a willow. She strained to her limit to arrest his fall, roots scratching for purchase. She felt her entire mass drop a foot before finally catching. Ironically the void left by the shelf provided the opening she needed.

Derrick's scream faded into the distance, the chasm too wide for an echo. Once he stopped swaying he looked up. Dierdre gently swung him next to the rock face. He sank his feet once more into the bedrock.

"Thanks. That was close."

"Sure was. I felt buzzing in the space left by the shelf that fell."

"It was rigged. They know we're here."

A piercing screech filled the air, followed by the approach of a gargantuan raptor. It resembled a cross between a hawk and a peacock, with grey chest coloration and blue-green feathers at its wingtips. Dierdre and Derrick exchange a few quick words then shifted. The creature swooped in, settling on a narrow rock shelf next to a small shrub.

It moved to pluck a berry from the plant, then stopped abruptly. A panicked shriek erupted from its beak when it realized its feet were sinking. It tried to take off but it was too late. The rock had become hard again, entombing the bird's feet.

The top half of the bush became a torso. An angry beak flashed towards her. A stone hand intervened, deflecting the beak harmlessly aside. Derrick's torso emerged from the rock, alongside Dierdre.

"There, on the left leg." Dierdre pointed to a small metal band with a red stone.

Derrick creating a shearing motion with stone hands, neatly snapping the band. The bird began bobbing its head excitedly. Derrick released its feet. It looked intently at both of them, then fell into the chasm and spread its wings.

They both looked at the band with a mixture of dread and grim resignation. Something truly dark is stalking them. Searskin bands are cruel devices that cause intense pain to their bearers. The pain diminishes only when the band is brought near to whatever is sought by the band's maker. Once in close proximity, the poor creature wearing the band will do anything to stay close to the quarry, lest the terrible pain return. The stone mounted on the band is a beacon that calls to the maker, allowing it to be found. Great skill is required to make a searskin band with a beacon stone, as well as great ruthlessness.

Cruelty of this magnitude always has a weakness, though. A band can tell when its host is dead. Makers of such bands assume if you are capable then your response will be to kill the intimidating predator that is hunting you, alerting them to your presence.

An act of kindness is not expected, such as gently removing it without harm to the carrier.

They watched the immense bird glide into the chasm.

“Ok, time for phase two.”

Derrick transformed his legs into slender granite cylinders, reaching far into the bedrock. He began reciting a chant that Pennirell had taught him. He couldn't help feeling a bit silly and dramatic as he voiced the terms, as though he would suddenly be transported home mid-chant and look the fool. This curious desire to juxtapose the fantastic onto the familiar evaporated when the ground started shaking.

“Is that the right one? Not another destroyer wave?” Dierdre asked nervously.

“It's the right one.”

The deep earth plume surfaced next to them.

“Enjoying your visit so far to this region? Mica inquired cheerily.

“Oh yes, lovely land all around here, thanks” Derrick replied courteously. “We have something for you.” He held up the band.

Mica extended a smooth hand-like appendage towards them, accepting the artifact with a curious expression.

“Oh dear, so very well made. Exquisite really. I may keep this one afterwards. Never seen one so perfectly made before. This stone is balanced, utterly. I didn't know your kind were capable of this level of work,” she said with admiration.

Dierdre and Derrick exchanged a worried glance. What exactly are they up against? Did Pennirell underestimate their foe?

“I must be off then to deliver this to the false location,” Mica pronounced, and sank smoothly back into the ground. After a few small rumbles no trace of her visit remained.

“Well, that’s one item sorted” Derrick offered hopefully. “Let’s see what is so special about this cave.”

They marched on as before for a short while longer. Soon they saw the opening, located on a vertical section of the cliff, accessible via a slender ledge perhaps a few inches wide.

“Good thing we can approach while being anchored the whole way. This would be pretty scary otherwise.”

“Umm. Steady on,” Dierdre muttered.

“Oh, not enjoying this much, eh?”

“I’m not particularly afraid of heights, but this just feels wrong. Like the whole illusion could evaporate and we plummet to very ungraceful endings.”

Just then they slid down a few inches.

“Let’s not discuss illusions right now” Derrick suggested.

“Right.”

A few minutes later they stood a few paces inside the entrance. Light filled the passage ahead, its source unknown. They walked slowly, filled with a mixture of caution and awe. The cave was indescribably beautiful. Irridescent colors shimmered in the walls. Surfaces varied from smooth to scalloped to jagged. A cool breeze moved gently past, flowing from somewhere deep within the cave. They walked down several steps

and rounded a corner. They both gasped at the cavernous, vaulted room they saw before them.

In the corner toiled a robed figure. They exchanged a silent glance, then looked back at the hooded person.

“Yes I know you’re there. No point sneaking about” came a female voice. Her words filled the room while remaining quiet, as though spoken from inches away. They conveyed an understated power, thinly veiled.

“We appreciate your treatment of the Steppe Falcon. Those less kind find the going more difficult.”

An image of the bone cairn flashed in both of their minds. Fear filled Derrick, his chest tightening. Then it faded, he felt a sense of being on the same wavelength. He exhaled.

“You knew. You knew that we did that not as an exhibition, but because it’s”

“Who you are. Yes. I see the essence of you.”

Dierdre looked intently at the woman, focusing first on her face, then at point in the distance beyond her. She saw pain, birth, love, creation, death and countless other images swirling in a tight vortex. The view snapped shut. Dierdre blinked, then stepped back a half step as though stunned.

“You’re not human, you’re a force of nature” she spoke with some effort.

Derrick looked at Dierdre, surprised by her statement. He feared angering this being. Her intentions are entirely unknown, and she does not come across as benevolent. Neutral, at best. Dierdre glanced back and shrugged.

“Seems the best approach at this point” she said.

“Indeed. Deceptions will not serve you,” the being said while staring at Derrick.

Feeling an answer was expected, he spoke.

“I’m not suggesting dishonesty. It seems unwise to risk antagonizing you. Your response is impossible to predict.”

“The truth again. It is your only path to survival.”

Derrick looked back at Dierdre, nodding slowly. I guess all we can do is go for broke, he thought. You do not negotiate with a force of nature – you go with the flow or get swept away.

“How shall we address you?”

“You may call me Timena.”

“Thank you, Timena,” Dierdre replied. Sensing an opening, she went on. “The gardener sent us here, but we do not know why. What must we do to learn the next step?”

The hooded figure slowly disappeared, sinking into the floor. The cavern filled with a growling rumble from all directions, giving the both the impression of being inside thunder. The sound had a pressure, urging them farther into the cavern. The flow goes this way, Derrick mused.

“I sense anger” Dierdre said.

“Your being here is an affront. Someone tampered with this reality long ago, disturbing the balance. Help must come from outside periodically to restore it. This is not proper. I detest needing this assistance.”

“We didn’t ask to be here either,” Derrick stated with a steely resolve.

“So it is.”

“I don’t understand. Why do you need us?” Dierdre pressed. “You are vastly more powerful than either of us, what could we possibly do that you cannot?”

“Exist as you do.”

They exchanged nervous glances.

“The imbalance was caused by a very clever mortal. Clever enough to start something, but not clever enough to see its true cost. He was very skilled, like the gardener, perhaps more so. He stole an element in such a way that none of us can restore it. Only the hand of a mortal may help.”

“Stole an element?”

“Ripped it from the very fabric of the world.”

Dierdre whistled. “Wow.”

“You said that help is needed periodically. Can nobody fix it permanently?” Derrick questioned.

A howling shriek filled the cavern, forcing them both to cover their ears.

“Do you think I would tolerate you otherwise? Do you think it has not been tried?” Timena seethed, shaking the ground.

Uh-oh, touched a nerve, Derrick thought.

“What is our part to be?” Dierdre calmly put forth.

Timena spun into a shimmering tornado, enveloping them.

[14]

Dierdre and Derrick found themselves outside his house in Sherborne, in mid afternoon. They looked around but nobody had seen their arrival.

“Oh, here we are. That’s my house. In the other Sherborne, I mean.”

“Nice. I like what you’ve done with the place” Dierdre said with a smirk.

Derrick laughed out loud, realizing how good it felt to be out of Timena’s presence.

“Let’s get back to Pennirell’s, it’s our turn to ask a few questions.”

“Why did you send us to her so uninformed?”

“Foreknowledge leads to a false assumption that one may estimate her reactions, which generally proves to be fatal. Going in fully naïve and innocent is the only way.”

“She knows of you. Why is your name a secret?”

“She also hinted at your skill. You’re sandbagging as a third level, aren’t you?”

“Sand-bagging?” Pennirell asked, amused.

“Holding out. Not letting on. You’re way more powerfull than a third level, aren’t you?”

“Well it had to come out at some point. You’ll need the full picture eventually. Yes, I have been ‘sand-bagging.’ It is necessary, otherwise there are those that would see me harm. A great many know the reputation of the gardener, but few know my name, not even the likes of Timena nor others of her kind. It is not from them that I fear trouble, but rather the keeping of secrets is a rather human endeavour. Timena uses information as she sees fit, one does not negotiate with her very far.”

Dierdre looked at Derrick and rolled her eyes. They both laughed out loud. Pennirel cocked an eyebrow, smiling.

“Yes, she can be quite a handful.”

“Understatement of the year. I get the feeling that if she threw a temper tantrum it would register on the Richter scale,” Dierdre said laughing.

Pennirell looked confused.

“Earthquakes. The ground moves. Terra no firma,” Derrick offered.

“Ah yes. Such a way with words. Terra no firma indeed. Legend has it that all islands were one, aeons ago, and she rent the land into its separate parts.”

“I can believe that” Dierdre said looking away. Something else was bothering her. There is no one else I can appeal to, so I may ask well just ask.

“Before we get into what Timena shared with us, I need to ask something. Why did you find us first? It seems like too lucky a coincidence. What if you are not as you seem?”

“Good. Always question what you see. Trust very little beyond your own heart, and each other. As for me, I can offer this: those who would do harm take their work

far away from the stones, lest they be detected early. Conversely I make a point of living near the stones, with the hope of locating the called. Not all nearby are beneficent, however. Sometimes they will post a sentry, to eliminate the called upon arrival. This tactic is risky and easily detected, still we must be vigilant. If I were of either type we would not be having this conversation. I would have either removed you myself, or set you up to die at the hands of one like Timena. I could have sent you to challenge her, claiming her a threat to be destroyed. I have done none of these – and before you say it I could still be nefarious, but this is the best I have.

“Ok. She said the coils are moving again.”

Pennirell looked stunned. Up until now he had all the answers, neither Dierdre nor Derrick had ever seen him look anything other than composed. Presently he reeled at the news, chilling the atmosphere in the room immediately.

“Oh dear. This is uncharted territory,” he offered quietly.

“The coils are the stuff of legends, very few believe them to be real. However Timena is not possessed of the ability to lie in direct statements like that. We have work to do.”

[15]

The legend of the coils is far older than that of the stones. Most believe do not believe either is real, considering them fairy tales. Pennirell and a handful of others understand the reality of the stones, but even this rarified audience does not put much stock in the coils. The legends and stories that have survived are too grandiose, too fantastic to be taken seriously. Reality, however, asks for neither permission nor approval from those appraising it.

Further, understanding that the stones are real is a far cry from understanding their nature. Only two people alive can claim to know anything about the truth of the stones, and one of them is shrieking mad.

Pennirell, Dierdre and Derrick sat around the central table in the study, focused on a large, leather-bound book. Its pages were filled with ornate script and illustrations that looked like gods playing with fire.

“This is considered the best telling of the Legend of the Coils,” Pennirell said as he gestured to the open book. “Until now I dismissed it as fancy. It speaks of the very

universe itself being rent asunder, then fragments and strips thereof being woven into an incomprehensibly thick rope. As a child when I first read this I pictured a god-sized version of the thick hemp ropes I would see on large sailing vessels.”

“Its essence woven therein,” Derrick muttered aloud, looking at the script.

“You speak Latin?”

“I can read it, at least. Fringe benefit of medical school. Not sure about my conversation skills.”

“That is good. I should have queried earlier about the rest of your skills.” He turned to face Dierdre.

“What other talents do you harbor?”

She brushed a wavy length of hair from her face and looked up.

“I study engineering at university. I’m good with mechanical systems. A bit of a runner, too, if that’s useful.”

“It is. At some point our combined skills will all be put to the test. Now back to the legend – it goes on to describe a twisting of the coils. Imagine a short length of thick rope secured at both ends, then twisted in opposite directions,” he said while gesturing with his hands. “You can build up tremendous pressure in the strands, so much so that they begin to tear. Recall the strands are made of the very material of reality itself.”

“That sounds bad,” Dierdre thought aloud.

“To put it mildly. The book shows all sorts of awful stuff streaming in through the rifts,” Derrick observed.

“Rift, that is a good term for the phenomenon. You have a dedicated word for this, do you have experience with them in your world?” Pennirell asked hopefully.

“No, they are the realm of science fiction, or at best speculation,” Dierdre replied.

Derrick raised an eyebrow at the latter part of her statement.

“People speculate the center of a black hole could cause a rift due to its immense gravity. But nobody knows since we cannot observe their inner workings directly.”

“If this is real then whoever controls the coils could wreak havoc. A month ago I’d have told you that beings moving through rifts is utter nonsense, but now,” Derrick said while motioning around him, “here we are.”

“Wouldn’t the stones necessarily have some of the same material in them?” Dierdre wondered. “It was a short-lived rift, perhaps, but you’d need a gateway of some sort or we wouldn’t be here.”

Pennirell sat back and pondered this. Until now he had never considered the stones as being related to anything else. The stones themselves are all but impossible to find, so direct study is not a course of action anyone pursues. Given that so few are even aware of their existence, there is more than enough work simply dealing with their impacts. Pennirell and his cohorts have had their hands full, but they were able to manage despite an in-depth understanding. No longer will this be enough.

“Your logic seems inescapable,” he said while absent-mindedly stroking his silvery goatee, “and I believe leads us to our next step. There is one who sought to unlock the secrets of the stones. She claims to have found one, and even touched its very essence. She lost her right hand for her troubles, seared off at the wrist.”

They both winced at the thought.

“She lost more than that. Her name is Gwendolyn, she was once one of the most skilled and powerful in our order. Now she is cared for by others, and referred to as the Lady of the Fractured Mind.”

“That sounds dark,” Dierdre considered.

“I fear she may make your visit with Timena seem pleasant by way of comparison.”

The two of them looked at each other, then back to Pennirell. The slid farther back in their seats, their look indicating they would prefer to sit this one out.

“Hmm. Understandable. We must all three be there. Each of us will see and hear something different. We will have to put our experiences together if we hope to make sense of it.

[16]

Dierdre, Derrick and Pennirell set out early the next day for the coast. Gwendolyn's abode is on small island a few miles off shore, to dissuade casual contact from curious neighbors. Nobody knows how much knowledge she retains from her experiences, but a healthy fear exists that in the wrong hands she could be dangerous. Measures have been taken to ensure she cannot leave the island at will.

Pennirell helped Dierdre alter her face enough to avoid detection. Lord Dubuque's men were everywhere searching for her, now convinced she is a spy. The three of them travelled under the guise of spice merchants en route to port. They passed several checkpoints with no troubles, arriving at the seaside town of Morgansea around mid-day. A familiar silhouette made Dierdre's heart skip a beat.

"That's Hav," she said.

"Remain calm, he won't recognize you," Pennirell assured her.

As they got closer Hav showed no signs of recognition, bolstering her hope. Just then a giant shape burst forth from the shadows and stood in her path. Mr. Woogins pawed the ground excitedly, then flopped over for a tummy rub. Dierdre was mortified.

Oh no he recognizes my scent! Is it safe to talk? Will my voice give me away? I cannot ignore him, though, I do not know how he will react.

“Such a lovely hound,” said in as gruff a voice as she could muster. She bent down to scratch his tummy. Mr. Woogins was ecstatic.

Hav looked on with more than mild curiosity. His champion hunting hound does not do this for just anyone.

“Good lady, do I know you”, Hav asked. Their dress as merchants afforded them polite greetings. Dierdre’s instincts told her to embrace the role and engage, rather than attempt to shy away.

“I have not had the pleasure of meeting you. By your appearances may I assume you are Haversham the third?”

“Indeed. And you would be?”

“Gwynneth, here with my father and brother, seeking trade at the port,” she replied while continuing to lavish affection on Mr. Woogins. Something told her to keep befriending the hound.

Hav seemed somewhat skeptical, but he had a hard time sensing danger with such a happy dog. Something feels pleasant about this group, there are no spies here.

“Thank you, Lady Gwynneth, carry on with your business.”

“Thank you, Lord Haversham.”

A few streets later Pennirell breathed a sigh of relief.

“I had no idea you’d befriended his hound. We did not disguise your scent.”

“Can you disguise a scent against a hound of that caliber,” Derrick asked.

“No, not as yourself. Only a full transformation can accomplish that. Ho – you do seem to have a way with the animal though – to see the great beast roll over for you was quite a sight!” he said, clearly amused.

“Hav knew, at first,” Pennirell continued, his tone serious. “I sensed some compassion in him, and a conflict. Rather than await his decision I gently influenced the situation, spreading calm and a mild forgetting.”

“He knew? You could tell?” Dierdre gasped.

“Your voice was convincing, but I believe he saw through it. I sensed strong emotion.”

“Are you saying he likes her?” Derrick asked, giving Dierdre a playful bat on the arm. Dierdre blushed.

“Ehm, yes. He may harbor feelings.”

Once at the docks Pennirell shifted into high gear, quickening his pace.

“Do not tarry. We wish to minimize our presence here.”

He led them past the major docks with their tall ships, navigating expertly past trolleys, crates and swinging cranes. Dierdre and Derrick had to hustle to keep up. Eventually they arrived at a small dock with a single boat tied on. The boat was perhaps twenty feet long, an open deck plan with a single mast and a large steering rudder at the stern.

Stairs led up the hillside away from the water. A small stone house stood at the top, neatly tucked into the hillside. They stopped at the top step as Pennirell knocked. A cloaked figure cracked the door.

“None may transit to the aisle. Access is not...” his voice trailed off after recognizing Pennirell’s face.

“None are expected,” he said after a pause.

“Circumstances change, master boatman. I trust you are well?”

The boatman fidgeted, then turned away, opening the door farther. Pennirell entered and motioned them to follow. The interior was sparse but well-maintained. A small bird squawked in a wood-and-wicker cage in one corner.

“We need immediate passage, I’m afraid. We can pay the premium.”

The boatman eyed the three of them, clearly dressed and ready for travel, then exhaled.

“Returning no sooner than three days hence.”

“We cannot afford to stay that long.”

“Storm says otherwise,” he said, motioning to the sea.

They all turned to look out the window. The sky grew progressively darker towards the horizon. Pennirell’s expression hardened into one of grim resignation.

“I trust your judgment. Please arrange to collect us as soon as you deem it safe.”

“Aye. We leave at once.”

The boatman set sail into a growing wind. The open-decked craft offered little protection from the elements, forcing them to hunker down facing the stern. Derrick placed his pack between his knees to fish out some food.

“Ugh. You still have an appetite in these swells?” Dierdre looked on, a little queasy. Pennirell chuckled, taking a bite of some jerky.

“You seem right at home,” Derrick noted, “both here and on the docks. You navigated all that equipment like a native.”

“I grew up not far from here. I still fancy a sail now and then.” He turned to face the boatman. “You should be home in no time after delivering us.”

“Aye. Likely home in a quarter of the time, as compared to this leg.”

Just then Dierdre shrieked, dropping her head into her hands.

“What is it?” Derrick dropped his pack and slid next to her, placing his arm around her shoulder.

“Flashes of light. Lightning. A tree. Weird images in my mind.”

“You are already sensing her,” the boatman said evenly.

“Yes,” Pennirell agreed, “it is not common but some are more receptive. Have you seen it this soon before?”

“No.”

Dierdre screamed again, bending farther forward.

“Do not fight it. Resisting will only injure you. Let it flow past you.”

Dierdre exhaled, trying to relax her body.

“If you can, record what you see,” Pennirell requested, taking out paper and a quill. “Every detail may prove to be important.”

“Sure. It will be good to occupy my mind, better than nervously awaiting the next bolt,” she said reaching for the paper.

“Will it be stronger on the island?” Derrick asked while she wrote. Pennirell nodded.

They arrived after another quarter hour without further incident. The boatman tied off at simple stone dock and extended a gang plank. After they climbed ashore he shoved off with a nod to Pennirell and was away.

[17]

Dierdre looked around warily, anticipating the next shock. Pennirell walked up beside her and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. With his other hand he gestured to a well-worn path.

They walked quietly to the modest-sized manor in the center of the small island. The island itself is about a mile long and perhaps half as wide, with a small rise in the center surrounded by trees.

A hooded figure greeted them just outside the front door. The robe bore a small insignia that Derrick recognized from Pennirell's study.

"A surprise, Master Pennirell, as none are expected," came a female voice.

"Indeed, my good Master Wentworth. Recent developments have brought us here urgently."

"She is agitated by your arrival. Who have you brought?" She turned to look at Dierdre and Derrick.

"My assistants, Mr. Keane and Ms. Cunningham," he replied, offering the minimum about them.

"They are... different," she spoke with closed eyes.

“I am not at liberty to disclose more.”

Dierdre sensed that she was being probed. She slammed her mind shut, the way she had felt Timena do to her. Wentworth abruptly opened her eyes.

“None may enter whose intentions are veiled.”

Pennirell weighed his options. Despite Wentworth being from the same order, he is unsure if he can trust her with the true details. He would likely prevail if force were employed, but that would burn a bridge he may one day need. The coils cannot be mentioned, the result would either be loss of credibility or would tip their hand.

“We come for information about the stones. We have evidence that one has been active recently.”

Wentworth raised an eyebrow.

“I have heard no such reports.”

“Now you have. If you please, time is short.”

Wentworth considered this new input, looking away for a moment.

“If my manner seems off-putting, please realize that the lady is not well. We are restricting visits. You should have known this.”

“Indeed I do. Going through proper channels would have cost us weeks that we do not have. Please trust that our urgency justifies this irregularity.”

“Very well. Prepare for audience within the hour.” She strode off.

When Wentworth was out of earshot Derrick looked to Pennirell.

“Prepare? Does she think we are not up for the task?”

“No, you are ready. For this encounter you will need to clear your minds of all but that which we seek, lest it cause confusion.”

“Can she read minds?” Dierdre put forth with some concern.

“No. None can, not in the true sense. But she will interact with your mind, as you have already experienced. With focus we can guide the interactions to be useful, informative.”

“And if we lose focus all we get is a sea of noise, useless chatter. Is that right?”

“At best, yes, the meeting yields nothing useful. If we stray too far afield and anger her, recall that she is still one of my order, and likely still very powerful, thus dangerous.”

They both considered this solemnly.

“So we focus on the stones then, or the coils?” Derrick posed.

“No, the essence they share,” Dierdre returned.

They both looked at her, Pennirell nodding. She looked back at Derrick with a shrug of the shoulders.

“It just came to me.”

“Once we broach the topic, I will ask if she knows how to stop someone who is already manipulating this material, working it for ill gains. This is the crux, the very key we need.”

A servant dressed in livery appeared. He led them through an elegant foyer, into a sitting room with a tall ceiling. Dark wood and wainscot lined the walls. At the far end a set of large glass-paned doors let in fading afternoon light.

The servant gestured for them to sit, then walked to the wall opposite them. He stopped beside a tall door, perhaps nine feet tall. A semi-circular window of stained glass sat above the door, occasionally letting light through. Dierdre perceived a small flash originating in the room beyond. She winced.

“Remember to relax. You must not fight her energy.”

“Can we go through the game plan again?” requested Derrick a little nervously.

“Visualize a substance joining the stones and the coils. Make it real, like black cloth or rays of sunlight, something you have experienced. Focus on this material. Hold it steadfast in your mind. This will guide our inquiry.”

“I will speak aloud,” he went on. “Do not offer your voice unless she asks you a direct question.”

“And we take notes outside, afterwards,” Dierdre confirmed. Pennirell nodded. Derrick fidgeted with his fingers, still unsure.

“What about eye contact?”

“Avoid it unless you feel it necessary. You will know if the time comes for it. The same applies to transforming. Let us begin preparing now.”

As they sat in quiet contemplation the storm outside drew closer. Wind began howling around the manor, gusts shaking the trees violently. The occasional branch

scraped against a window pane. Distant flashes farther out to sea served notice that more is to come.

A short time later the servant moved, a slight bowing of the head, appearing to listen to someone unseen. A moment later he reached for a graceful rope that disappears into the ceiling, pulling once. A low, deep ringing filled the room. He opened the door, stepping aside as it swung open.

The three of them enter slowly, led by Pennirell, their gazes downcast. The room shares the same tall ceiling as the sitting room, but is more opulent. Its polished green marble floor shines with each flash of lightning. Elaborate furniture lines the walls. At the far end a chair sits, throne-like, carved from enormous blocks of wood.

Gwendolyn watched them enter, perched regally upon the massive chair. She wore a gown of deep green brocade and velvet, once spectacular but now fraying at the edges. Her graying hair shot up in every conceivable direction. Her eyes looked wild, untamed, as though moments before she had been an animal and now did not quite know what to make of this new form.

“Greetings, Gwendolyn,” Pennirell spoke in a calm voice. Deirdre noticed him exuding warmth with his words, much like she felt during their recent encounter with Hav.

She turned to face him and seemed to speak, but a low rasping noise was all that emerged. She nodded her head slightly, acknowledging his presence.

“We do not disturb your solitude lightly. A matter of great urgency drives this meeting.”

Gwendolyn’s gaze drifted away as he spoke. Her hair slowly swayed above her head, driven by unseen currents.

“Why should I care about your troubles?”

“The troubles are not mine alone. Forces are at work that could bend us all to their will. Your solitude may one day be replaced with servitude. We seek to prevent that.”

Greatly agitated, she leapt to her feet and stood upon the great chair, towering above them.

“You dare threaten me?”

She screamed. The air in the room buzzed with building energy. Dierdre forced an exhale, visibly scared. Pennirell straightened his back, standing fully upright to face her. Derrick remained detached, his feet already merging with the stone floor.

“It is not I that threatens, good Lady Gwendolyn. It is one who works the coils, even as we speak.”

She snapped her focus back to Pennirell.

“Lies! You serve only to torment me!”

She unleashed a torrent of white hot energy at them. Pennirell raised a shield to divert the flow around them, but could not hold it wide enough. Gwendolyn’s power was greater than he anticipated. Searing heat flashed around him, then went quiet. His heart sank as he lowered his shield spell and turned to look at his companions.

A wall of polished marble blocked his view. The wall slowly withdrew, returning to the form of Derrick. Behind him stood a small oak, unharmed. Dierdre's face returned, the rest of her quickly following.

"Oh dear God thank you," he exhaled quietly, then turned to face Gwendolyn. The room filled with energy more intensely than before, causing the air to crackle around Pennirell. He was about to act when Gwendolyn spoke.

"The called. You brought the called before me." Her connection to the stones was strengthened when they transformed, finally breaking through the noise in her mind.

"Indeed. Let this be testimony that we come in earnest," he looked directly at her, letting some of his gathered energy dissipate. "We must learn more about that which binds to the coils. You possess hard-won knowledge, ensure its cost was not in vain. Help us."

Gwendolyn was moved by their presence. Dierdre could feel the tone of the encounter changing. She dared to look up. Momentarily she sensed compassion amidst the tempest, then just as quickly it was gone. Fragments of the original Gwendolyn are still in there. Dierdre felt herself smile, knowing that she would feel it.

Images began to flood Dierdre's mind, like shards from a kaleidoscope. Pictures awash with emotions, smells and tastes came in a deluge. The intensity built to a point that she thought she might break. She felt her feet become roots. She held.

Derrick stood motionless, his feet still planted in the marble floor. Pennirell had crouched down on one knee, his hands held outward, palms-up, gathering.

[18]

Two hours later they emerged from Gwendolyn's chamber, exhausted. Daylight now fully departed, the room was lit by lamps and lightning, the latter with increasing regularity. Despite their collective desire for sleep they each sank into a chair and immediately began writing. Now alone in their thoughts, the wind and the rain were their companions as they scoured their memories.

After about an hour Derrick looked up, stretching his neck and back. A bolt of lightning hit nearby, rattling the windows.

"I keep waiting for the lights to flicker," he said smiling.

Dierdre burst out laughing.

"Me too, although I couldn't put my finger on it until you said it just now."

"But there is no wind in here," Pennirell interjected, confused.

They both laughed and looked at each other, as if to ask 'Are you going to take this one?'

"It's late, and it would take forever," Derrick offered.

"Wait, I think I can get close to the idea quickly. Remember back in the room when the air crackled around you? There is a way to send that energy through metal. We send it into houses to make light. The generators are affected by lightning, so lights often flicker during storms."

Pennirell sat dumbfounded for the better part of a minute.

“I have never seen work a spell on that scale. Where are you from? Are you, ehm, ‘sandbagging’ on me now?”

This brought another round of laughter. Dierdre stood up and kicked off her shoes. She walked over to Pennirell dragging her feet on the carpet, then shocked him with one finger.

“Our generators are just big versions of my socks. No spells at all.”

“First bendy tubes, now sock energy. You bring strange gifts my young friend,” he laughed as he spoke.

Lightning rattled the windows again.

“I hope our quarters are in this buidling,” Derrick mused, looking out the window. Leaves and the occasional small branch could be seen on the wind.

Just then the servant walked over.

“Our guest quarters are being repaired, as none were expected for the next two weeks.”

“Is this room our only option?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Not to worry, we shall be fine. Do you have sufficient provisions for breakfast?”

“On that account we are in good stead, so you are in luck.”

“Splendid. We can return some luck as well, for we have a master dishwasher among us,” Pennirell joked, looking at Derrick.

Derrick put his face in his palm and shook his head and giggled, unable to feign indignance.

[19]

The beacon stone sat beside a small brook on a rock outcropping, deposited there by Mica some days earlier. A gaunt, wolf-like dog sniffed it, sat on its haunches and howled once. A figure rode on horseback nearby. Hearing the call, he turned to join the hunter. The rider wore a cloak that could not be seen directly. One could only infer its presence by noticing what was absent.

The rider dismounted, his feet making no sound when he hit the ground. He bent down to inspect the beacon stone, still attached to the searskin bracelet. He growled, then swore loudly enough to startle the beasts. He collected the bracelet and stone in a leather pouch, then climbed back onto the horse. They departed in silence.

[20]

None of them slept well that night. The storm's onslaught continued unabated, rattling the manor straight through to the next day. Their proximity to Gwendolyn compounded matters, leaving Dierdre a wreck by morning.

Mercifully the gale ended by mid-day, earlier than predicted by the boatman. When he pulled up a couple hours later they were already on the dock waiting. Dierdre fell asleep on one of the bench seats before they had shoved off.

Once back ashore in Morgansea they walked quietly through the town, remaining unnoticed. A mile or so outside its gates Pennirell broke the silence.

"Let us begin to discuss what we saw."

By the time they reached his study a few themes had emerged. The picture was by no means clear, but enough details surfaced for them to plot a few more steps.

The next day they began before dawn. Pennirell packed for a journey of several days, alone. Dierdre and Derrick were to stay behind and try to make contact with Hav. The prospect of working on their own left them uneasy.

“Remember to work as a team. Your skills are complementary. I have full confidence that you can either convince him to help our cause, or safely remove yourselves from the situation.”

Derrick let out a long exhale, looking around for something to double check. Pennirell gave him a reassuring smile.

“You have met Timena and Gwendolyn thus far. A visit with Hav should be more pleasant than either of those.”

“It’s Lord Dubuque’s men I fear,” Dierdre spoke.

“Me too.”

“Ensure he comes alone, or at least with none other than his hound. The inn should provide ample view to watch for others. Reveal your true identities only to him, when you feel the time is right.”

They remained unconvinced. Dierdre nervously twirled a lock of hair while Derrick fidgeted with a strap on his pack. Pennirell sighed, dropping to one knee to address them.

“I must make this journey alone. The person I seek does not tolerate unexpected guests. It will take all of my skill to negotiate the situation. I will not have power to spare to protect others, for he is more powerful than Gwendolyn. Further, my presence will not help convince Hav. His father deeply distrusts all orders like mine.”

Pennirell stood.

“Ah, it is time. I must be off. Good luck.”

He turned left out the front door, heading north towards the mountains.

[21]

Derrick and Dierdre set to work straight away, fearing they might lose their nerve if they dared to procrastinate. They altered their appearances, shouldered their packs and set out for Lord Dubuque's manor.

The plan was simple enough – throw a note tied to a stone over the wall to Mrs. Bram, who could then discreetly deliver it to Hav.

By mid-afternoon it was becoming apparent that this approach might not work. The section of wall closest to Mrs. Bram's office stood atop a steep embankment that leads down to a sizeable stream. The only good footing is several feet below the base of the wall, requiring a good ten feet of elevation to see over the six foot wall. Fortunately the area is wooded, providing good cover, and the stream masks noises, affording them some leeway for trial and error.

They wrestled with the wall all morning, Dierdre as a small tree with Derrick perched atop, partially transformed to hide his shape. By the time they had maneuvered enough to get a steady look they realized the bigger issue: Mrs. Bram is nearly impossible to spot. As head of the kitchens she is busy – they were expecting as much, but she takes this to a completely different level.

"She might as well be a ghost," Derrick muttered.

“Maybe that’s her secret. Can a ghost be in two places at once? Would be a good way to keep track of all that activity,” Dierdre joked.

“Can you imagine that back home? Welcome to the next episode of Ghost Chef, let’s meet our contestants! Mrs. Pim was run down by a trolley in Pembrokeshire, and Mr. Flanders lost his head.” Derrick tried to laugh quietly.

Dierdre spoke in a high, squeaky voice.

“For my dish I shall prepare a lovely poultrygeist, with spectral scallions followed by dead pudding.”

She giggled so hard the tree shook. Derrick fought to hold back a snort.

“I’d say my sides hurt but I don’t have any right now.”

“Stop it, I might drop you.”

Just then a guard noticed a small tree swaying, despite the lack of wind. He walked over along the inside of the wall, and stopped to peer over. Everything seemed ordinary at first, yet a lingering doubt troubled him. He stood staring for another minute when it dawned on him. No trees are permitted to grow this close to the wall, by order of security.

“How did you get so tall?” He wondered aloud. “Daily perimeter walks would have spotted you years ago. Right then, time to fetch the gardener.”

He strode away towards the sheds in the rear of the manor. Once he was out of sight they changed back and quietly departed down the embankment and made their way along the stream back to the road.

“Time to make a Plan B,” Dierdre observed.

“I’ll say. That could have gone better. Part of me says we really botched that, but I don’t think it was going to work anyway.”

“Same here. I think the market is our next best chance. We might catch her shopping. Actually no, that feels like the wrong goal, but the market still feels right.”

“I’m getting the same vibe.”

They arrived at the market about four o’clock, past the mid-day peak, but most stalls were still doing a brisk trade. They wandered up and down the various aisles, pretending to be shopping for herbs and vegetables. Occasionally they would pass a pair of Lord Dubuque’s men, identifiable by their livery, but they were not recognized.

After an hour of looking they agreed time was running out on this option, and soon they would have to leave to get back to Pennirell’s before nightfall. They decided to have a cup of tea with biscuits at an open-air stall at one end of the market, overlooking the town square.

“Not bad,” Derrick assessed. “Not quite an Earl Grey, but not far off.”

“Do you suppose they have bergamot here – oh! Just there! That’s his horse. Behind you, at your seven o’clock.

Derrick turned nonchalantly around to his left.

“The tall one, fancy saddle with the teal trim? Are you sure?”

“Totally, that’s the saddle he captured me on.”

“Ok. What’s the play?”

“Direct. We walk by and put the note straight onto the saddle.”

“Won’t the rock roll off?”

Dierdre balanced the rock in her hand.

“Yes, too round. I’ve another idea. Follow me, and be ready to grab me if Woogie shows up.”

She rubbed the rock around her neck and face, and discreetly coughed on it. They walked up to the side of the horse facing away from the sidewalk. Dierdre slipped the rock and note into Hav’s saddle bag, and kept walking.

They stopped at a store across the street to watch. A few minutes later a small entourage emerged from one of the garment shops, with Hav at the center. Servants doted on him while the security detachment cleared a path. Hav strode up to his horse, unhitched and climbed into the saddle. After a few quick words, he and two security men rode away.

Dierdre and Derrick began walking the route back to Pennirell’s.

“Everything happened so fast there. Did that go to plan?” Derrick asked.

“Yes. Let’s get back first. I’d rather not discuss this openly,” she replied, looking warily around.

Hav and the security men arrived at the manor gate just before dark. The gates swung open on cue, admitting the still-moving riders. They parted ways once inside, as Hav’s personal stables are separate from the rest of the working animals. Mr. Woogins ran out to greet him, then stopped. Instead of his customary greeting he pawed the ground anxiously. Intrigued, Hav brought the horse to a stop and dismounted.

“What’s going on, eh Woogie?”

Mr. Woogins poked the saddle bag with his nose and whimpered.

Hav furrowed his brow, then opened the leather bag. He found the rock and the note. Mr. Woogins pressed his muzzle in between Hav’s hands to get a closer scent, then yipped with excitement. Hav brought the note to a nearby lamp and opened it.

Lord Hav,

I hope this note finds you well. I regret leaving your manor in haste, all the more so because I am here in service to your realm. To that end I have come to ask for your help. Please meet me at the Sheridan Inn at nine o’clock in the morning. All will be explained. Please come alone.

Kindly,

Dierdre

p.s. Mr. Woogins is of course welcome too.

[22]

Dierdre and Derrick arrived early at the Sheridan Inn to learn its layout. They noted all the doors, hallways, stairs and windows in case they needed to make a quick exit. They found a table with visibility of the street and direct access to the kitchen door, and sat down.

A servant approached them, and upon recognizing their attire as that of merchants, greeted them warmly.

“Good morning, Sir and Lady. Do you require provisions?”

“Yes, thank you,” replied Dierdre. “May we both have tea and bread?”

“Of course.” He gave a slight bow and departed.

“Do you think he’ll show?” Derrick whispered, anxious.

“I do. This is sufficiently ‘irregular’ that he will feel compelled to investigate. The question is will he bring guards or come alone?”

They did not have to wait long. A few minutes before nine o’clock two riders approach, accompanied by a large dog. They hitched the horses then spoke briefly on the sidewalk. The guard entered first, surveying the room for threats. Seeing none he proceeded to a table at the far side of the room, and sat with his back to the wall. Hav strode in after, exchanged glances with his man, then came over to their table.

Derrick looked at Hav, then at the guard, and back to Hav with a questioning look.

“This is as alone as it gets with me,” he spoke quietly.

Derrick looked to Dierdre for agreement. She nodded. Derrick offered Hav a chair. Dierdre shifted so that her back faced the guard.

“Greetings, Lord Haversham. I trust you are well. I am Derrick.”

“Dierdre let her appearance return to her own.”

“And I believe you know me,” she spoke softly enough that her words would not carry, but not so softly as to arouse suspicion.

Hav drew a sharp breath.

“I took measures so that only you can recognize me. If you decline our request for help, then we may part amicably and your man will think nothing untoward.”

“I see you are clever, but this subterfuge does not help your case against being a spy.”

“The stones brought us here,” Derrick said matter-of-factly. “For a purpose we are still uncovering.

“The Nowhere Stones?” Hav asked, incredulous. He let out a short laugh.

“Curious, why do you call them that?”

“Because they are nowhere to be found. They don’t exist. I see I was mistaken –“

“Leaf and Clay,” Derrick interrupted. “Are you familiar with the legend?”

“Of course, every child is.”

Derrick quietly enclosed Hav's wrist in a stone manacle, careful to keep it out of sight of the guard. Hav's eyes grew wide. He tried to move his hand but Derrick had rooted himself to the stone floor. Derrick quickly released him.

"You are in no danger from us, I assure you."

Hav turned to Dierdre, his expression intense. She smiled and closed her eyes. Roots silently bound his feet to the chair legs. Hav again tested the strength of the bond, but could no more have moved an oak tree. She released him.

Hav sat thunderstruck, trying to process this very unexpected input. His thoughts quickly drew to their first meeting.

"You could have easily overpowered me when I apprehended you."

Dierdre nodded.

"Why didn't you?"

"I can do you no harm, your Lordship. It never crossed my mind. I considered escape," she made a gesture of a skinny limb removing itself from a binding. "But then what? Once free of the bonds I could not outrun you and Woogie. So I chose to trust you."

"And risk my father's dungeon."

"Yes. Better a risk to myself than to harm one who is innocent." She smiled kindly.

Hav sat back, his hand on his chin.

"And as you have both demonstrated, you could cause me harm even now, before my man could stand up, let alone close the distance and render aid," he thought aloud.

The server returned with the tea and bread. He turned to have, breaking his reverie.

“Does your lordship require anything?”

“Yes, please, the same as my guests.”

The server bowed deeply then disappeared into the kitchens.

“This still feels like fakery, yet you have shown me clear proof. Let us say I believe you, for the moment. What do you ask of me?”

Derrick spoke up.

“We will be departing soon, to deal with the looming threat to this realm. The very same threat that triggered the stones to bring us here. We need your help. We need you to join us.”

The very idea stunned Hav. He shook his head.

“This is most irregular.”

Dierdre smirked at Derrick. Hav raised an eyebrow.

“Told you,” she laughed towards Derrick, then turned to face Hav. “Everything about this is irregular. Neither of us is from here. We come from a different time and place. We don’t have Leaf and Clay back at our home. We have been getting accustomed to this for but a few weeks now. This is a lot to accept at once. You need not decide now, however time is short. If you will not help us we must find another, likely within the week.”

“Even if I wanted to, one such as myself does not simply pack up and leave. The consequences would be disastrous.”

“Consider in the balance that the consequences of inaction are far larger,” Derrick said coolly. “Have you heard of a searskin bracelet?” he asked quietly.

Hav sat stock still, moving only his eyes to meet Derrick’s.

“Possession of one is punishable by death on the spot.”

“We were tracked by a steppe falcon wearing one, fitted with a beacon stone. We managed to free it, and send the bracelet another direction. Forces are at work.”

“When was this?”

“A week and a half ago.”

“If this is true, then matters are serious. However I cannot join any brigade in secret, that would be viewed as foresaking my duty, which I cannot abide. This must occur with my father’s full knowledge, or not at all.”

“Your father distrusts powers such as ours. Futher, he is utterly convinced I am a spy. Does that option hold any hope of success?”

“I do not know. I must consider this. Let us meet here again in three days.”

“Agreed, Friday at nine o’clock.”

[23]

Pennirell travelled north for the better part of a day before reaching his first waypoint. He left the main road and took a small footpath into a small glen. Dim light trickled through the dense canopy of trees surrounding the depression in the land. A brook tumbled through the middle, disappearing under a thicket. Two paths crossed in the clearing, one marked with a standing stone. Pennirell gazed at it, running his fingers along the inscriptions. He smiled, having been here many times before.

“No time for reminiscing now. Straight to it.”

He lowered his head and placed his hands together. He focused his mind, spoke three short words, then promptly vanished. Moments later he faced a hardscrabble hillside, scarred by years of mining. He walked up to a gravelly path, stained ruddy brown by traces of iron ore. He gathered energy into his staff as a precaution, then continued his journey north. The windswept landscape bore few trees. He walked quickly, hoping to avoid encountering anyone. He placed a blurring spell on his cloak to confuse observers, rendering him difficult to see or hear. The spell also dampened external sounds, but on balance this is a risk worth taking. Two hours passed without incident.

The next waypoint would not be as simple. A local market had sprung up in the low area surrounding the waypoint, as a means to escape the wind that funnelled down the valley. Despite its small size, the market was dense with merchants hawking their wares on tables, blankets, or straight off the backs of their pack animals. Trade was slowing in the waning hours of daylight, but the area still buzzed with activity.

Pennirell weighed his options as he approached. Using the waypoint now would require a diversion, a measure that always carries an element of risk. Waiting for full darkness and for people to go to sleep would cost him about six hours, and carried other risks.

He released the blurring spell before encountering anyone. He walked to the center of the market, observing passers-by as he went. The waypoint itself was in a clearing, perhaps twenty feet across. People instinctively walked around it. Perhaps a few had seen someone arrive there and knew to avoid it. Two thugs sat off to one side, in clear view of the waypoint and most of the market. They looked like the sort that hired themselves out as security by day, and if you paid them enough they might not steal from you at night.

Time was running out, with no good options for gaining access to the waypoint. Pennirell decided on a one-time disguise that will likely never be used again. He scouted the crowd for targets, selecting one after a couple minutes.

An elderly woman swept the pathways, clearing them of trash. She was working her way towards the center of the market. Pennirell gently bumped into her, then adopted her appearance. He cast a strong blurring spell around her, rendering her

nearly invisible. He walked a few paces ahead of her, making sweeping motions. As they approached the clearing the thugs paid the old lady no attention. Pennirell walked atop the waypoint, spoke three words and vanished. His last move before departing was to lift the blurring spell.

The elderly sweeper seemed to jumped a couple feet back. One of the thugs blinked, rubbed his eyes, then looked to his partner for a reaction. Seeing none, he resumed watching the crowd.

A short distance away a hooded figure smiled. He wore a cloak that could not be seen directly. He turned on his heel and quietly departed.

Pennirell arrived atop a rocky hill, a shield spell raised. He crouched and turned in a circle, looking for threats. He detected none. He departed quickly, masking his steps once more with a blurring spell. He descended the hill into a valley containing a small river dotted here and there with patches of trees along its banks. He moved silently upriver, passing several small settlements unnoticed. The valley narrowed, leading to an imposing rock formation that gave the appearance of an ancient gate. The river occupied most of the area between the two rock walls, confining the road to a narrow footpath along the left bank.

Pennirell paused before the natural barrier. He gently reached forward with his staff, stopping its tip just before the leading edge of the sheer wall. He spoke a short phrase, causing the air around the staff to crackle. He moved the staff another inch forward, then the air shimmered, outlining a wall of energy spanning the distance

between the two sides. He stepped back a few paces and sat down. A couple minutes later the wall revealed the glowing outline of a door. Pennirell approached and placed his right hand as though on the surface of a physical door, then stepped through.

About a mile up the narrow valley he reach a stone dwelling that abutted the rock wall on the left. He paused outside the door.

“Greetings Jurnigan, I hope you are well.”

A massive, bearded man appeared in the door, clad in working clothes and a blacksmith’s apron.

“What urgent matter is it this time?” He asked with a small grin.

“The most ambitious task I will have ever undertaken, and likely yours too. We must forge the night.”

Jurnigan laughed.

“Been reading too many old stories, eh Pennirell? Too much Latin is not good for you.”

“I would that were the case. May come in?”

“Of course. I can’t wait to hear this.”

[24]

“What happens if Pennirell’s not back by Friday?” Derrick asked as he released the bowstring. They stood in Pennirell’s garden, practicing drills he had given them.

“We’ll have to be persuasive on our own. I’d wager if Pennirell is delayed then our troubles would pale compared to his. We’ll have to handle it.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Derrick released another arrow. It nearly split the shaft of the previous one.

“Were you that good back home?”

“No. I was maybe above average, but nothing like this. Invoking Clay when aiming is like a super power. I can go dead still when I aim, and hold the bow at full draw as long as I like.”

“Does it creep you out at all?” Dierdre asked while spinning a wooden staff.

“Does what?”

“If you put that skill to use, you will be shooting an arrow into another person,” she said with a shudder.

“A bit. Then I think about the sort that would put a searskin on a living creature. That awful tool is probably tiny in light of whatever they have planned if they get their way. Long-winded way of saying I look at the big picture to keep that in perspective. Although I only do that occasionally, thinking about it too much is a bit terrifying.”

“It creeps me out, even with proper perspective. Can you imagine being born in this age, with that as your daily reality? Hav must be ready at a moment’s notice to defend life and limb.”

“No, I can’t imagine. Especially not as a doctor. I’m sworn to do no harm, at least when practicing medicine.” He sighed. “But I don’t have to fully understand it. First I have to do my part. Understanding may follow.”

“What if we’re stuck here? I mean, even if we prevail, we still don’t have any concrete plans for getting home.”

“Another one of those things I’m parking for later. I figure if I don’t stay focused here and now, there won’t be a later.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. Even if you do sound a bit like a closet Zen master,” she laughed.

She walked down range and stood next to the target.

“I’m ready for the next shot,” she said.

Derrick fired at the target. Dierdre swung the staff so quickly that all Derrick saw was a blur, followed by a snapping sound. His arrow lay on the ground in two pieces of almost equal size.

“You get the middle of that one?” he asked.

“Almost, about an inch off. Send another one.”

[25]

The hooded figure left the market after Pennirell's waypoint departure. He walked a short distance south on the main road, then turned right onto a small footpath that led through a patch of dense undergrowth. He stopped, sensing something was amiss. Two dogs growled nearby.

"You think you have a clever disguise, but you can't hide from them. Show yourself, and we might let you live," came a gruff voice from the darkness. He heard bows creak as they were drawn.

With his left hand he reached down and slid his sword a couple inches out of its scabbard. Howling shrieks filled the ears of the would-be attackers. Terror and overwhelming dread filled their minds, as though the very hounds of the underworld were being unleashed upon them. They scattered into the night. He flicked it shut with a crisp, well-practiced move and kept walking.

At the clearing where he made camp a lone silhouette sat atop a pack, unmoving.

"Be gone," the hooded man spoke in a low voice.

"A grey blade is the mark of a coward," a female voice replied.

"Mind your tongue, or you will not be as fortunate as those thieves."

He advanced on her, reaching for the hilt with his right hand. He froze suddenly and looked down. His feet were underground, buried up to the shin. He tried to move but his feet were held fast by roots from nearby trees.

“Tell me where you got that sword and I will release you.”

“I took it from its previous owner after I killed him.”

“And the cloak too, I presume?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s try again. Tell the truth this time.”

The roots tightened around his ankles. He drew a short breath, but showed no other outward signs of his pain.

“I already told you,” he spoke through a clenched jaw.

“I’ll do you one better. Tell me who you work for and I will free you of his control.”

“Fool! I am no common conscript, I serve because I chose the winning side.”

He reached for a pouch tied closely around his waist. Operatives like him carried a means to end their lives quickly rather than face interrogation and risk divulging secrets.

She anticipated as much. Most such devices also destroyed everything around them for some distance. The roots constricted fully, severing his feet at the ankles. The shock caused him a moment’s pause, giving her a window of time to stop his suicide. She ripped the pouch from his waist with a gathering spell, then stepped back a few paces.

“If you do not wish to be freed then I will at least free the poor soul you have entombed in that blade.”

He snarled and began to yell, but was cut short. Bright light spilled out of the scabbard, accompanied by ear-splitting wails. The pent-up energy released in a flash, incinerating most of his body.

She lowered her shield spell and walked over to where his remains lay. She picked up the cloak, which was unharmed. Using her knife she cut out a small pouch of fabric that was sewn into the collar. The pouch was home to a beacon stone, that acts both as a tracking device and an energy source for the spell that renders the cloak nearly invisible. She was careful to keep the pouch fabric intact, else the stone would know it had been removed.

She called to the thieves. They emerged into the clearing.

“Thank you for your help. I have your payment. This is the item I described earlier. I suggest you attach it to a limb and cast it into the river.”

“We seen what it did to his cloak. I may keep it for myself,” said the leader.

“Its source of energy is also a tracking device. Its maker is one more powerful than I. He does not take kindly to surprises. Choose wisely.”

She dropped a small leather bag of coins onto the ground and walked away, while the thieves debated their next move. She covered the short distance back to the market in a few minutes. A few low fires still had embers glowing, but otherwise it was completely dark. She voiced a short spell. Darkness began to flow towards her. She wrapped it around herself until nothing visible remained. She walked to the center of

the market, careful to ensure nobody bumped into her. She stopped atop the waypoint, briefly spoke, and was gone.

She arrived at the same rocky hilltop as Pennirell had a few hours earlier. She kept her cloak of darkness as she walked, following the same route to the stone gate. There she picked up a stone, breathed a spell into it, and threw it at the invisible ward guarding the entrance to the valley.

An alarm went off in Jurnigan's house. He looked up sharply, reaching for his staff. Pennirell closed his eyes, smiled, then spoke.

"That would be Mirabel."

"Why didn't you say she was coming?"

"Sorry, I suppose I was focused on sharing the details of events thus far."

"Hmmp. I don't like surprises," he grumbled, then invoked the same entrance that admitted Pennirell. A few minutes later there was a knock on the door.

Jurnigan feigned annoyance at he rose, but broke into a wide smile upon seeing her. He was fond of her defiant spirit, which reminded him of his own daughter.

"Mirabel! So nice to see you. What a pleasant surprise." He bear hugged her.

"Oomph. Glad to see you too, big guy." She had given up trying to correct him that she goes by Mira.

Mirabel's tough demeanor softened a bit after that. She wore her platinum hair in a spikey fashion, and normally presented a gaze of such intensity that few could meet

her eyes. However this is one of the few places she can let her guard down. She flicked back her hood and smiled.

“Please have a seat,” Jurnigan offered, “Julius here has been getting me caught up.” She chuckled at the reference, very few people call him by his first name.

“Pennirell already briefed me,” she replied, “when do we start making this thing?”

“Six hours hence. I have someone starting the forge fires now. We should rest soon, as the next few days will offer little sleep.”

“Mira here will prove crucial to the process, her command of the dark is near mine,” Pennirell put forth. “But we are getting ahead of ourselves, what did you observe at the market waypoint?”

“It was as you suspected. The ways are being watched. A shadow with a grey blade watched you go. He was about to call home when I captured him. He was a higher level guy, did not want to be freed. He chose self destruction, and tried to take me with him. I released the blade instead, which gave him the same result.”

They both wore hard expressions as they listened.

“Good work. We shall have to take another route back. And the beacon stone?”

“Left it with some thieves that helped me flush him out. I told them how to be rid of it safely, we’ll see how that ends up.”

“Did you keep anything of his?”

“Just the pouch that held the suicide amulet. I was worried the amulet might be traceable, or that it might go off unannounced, so I destroyed it.” She handed the pouch to Pennirell.

He held it under his nose and inhaled deeply. He closed his eyes and sat back while offering it to Jurnigan. About a minute later he leaned forward.

“Horse, from the northern reaches.”

“Hmm, yes,” Jurnigan agreed.

Mira picked it back up and tried to do the same.

“I don’t have that one yet,” she fiddled with it as she spoke, turning it inside out.

“There are markings inside.”

Pennirell read the inscriptions.

“This is worse than I feared. Did he say anything else?”

“Something about I serve because I chose the winning side.”

“So there’s already sides then,” Jurnigan thought aloud. “Last time anyone talked like that was the big one, right? Isn’t that what the old scrolls say?”

Pennirell nodded.

“Yes, it was before our time. But the message was clear about that event, there was a combining of forces, either through alliance or force.”

Something nagged at the corner of Mira’s mind. She sat quietly for a minute.

“How long are we going to keep relying on the stones to tip us off? Won’t they expire at some point, or get all used up? It seems like we should be able to do this on our own.”

“A sentiment shared by every member of the order, and one that we are thus far powerless to change,” Pennirell replied.

“She makes a point though, Julius. We should at least be able to maintain the stones, keep ‘em charged up. They can span generations of us in the order, make sure this need does not get forgotten.”

A worker came in and spoke to Jurnigan. He nodded then spoke.

“Forge will now be ready in four hours. Get some rest.”

[26]

The thieves argued about the pouch and its stone for a while after Mira left.

“That bloke was proper scary. And if that’s not enough, you saw what she did to him. She said the maker of this thing is even worse. I don’t want no part of it.”

“What if she’s lying. Maybe she just don’t want another invisible cloak on the loose,” the lead thief said smugly. He tossed the pouch from hand to hand.

Jus then the cloak that the pouch had been removed from disintegrated into ashes with a hiss. All eyes nervously turned to the pouch. Surprise, then fear crossed the face of its holder.

“Right, that’s it. This thing is straight evil. Let’s be done with it.”

“Get rid of them ashes too. This is our spot, don’t leave no traces that would lead anyone here,” another ordered.

They gathered everything and walked a few hundred yards down to the river. The ashes went first, swept away easily by the current. The leader tied the pouch to a small log they found nearby. He pushed it into the main current, then watched it float downstream.

“Good riddance.”

[27]

Late Thursday afternoon found Dierdre and Derrick sitting across from each other at the center table in Pennirell's study, looking at old books and trying not to be nervous. Dierdre focused on learning Latin, which came more easily than expected. She had a hunch it would be more difficult back home but chose not to question it further.

A commotion upstairs broke the silence. Moments later Pennirell descended the stairs followed by a large bear of a man and a woman who appeared to be the hybrid of middle ages nobility and a punk rocker. The large man came forward and placed a long item on the table that was wrapped in fabric and tied at both ends.

"Greetings, it is good to be back," Pennirell pronounced. He introduced everyone then untied the package.

"I was not sure we would be able to succeed, but our combined efforts were just enough. Behold the Nightshade."

He presented a sword and scabbard, both entirely black. Dierdre and Derrick could feel its power, like the distant thrumming of an enormous engine.

"Why did you name it the Nightshade?" Dierdre asked while peering at the sword.

“A nightshade is harmless to most, but deadly to a very few. This summarizes our intent for its use.”

“A tomato is a nightshade, isn’t it? Any connection? Derrick wondered. Jurnigan laughed.

“Perhaps. I do grow them from time to time. It seemed fitting, that this device took so much effort, not unlike that required to successfully grow a tomato,” Pennirell smiled.

“Ever the gardener, eh Julius?”

Pennirell acknowledged Jurnigan’s remark with a slight bow and a grin.

“This is what we want Hav to weild, right?” Dierdre posed.

“The very same,” Pennirell spoke as he wrapped it up again. He turned and placed it in a sturdy chest against the wall, being careful to close it in a specific way. The power of the sword felt more distant. Seeing their curious expressions he explained. “For safe keeping. Most who enter this room do not see a chest, but rather a bench that contains nothing.”

“Back to the topic of the younger Haversham, how went your week? Is he on board?”

“Not yet, but we succeeded in gaining the second audience we sent word about, tomorrow at nine o’clock. He is definitely thinking about it.” Dierdre looked at Derrick.

“We were pretty convincing, I think. We did some low-key demonstrations, and gave a few details. I think mention of the searskin really caught his ear. His whole demeanor became more serious after that,” Derrick added.

“He has conflicting forces going on. I think he wants to help us, but he cannot see a way to do so without appearing to abdicate his duties,” she said with a frown.

“The only way to resolve the conflict is to have our effort become part of his duties, which means Lord Dubuque must be on board.”

Pennirell considered this.

“This is a reasonable outcome. Good work. Let us begin our preparations for tomorrow’s meeting after supper. I have a few things I wish to share with Jurnigan in the meantime. Pennirell and Jurnigan left the study.

Mira came over and sat down at the center table with Dierdre and Derrick. She smiled.

“Betcha never heard his first name until now,” she said in a very modern-sounding accent. “He’s a real piece of work, but he’s the real deal. You can trust him.”

“You don’t sound like you are from here originally,” Dierdre observed.

“East London. Came here like you, twenty-odd years ago. I chose to stay.”

“Oh wow!” Dierdre blurted out. “What made you stay?”

“Nuffin to go back to,” Mira said in a thick accent. “I was an orphan, and all that.” She resumed her normal voice. “Tired of living a street existence. I feel like my life means something over here.”

“So you had a choice,” Derrick noted. “I’ve been wondering about that since we got here. We have been so busy just getting by, that never had the time to ask for more details.” Derrick looked relieved.

“He wouldn’t be able to share details anyway, other than to say you’ll know when you are able to go back. When your skills have grown enough.”

“Could he have sent us back all along, given his power?” Derrick asked a little suspiciously.

“No, he’d never know where to send you. You have to own that, it’s your destination. Like I said, he’s straight up.”

“Which one are you?” Dierdre leaned forward with interest.

“Came over as Clay, but now I think I prefer Leaf. It’s not really that distinct any more. The most fun, and hardest, is manipulating the dark.”

“Wait, so you are a full-blown practitioner like Pennirell? You can do all that?”

“Yes, and so can you, in time. Which ones are you? Wait, don’t tell me.” Mira closed her eyes, then looked at Dierdre. “Leaf.”

“Yes.”

“Did he tell you that you can heal things too? It’s not just about changing shape.”

Derrick sat thunderstruck for a few seconds, then spoke.

“I’m a doctor back home. Are you saying if I learn Leaf then I can do more than scalpels and sutures?”

Before they could react Mira drew a knife and nicked his forearm. She placed her hands on either side of the cut, and spoke quietly. In the span of a few seconds the cut healed fully.

“It’s complex,” she cautioned. “He’s probably building you up to that.” She turned to face Dierdre. “You have it big time.” Dierdre looked puzzled.

“The power that drives healing is love. Took me a long time. You must come from good people. It practically vibrates out of you.”

“No wonder he likes you,” Derrick chuckled. Dierdre laughed out loud, then went quiet.

“I miss my mom and dad.” She turned to Mira. “If I choose to go back, will they still be there?”

“So I’m told. I never had anyone to look for when I went back.”

“What?” Derrick nearly jumped out of his seat. “You can go home and come back again? Did you keep your abilities back home?”

“Yes.”

“Wait a minute, if you can do Leaf and Clay, and so can Pennirell then why do you need us?”

“You bring with you more than that. You’ll know it, but probably only in hindsight.”

“This is so much to take in,” Dierdre spoke with a faraway look.

“Yeah, don’t get stuck thinking about it. You still need to survive this ordeal,” Mira warned. “I’ll give you something to focus on, let me show you the first lesson in healing. Both of you.”

[28]

Dawn seemed to come early the next day. Dierdre and Derrick both felt like they needed more time to prepare. They looked nervously around as the five of them double checked their plans and equipment.

“Relax. You’re not alone for this one,” Mira reassured.

Pennirell looked on, smiling. He was happy to see Mira befriending them.

“Are we all ready?” he asked. Everyone nodded.

They reached the Sheridan Inn at half past eight, thirty minutes early. Six horses in Dubuque livery were already hitched outside. They exchanged glances, then walked inside.

Hav sat at the same corner table where they had met earlier, accompanied by one security guard. Four more sat at a table across the room. Pennirell, Mira, Dierdre and Derrick joined Hav. Jurnigan smiled and walked over to the other table. He flagged a server as he sat down.

“Circumstances have changed since our last meeting,” Hav spoke. “Your story seemed too fantastic, so I began making discreet inquiries. However, matters of this import are difficult to contain, thus my intentions are now fully known.”

“It is better that we not operate in secret,” Pennirell said with a positive tone. “For matters will soon be evident to all. Allow me to restate that we come to both to offer our aid, and to request that you might fulfill your duties in a specific manner.”

The security guard next to Hav shifted uncomfortably. Hav looked around the table. Two men from the other table rose. Hav motioned for them to sit back down.

“What did your inquiries reveal?” Dierdre broke the silence.

“Forces are indeed at work, as Derrick said. A beacon stone was found in the river yesterday, attached to a log,” Hav said with a grim expression.

Pennirell glanced at Mira. She shrugged and smiled. Hav looked at her quizzically.

“I, um, dispatched its owner the day before, near the iron market. He carried a grey blade.”

Hav drew a sharp breath.

“Underscoring the need for cooperation on our part,” Pennirell added.

“Tell me you do not carry this blade,” Hav said with quiet urgency.

“I released it, freeing the one within. This process also killed the shadow. I only kept the pouch that held his suicide amulet.” She put the pouch on the table. Hav and the guard drew back. “It’s empty now.” She turned it upside down as proof.

The guard picked it up before Hav could reach it. Once he deemed it safe, he handed it over.

“Look inside, there are markings.”

“I recognize these from old scrolls. There seems to be a great deal of mythology coming to life these days,” he said with some disdain.

“For all of us. To that end, we have toiled to create something to combat these elemental forces that we will soon face. A weapon.” Pennirell paused to verify he had Hav’s full attention. “A weapon we want you to wield.”

“You propose to give me a weapon?” He did not expect the conversation to go in this direction. “Do you have it with you?”

“One piece. As proof of our sincerity. But before we go further, we must know your intentions, and those of his Lordship. As with any weapon, it can be used for good or ill. Second, we must know that Dierdre is cleared of all charges. Our ability to help you is diminished by this misunderstanding.”

“My intentions are true. As are my feelings on the charges. I must still convince my father, but I am hopeful there. May I see your proof?”

Pennirell looked at Mira, then nodded. She put a small cloth roll on the table, then opened it. A black dagger emerged.

Hav reached for it.

“Stay your hand for just one moment, Lord Haversham, this is no standard blade. May I demonstrate?”

The security guard reached for his own knife. Pennirell glanced at him and nodded once more.

“If you deem it necessary, by all means have yours at the ready. I seek only to prevent Lord Haversham from losing a finger when he inspects it.” He opened it slowly,

revealing a blade that is sharp only on one edge. The other edge is smooth, and remained in contact with the scabbard when opening.

“The blade cannot touch the scabbard, lest you destroy it. Do not touch the blade. You will not be able to feel it before your finger is gone.” He closed it, then handed it hilt-first to Hav.

Hav took it warily. He opened it and looked closely at the blade.

“Place it on the table, blade up. Then set another blade atop it. One that you believe to be of good quality.”

Hav held it flat on the table with the blade edge facing up. He motioned for his guard to put his knife on it. As he set it down it did not come to rest atop the black blade, but instead cleaved into two pieces, with no more force than its own weight. The guard’s eyes went wide, then he looked to Hav. The guards at the other table saw the panic on his face and rose quickly.

“Go look,” Jurnigan insisted. “Try it yourselves.”

They all walked over, hands on their weapons.

“I don’t understand,” Hav said. “This is not supposed to be possible. What is it?”

“The Nightshade was forged from the darkness itself. Two weeks ago I would have dismissed this as fancy. A great deal has changed since then.”

“You said this is but proof. There is more?”

“A sword, of the same edge and scabbard design. I trust you could adapt your style to a sword such as this?”

Hav nodded, then sat back to think. His guards murmured among themselves. Just then Sir Stamford marched in, followed by Lord Dubuque himself. Several more guards filled in behind him.

“It is time I take control of matters, this has gone far enough.”

Hav stood.

“Father, I gave my word no harm would come to them.”

“And none shall, not by your hand, and thus you shall keep your word,” Lord Dubuque spoke coolly.

“It would seem our caution was well founded,” Pennirell said calmly. “In the coming months we must cooperate or perish. What control do you intend to exert, your Lordship?”

“You will accompany me to secure quarters until we can ascertain the veracity of your outrageous claims.”

“There is no time for that, I am afraid. You are fully authorized to take such action, but I warn that many lives would be lost unnecessarily. We must talk here, now.”

“None may address me thus in my realm. Guards.”

The guards moved to apprehend them. They were interrupted by Jurnigan’s thunderous laughter.

“Pardon me, but the ironies of protocol never cease to amuse me. We are on the same side. We face a common enemy. Yet we feel we must subdue each other first. Your Lordship,” he spoke with an elaborate bow, “allow me a short demonstration of good faith.”

The steel weapons of every one of Lord Dubque's men fell to the floor in a clattering mass. The guards tried to pick them up again but they would no more move than the stones in the floor. Jurnigan laughed again.

"We are your allies! We're offering to give your son a weapon of such power that there isn't even a procedure yet for how to store it safely. Imagine it, his to weild," he pointed to Hav.

"You may not give orders nor act in this manner." Lord Dubuque remained defiant.

"We do not propose to give orders, your Lordship," Mira turned to face him. "WE propose to fight at your side. We are powerful but we are few."

"While we have been enjoying this lovely bit of repartee, has it yet occurred to anyone that you are still defenseless, and have come to no harm?" Jurnigan bellowed.

"I will go one further, your Lordship," Pennirell chimed in. Of this group I am the only one who lives in your realm. I wish to continue doing so when this is behind us. We have honored your rule thus far, and we will honor it now. If you do not wish to aid us, we will not defy you. We will depart and seek help elsewhere. This threat is bigger than all of us."

Lord Dubque's eyes shifted from person to person. Years of court politics have given him razor sharp instincts for reading body language and complex situations. He scoured his experience but could think of no precedent for this scenario. Yet he

perceived no threat from this unorthodox band. Still, he must retain the upper hand. He walked over to Mira.

“Give me your hand.”

She presented her right hand, palm up. In the blink of an eye he held a stone knife across her wrist.

“Clever. I like that.” Jurnigan smiled.

Mira looked Lord Dubuque calmly in the eye, with an intensity few can match. He did not flinch, but did note her resolve. She pressed her wrist upwards into the blade, drawing blood. She then smiled and dropped to one knee.

Lord Dubuque stood speechless. Could their intentions be true? He released her hand, and turned to Dierdre.

“And what of the spy?”

“Her subsequent actions have not been consistent with being a spy,” Have spoke up. “I fear my initial assessment may have been off the mark.” Lord Dubuque remained unconvinced.

Dierdre arose, walked over to him, and offered her wrist in the same manner. He met her eyes, and this time felt only warmth. The urge to hug her overcame him, triggering his instincts.

“Do you attempt to deceive me?”

“No,” Derrick replied. “That’s who she is. She just revealed her true self to you.”

“We shall see about that. There is one way to reliably detect sorcery. Mister Stamford, bring in the beast!”

Stamford departed, followed by one other guard. Derrick and Dierder looked nervously at each other. Stamford returned with a thick leather leash in his hand. Mr. Woogins followed on his heel.

“Seek!” Stamford yelled, pointing at Dierdre.

Mr. Woogins wagged his tail so hard he knocked over a chair. He trotted up to Dierdre and promptly rolled onto his back.

“Woogie!” She exclaimed as she commenced tummy rubs.

Stamford wore an expression of indignation. He opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by Hav’s laughter.

“It was you all along!”

Lord Dubuque sensed something real here. He could not put his finger on it, but all his instincts told him to engage. He turned to Jurnigan.

“Give my men back their arms and we may talk.”

[29]

Six hooded figures arrived in rapid succession at the iron market waypoint, just after midnight. They fanned out in groups of two, searching for the missing shadow. The group heading south soon found the main road, and then the small footpath. One got down on hands and knees, checking for scent. He grunted in the affirmative.

They emerged into the same clearing as their predecessor. The group of thieves that called this area home sat around a fire.

“Don’t want no trouble here,” said the lead thief.

“Where is he?” rasped a voice that sounded both distant and ubiquitous.

“Who?”

The two shadows drew their blades. The three visible thieves covered their ears and screamed at the top of their lungs. Two bows twanged, unnoticed in the noise. Arrow shafts quivered in both shadows, felling them instantly. The lead thief closed their blades. This group had learned quickly after watching Mira in action.

“Time for a new spot,” the leader announced.

“Can’t we keep nothing?” A younger member asked.

“This lot is cursed. Whatever you take will be your death.”

They dumped the bodies into the river, then forded it and kept walking.

“I’ve seen this before,” the leader spoke. “It’s gonna get big now. We got two choices – take the King’s coin and join ranks with soldiers, or go live in the country for a while.”

“Countryside is nice this time of year.”

“Fresh air.”

“Right, let’s move.”

The other four shadows reconvened outside the market shortly after dawn. Vendors were busy setting up for the day. Fires burned in the food stalls. The four walked the aisles, scanning for the other two. Slowly they made their way back to the center of the market, by the waypoint. They looked at each other, unsure of their next move. Their leader was one of the missing. The second-in-command was about to speak when someone appeared at the waypoint.

The new arrival wore black military gear and made no effort to conceal her identity. She surveyed the market and strode directly to the four shadows.

“Fools. Two of your ranks are dead and you lack the skill to notice. Return at once for reassignment. I will handle this.”

A small crowd formed, watching from a wary distance. The body language of the four shadows was somewhere between sullen and scared witless. One by one they trudged to the waypoint and disappeared, drawing gasps from the crowd. Waypoints

are used so secretively that most people have never seen one in action, believing them to be just another bit of folklore.

Sirinha looked around at the now-stunned crowd, estimating the strength of the spell needed. She pulled a small pouch from her waist, spoke a few low words, then hurled it at the ground halfway between her and the crowd.

A bright flash overwhelmed the onlookers, followed by thick smoke. Several in the crowd fainted. When the smoke cleared she was gone. Later they would wonder what caused the commotion, and put it down to a cook dropping oil onto a flame.

Sirinha quickly found the footpath and walked quickly to the clearing. There she stopped and closed her eyes. She walked around slowly, coming to a halt in the spot where the grey blade had been destroyed a few days earlier by Mira. She scooped a handful of soil and brought it near her nose, inhaling the scent. She spoke a few words, then cast the earth around her. The particles glowed briefly in two locations about a shoulder's width apart. She voiced another command, raising her hands while she spoke.

Two charred boots rose up through the ground. She growled, then spat.

"This is not the work of common thieves."

She focused her gaze on the boots, then clenched her hand into a fist. The boots burned for a few seconds, then were no more than ash. She walked a few paces down the path towards the river, but stopped when she realized that only the thieves had gone that way. She retraced her steps, trying to pick up the trail of the other.

“Who are you?” she asked, walking back and forth along the section of path between the clearing and the main road. After a few minutes she abandoned the effort. There is nothing here.

She returned to the clearing and sat down. She pulled a small red object from a vest pocket. The spherical object was grape-sized and shiny, like glass or a jewel. She concentrated, cupped it in both hands, then spoke.

“Report. Skilled makers at work, iron market waypoint. Request one to watch the waypoint who is not so easily dispatched. Sirinha out.”

She walked back to the market and made her way to the center. The two self-appointed security thugs were now accompanied by an imposing troll-sized man, who was making amicable conversation with them. He had arrived at the waypoint just minutes earlier, but if you asked the thugs they would tell you he has worked with them for weeks.

Sirinha gave him the briefest of nods, became invisible, then departed through the waypoint.

[30]

“I will require more proof than words,” Lord Dubuque calmly spoke.

“Agreed. We request that you send a few to accompany us, no more than three. We will travel by means that will seem irregular, out of necessity. We shall gather the proof together,” Pennirell offered.

Hav’s eyes narrowed at the mention of the limit. He shook his head.

“That rules me out.”

“Quite,” Lord Dubuque added.

“Understood. Consider that forces such as those witnessed today will occur. Please select pragmatic observers not prone to fancy, who are light on their feet and capable with blade or bow.”

Lord Dubuque considered this for a moment then waved Stamford over.

“Please select three from your ranks suitable for the task.”

“I could select randomly and meet all the requirements,” he said with pride.

Lord Dubuque smiled.

“May I propose you ask for volunteers?” Jurnigan interjected. “We may be pressed into hard duty, it is well not to worry about motivation at such times.”

Stamford looked at Dubuque, who nodded. He then looked around the room at the dozen present from his company. Six stepped forward without hesitation.

“A bow, a sword, and a thief,” he said pointing to a person with each comment. He proceeded to introduce them.

“Hadley Wilkins, expert archer.” A young man in his twenties gave a slight bow.

“Rachael Donahue, sword master.” A tall woman inclined her head. She wore both a dueling rapier and a short sword.

“Finn Ashwood, covert specialist.” A wiry man stepped into view, catching everyone by surprise.

“Splendid!” beamed Jurnigan, amused by this level of ability. He turned to Pennirell and gave a look of approval.

“Gather provisions for three days. We leave as soon as we can reassemble. Let us meet in the glen by the great oak.”

The three new recruits exchanged curious glances at the choice of location, then shrugged.

“We will be there within the hour,” Rachael informed them.

[31]

The three guards showed up at the glen after forty-five minutes, accompanied by Hav and Stamford. They saw only three of the expected five from Pennirell's party. Dierdre and Mira were absent. Moments later they stood next to Pennirell, talking casually. Rachael blinked, feeling it was a trick of the eye.

"No. I saw it too," Finn said quietly. "Curious lot, this."

Pennirell looked up and waved them to come closer. They now noticed that all five of them were armed. Dierdre carried a wooden staff as tall as her forehead, perhaps an inch or more in diameter. Derrick carried a large bow and quiver on his shoulder. Jurnigan carried an axe and a sword. Mira carried blades matching Rachael's. Pennirell carried an ornate staff and a curved sword.

Pennirell approached Hav and Stamford.

"One last request, your Lordship. Please keep word of the Nightshade limited. To be most effective it must not be known by the enemy until it is too late to react."

"Standard procedure," Stamford said without hesitation.

Hav nodded, then looked puzzled.

“What sleight of hand just transpired?”

Pennirell laughed.

“Gather around,” he motioned them closer. “We shall be travelling by waypoint. Each will travel with someone capable of using it, until such time that all can do so independently.”

“Be warned,” he paused to look at each of them. “The ways are being watched. On every new landing be on your guard, but discreetly so.”

Hav shook his head incredulously.

“Those are real too? To what new limit shall I now ascribe?”

“None of us knows.”

“If anyone says they do,” Jurnigan chimed in. “Then you know they are lying.”

Stamford looked uncomfortable.

“I presume the enemy may also travel thus?”

Pennirell nodded.

“Can a waypoint be destroyed?”

“Not by any means known. Observation usually proves most effective.”

Stamford looked into the distance, mental gears turning.

“Tent it.” Mira walked over. “That will hide its use from curious eyes, and ensure you know who is coming or going.”

Stamford nodded slowly.

Jurnigan shook his head.

“First step towards a garrison.”

“Sometimes it’s worth it.” Mira faced him. “This far inside his realm.” She waved a hand towards the nearby village.

Pennirell nodded at Mira, then put a hand on Jurnigan’s shoulder.

“Ever the purist, old friend. The old ways and methods can only remain secret if we can handle all threats without aid. Those days are behind us, I’m afraid.”

Stamford sensed the magnitude of this moment. He let slip his measured expression, showing a brief expression of awe, then spoke.

“You are henceforth sharing this hidden power with us.” He was processing this realization as he spoke, shaking his head in disbelief as Hav had done minutes earlier.

“Never in all my years would I have voluntarily joined in league with such ...,” he paused and gestured towards the waypoint. “Such means. And now it seems inevitable. So be it. I will see to the tent, and concoct a suitable ruse for its presence.”

“The timing of our return depends on what we find. Please expect us at any hour of the day or night, beginning two days hence.”

Pennirell moved into the waypoint and extended an elbow to Rachael. She locked her arm in his, then disappeared with him. Mira went next, taking Dierdre and Derrick. Jurnigan put an arm around Hadley and Finn and was gone.

Stamford looked at Hav.

“If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.” He paused, thinking. “What have you uncovered?”

Hav smiled.

“Truth be told, the credit goes to good Mr. Woogins. It was he that first noticed the presence of our new guest.”

“He may prove useful yet again.”

Their scouting party of eight arrived at the first waypoint, the same one Pennirell transited when beginning his journey north some days before. Dappled light shone on the standing stone in the forest glen. Hadley walked up to it. He touched it, then turned to Pennirell.

“Are these related to the use of the waypoints?”

“Originally they served as signposts, or a sort of map. They were once found at every waypoint, or at least the official ones.”

“Now boarding for Kensington station. Mind the gap.” Derrick portrayed a monotone speaker. Dierdre burst out laughing.

“More like Mind the Void, or whatever it is we traverse in there.”

Everyone else looked confused.

“We have maps back home like that, for fast carriages, er, wagons. In tunnels. This isn’t helping. Right, that can be a story for later.”

Pennirell took that as his cue to give a short lesson.

“The first step to use a waypoint is to know the locations, both the point of origin and the destination. With some practice you should be able to reverse this trip and return to the great oak. You must remember which points are connected.”

“How do you know someone is not standing where you need to arrive?”

“You will feel the resistance.”

“You get bounced,” Jurnigan simplified. “Unless whatever is over there is smaller than you, then you bounce it.”

“Ok, that is enough for now. We must keep moving. We will practice more as we go. On the next one pay attention to your center, your very innermost spirit. See if you feel a connection to anything.”

“Speaking of our next move, the iron market waypoint is off-limits right now,” Mira spoke from behind. They turned to face her.

“Due to recent, uh, activity,” she added with a sheepish grin.

“It will be our first target of observation, but we must approach on foot for the reasons Mira mentions. I know a waypoint in the hills to the west, less than half a day’s march.”

“You talking about the ‘henge waypoint?” Jurnigan asked suspiciously.

“The same.”

“Good thing we’re armed. That’s bandit country.”

They all arrived at the waypoint crouched and wary. A few curious onlookers noticed them, then nonchalantly resumed their prior activities. They moved quickly to the tree line. Pennirell continued the lesson.

“Rachael, what did you notice?”

“Something tugging on me, on the inside.” She pointed to her abdomen. Hadley and Finn nodded agreement, followed by Dierdre and Derrick.

“Good. Your discipline in training that you undergo as part of Lord Dubque’s ranks will serve you well here. A focused mind is a clear mind. A clear mind can feel the tugging. You are two-thirds of the way there. We can discuss further when we stop for the night. Now we must proceed quietly.”

They walked single-file down a mountain path that varied between shoulder width and perhaps eight feet wide. Old ruts from countless carts could be seen in the wider sections. Thirty minutes into the walk Mira crouched down and held up a fist, motioning for a full stop. She walked back to Pennirell and Jurnigan.

“I feel a familiar presence. I think a visit may be worthwhile.”

They nodded agreement. Mira began looking around the edges of the trail down at ground level. She stopped at a small opening between two trees, then picked up some earth and breathed in its scent. She stepped through the opening, checking for traps as she went. The others followed, hands on their weapons. They proceeded in this slow, awkward manner for a hundred or so yards, then stopped. Mira made a peculiar bird call, then repeated it. Moments later a similar call came back. They walked a few paces into a small clearing with a fire pit.

“Didn’t expect to see you no more,” came a familiar voice.

“I see you made the right choice with the stone.” Mira smiled.

“That’s not the half of it.” He turned to the rest of the scouting party. “Who is this lot? You’d better not be bringin’ law in here.”

“Hardly. We are just passing through. We have information to share.”

The lead thief considered this. The scowl on his face indicated that he did not like such a large group knowing his hideout.

“You got gold to share too?”

“We can pay you,” Pennirell spoke. “How shall I address you?” He was careful not to request a proper name, indicating that he intends to honor the secrecy.

“You can call me Adrian.” He made a motion with his left arm. Three armed men emerged from the shadows, then lowered their bows. Pennirell stepped over to the fire pit, placed a gold coin on one of the rocks, then stepped back again. Adrian gave a small smile at this display of manners.

“We haven’t long. Let us discuss matters then we shall depart.” Pennirell suggested.

“Why did you move locations?” Mira looked at Adrian. “Prospects were good there by the iron market.”

“Were. Not no more. Two more of them shadows turned up, tried to mess us about. We learned from watchin’ you. Dropped them with arrows while we pretended to be disabled by their howling swords. Dumped in the river. That was our cue to move. No idea how they found us.”

Mira looked at Pennirell, shaking her head.

“Iron market will be swarming with them now.”

“They probably sent reinforcements, yes.” He turned to face Adrian. “You were wise to depart. None of us know all the ways they track their own. I trust you did not keep anything of theirs?”

“Nothing.”

“I can repay some information that may be of use. These woods will become unsafe in the coming months. Many boots will walk these paths, from both sides.”

Adrian turned to face his men.

“Told you. King’s coin or lay low.”

“An accurate assessment. Should you prefer the latter, the lands west of the old henge will be among the last affected. North and west should also be good, for a time. Do not linger near Chepstow, if your travels take you that far, but carry on into wilder lands north and west of there.”

Adrian looked at Pennirell with a curious expression.

“How do you know all that? And why aren’t any of the fancy Lords and Barons saying anything about this?”

“I have faced elements from this enemy before. I regret to say they could never be fully extinguished. I know the routes we must travel to combat them. I described lands in between these routes, as exchange for your information.”

“As to the question about Lords, three of our company are here for just that.” He motioned to the guards. They no longer wore uniforms, but Rachael’s and Hadley’s postures fit the part. However, Finn looked right at home, in stark contrast to the other two. He gave a curious nod to Adrian. Adrian laughed out loud.

“So they take in old thieves now, do they?”

“I still get to go sneaking around, but now I get a dry bed,” he replied lightly.

“Don’t go giving my lads no ideas.”

“We was just leavin,” Finn replied in a thick accent.

“One more thing.” Adrian turned to Pennirell. “How long we got here?”

“Days, perhaps weeks. We are a scouting party, sent to investigate just that. Of one thing you may be certain – the shadows will be the least of what you will encounter if you stay.”

Adrian’s men looked at each other, concerned.

“And you lot are walking right into the teeth of this? Barking mad.” He turned to his men. “Stock up for two days, then we move.”

[32]

The scouting party continued on the path for another two hours, and came to a stop at the western bank of a shallow river.

“This is it.” Mira pointed across the river. “Two hundred yards up the path on the far side is their old clearing. Likely being watched.”

“We should not take the common path,” Finn offered quietly.

“There’s another path that comes into the clearing from the south. We can take that halfway, then use the woods.”

Mira led them across the river, then south for a quarter hour. She checked for scent at the trail entrance, and finding nothing continued onwards. The narrow path rose gently as they went, branches brushing their shoulders constantly. Mira stopped suddenly, just before a large branch that hung the full way across the trail.

“It’s rigged. I can feel the spell.”

“I can feel it back here,” Jurnigan said. “Feels a little too obvious. Are the routes bypassing it also marked?”

“I can’t tell. Might be too subtle for me,” Mira called back.

Jurnigan walked forward, pulling a curious dagger-shaped piece of wood from his belt as he went. He knelt down on the right side of the trail, where one might walk to avoid the marked branch. He pushed the wooden artifact six inches into the ground, then placed his hands atop it. He sat quietly for over a minute, then removed the device and stood up.

“Earth spells, very good. This whole place is a trap. We need to leave.”

Pennirell turned to the three guards.

“Quickly, before we leave. What do you feel?”

Finn looked positively ill. Rachael and Hadley looked uncomfortable.

“Disquiet. In the same place I felt the waypoint tugging,” Rachael said with a hand on her stomach.

“Good. That signal may one day save you. Remember it.”

About halfway back to the river Jurnigan motioned for them to stop.

“Problem.”

They gathered around him, looking back down the trail in the direction of the river.

“This branch has one too. Real faint. We already tripped it on the way in.”

“They know we’re here,” Rachael observed. “What options do we have?”

“We could crawl under it and leave. They might think we’re still in there. Or we could walk through it normally, making it clear that we left. Then crawl back in.”

“Why would we do that?” Hadley looked nervous.

Mira spoke next.

“They will send someone to the river anyway. Our best bet is to make them think they missed us. Then we hide out in here and see who turns up.”

Jurnigan nodded. Rachael looked to Finn.

“Aye. It’s what I’d do, if I was trying to gather information about a target.”

“I don’t like it, but I see the logic. Very well then.”

They marched through the small enchanted branch at a regular pace, then crawled back under it. Jurnigan and Pennirell moved their hands over their crawl marks, speaking in low voices. The marks vanished. Jurnigan put his wooden device into the ground again to find the safest route to leave the trail. He pointed to the eastern side of the trail, then rose and gestured for Mira to lead. He and Pennirell took up the rear, continuing their work to remove tracks.

After a half hour of careful walking, crawling and covering they circled back to a rocky outcropping within sight of the trail, some ways north of the place they left the trail. Dense trees surrounded the rocks. Jurnigan and Rachael discussed tactical positions for everyone, then they all hunkered down. Lastly Mira walked around sprinkling earth on each person while voicing a low chant, rendering them nearly invisible.

“Will they be able to sense this?” Finn held up his earthy sleeve.

“No. The spell is very localized. You can’t sense it unless you touch it.”

Pennirell whispered, just enough for all hear.

“Remember, our first objective is to observe, not engage. Keep your nerve no matter what you see. Clear your minds, like you did in the ways. A clear mind is also a silent mind.”

“Can they read minds?” Rachael looked at Mira, concerned.

“No. But panic creates a disturbance, like ripples in a pond. So does focused anger or attention. Be an empty vessel as you watch.” She nearly disappeared from sight as she spoke. “Did you see the difference?”

Finn chuckled.

“That’s good. Better’n I was taught.”

They reviewed hand signals then went silent. Several animals wandered by in the next quarter hour, oblivious to their presence. Pennirell motioned a thumbs-up signal as encouragement to keep it up.

Dusk came an hour later, and brought with it footsteps. Two shadows walked down from the north, having come from the direction of the thieves’ clearing. They were met by two more that came from the south. They moved in a careless manner indicating that they thought the intruders had left. Another figure approached from the south, wearing dark, functional gear. She moved silently. She wore her hair in a pony tail, the color a mix of orange and auburn.

She stopped to check the branch they had triggered.

“More than five.”

The shadows stopped talking and walked over to her. She looked around, her eyes distant.

“The markings indicate a large party came through, yet there are only traces of three in the air.”

“What do you make of this, first shadow?” She turned to face the closest one.

“Perhaps only three came this way. Animals or wind can trip the marker. Either that or makers came through.”

“Very good. We know that makers have been active here recently. What should we do now?”

“Find them” the first shadow replied.

She turned to the next in line.

“How do you propose we do that, second shadow?”

“Either bring in our own, like you, or call for hounds.”

“Good. You are not as hopeless as the last. You must be capable of this on your own. Proceed as though I were not here.”

“Yes, your grace Sirinha.”

Pennirell made a low motion towards Mira then to the north. She closed her eyes in concentration. The earth in the thieves’ clearing began to move. Roots grew and broke the surface, radiating all the signs of active spell work.

The four shadows stopped talking, then looked at Sirinha. She scowled at the two that had come that way.

“I though you checked the clearing.”

“We did. It was clear.”

“Well, it is clear no more. Move.”

The five of them headed north up the trail.

After they were out of sight Pennirell pointed south. Dierdre shook her head.

“She knows.”

A moment later they heard the hounds, coming in from the northeast. Jurnigan spoke next.

“They’ll get here before their handlers. Take down the dogs, then quietly go east. They expect to flush us southwest back towards the river.”

Derrick and Hadley notched arrows. Mira spoke quietly to Dierdre. Less than thirty seconds later six wolfish dogs bounded into view, barking and baring fangs.

At twenty yards Hadley dropped the leader, then Derrick took the next one. At fifteen yards large roots grabbed the next two and dragged them underground in strangleholds. At five yards Hadley felled the fifth. Derrick was not as quick to reload, and was still readying his arrow. The sixth dog leapt for him. A silver blur from Rachael’s sword silenced it.

Pennirell was already on his feet moving east at a full run. They fell in behind with Mira and Jurnigan taking up the rear. They worked blurring spells to muffle their sounds.

A minute later they heard horns blaring from their prior location. They quickened their pace, and arrived at the main road a few minutes later. They stopped in some brambles just before the road, huddled in a close group.

“The road will be watched, we cannot take it north or south. We cross, continuing east into the hills.”

Horses galloped into view on their left, coming from the north. A group of ten hurried past, comprised of shadows and others they could not identify.

As soon as they passed Pennirell, Jurnigan and Mira invoked a powerful blurring spell, to such an extent everything fell silent within a ten foot radius. They crossed in a tight group with hands on shoulders. Once in the woods on the far side they lifted the spell. Outside sounds rushed back in, and ears popped with the rapid return of normal pressure. They resumed their flight at full speed.

They traversed several foothills and a low, rounded mountain. Twice they had to divert to avoid active mines. On both occasions they noted the presence of shadows.

They kept moving until near midnight, stopping finally in the shelter of a large oak. Dierdre had the curious sensation they were not alone. They made camp without a fire, and spoke in low voices.

“How far are we from Lord Dubuque’s realm, on foot?” Rachael asked.

“Two days steady march, towards the south. There is a waypoint a half day from there that we may use, however it is not time to return yet. One skirmish is but proof of their existence, but tells nothing of their numbers.”

Rachael nodded.

“What do you propose?”

“The next waypoint to the north leads to a secret waypoint, one that may drop us deep into their territory.”

Jurnigan's eyes narrowed.

"The cave?"

Pennirell nodded. Jurnigan did not like this answer, but did not disagree.

Mira turned to Dierdre.

"How did you know?"

Dierdre's eyes darted around as she looked for the right words.

"A pulse. I felt a pulse, like a clear bell, or a wave hitting me at the beach.

Certainty. It conveyed certainty. When I looked towards its source, I saw Sirinha."

"You seem to have a rare gift," Pennirell noted with admiration. "You may well have saved us all."

"Who else is here?" Dierdre asked in Pennirell's direction.

Pennirell laughed, then spoke in a language she did not understand.

"Welcome masters of the forest." He turned towards the oak's trunk.

A small man of eighteen inches walked into view. A woman of similar size appeared beside him.

"Master Gardener. A surprise. What have you brought to exchange?"

"Seeds for a wonderful herb. Transported from another country. Would you like to try some of the herb?"

The two became very animated, barely able to contain their excitement.

"Yes, that would be pleasing."

Pennirell reached into a small pouch and pulled out some dried herbs.

"It is called oregano. It comes from the land where Latin was once spoken."

He held out the spice in his hand, palm up. The air popped slightly, then the oregano and the two small people were gone. Pennirell smiled.

Dierdre held an hand over her mouth, her gesture a mixture of surprise and wonder. Slowly the memory of her initial arrival came back. She pointed in their direction and spoke to Pennirell.

“I saw one of those people when I first got here! On a fence. Smart outfit. Fedora. I totally forgot until just now.”

“It was he that tipped me off to your appearance. That is part of how I found you first.” He sat back, amused.

Hadley talked to Rachael, shaking his head. Everyone else went quiet, so he addressed the group.

“I was just saying that this feels like a sustained trick of some kind. I don’t want to write a report. I’ll be summarily dismissed as crazy.”

Jurnigan laughed, hands on his belly.

“Well then, you’ve found the right company to keep.”

He then held up a hand, with two knives laying across his palm. One began to hover, then rotate slowly.

“It’s no illusion. The first step towards seeing things as they really are is to let go of what you think they are.”

The top knife clinked back onto his palm. He handed them both to Rachael.

“You have a bit of the smithy in you. Try it.”

She looked uncomfortable.

“Try it later then, when nobody is looking.”

The forest dwellers returned.

“Your gift is most excellent. May we have the seeds?”

“Of course. Plant them in areas of high sun, no shade. May I ask a question first?”

The small person nodded.

“Have you seen many of the hooded people around, with cloaks that try to hide?”

The small person spat on the ground, a gesture of extreme displeasure.

“Yes. The carriers of the screaming swords are no friends. They infest the far north like a sickness.”

“How many?”

“All of them,” he replied as though this should be obvious.

“Are there good folk left?”

“Good folk remain. Are fearful. Talking done. Seeds, pleasing.”

Pennirell handed him the pouch. The air popped again and he was gone.

“Curious mann-“ Derrick began.

“A wonderful exchange,” Pennirell cut him off. “We are in their home, speaking a foreign language. We must be polite to our hosts.”

“Balance.” Dierdre spoke with her eyes closed. “Their exchanges maintain balance, like other natural systems do. In fact, they are part of the order of nature, like birds or trees, not separate like us.”

“The illusion again,” Jurnigan pointed out. “Our actions have consequences. Each is an exchange, even if we do not see it.”

Pennirell nodded agreement, then turned to Rachael.

“We must go north, to see the ‘infestation’ firsthand. This will be far riskier than the iron market.”

“And more important,” she added. “We are not backing out now.”

“Good. We move in three hours.”

Derrick walked over to Dierdre as the others were laying down for rest.

“You seem to have access to a totally different wavelength there. Back home I’d be worried if someone I knew kept doing that, but here,” he trailed off. “Actually it seems a bit much even here, or maybe I’m jealous.” He smiled.

“It is odd, for me too. I’m a mechanical engineer at university. I’m good with logic and materials, not all this fluffy stuff. But then it just comes, and it feels like a mistake to ignore it.”

“Clearly it is important. We’d be in Sirinha’s custody right now otherwise. Got any tips for how to do it?”

“Oh. Um, no. Er, maybe. Wait a sec.” She closed her eyes. “Reach out like the feeling when you are just about to enter a waypoint. Like you’re connecting with the earth itself, as a network, not just a collection of atoms.”

Derrick looked perplexed.

“Well, at least it’s something to practice,” he said hopefully.

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Three hours passed in an instant. Derrick rubbed bleary eyes and stood up. They started walking a couple minutes later, to his dismay. Breakfast would be of the walking variety in the final hours before dawn.

They moved in silence for over an hour through forested rolling hills, avoiding settlements. Jurnigan brought them to a stop in a clearing at the foot of a steep hill.

“We need to discuss tactics for the coming waypoints.”

“Is this about the cave you mentioned yesterday?” Derrick asked.

Jurnigan nodded. He turned to Pennirell.

“You still think it’s worth the risk?”

“I do. I know of no other waypoint in the north that is sure to be free of observation.”

“Well, free of human observation, anyway,” Mira added.

“Lay out the details,” Rachael turned to Pennirell. “Let us know what hangs in the balance.”

“Very well,” Pennirell exhaled.

“Sometimes it is better to not know, to go in as a blank slate. Knowledge of the dangers is itself a risk. I was hoping to get a clear signal which approach would be best for our five new travellers. I suppose this prompt is that sign.”

Pennirell looked away for a moment, collecting his thoughts.

“Force exist in the cave that can destroy you. Will destroy you if you are careless. A darkness exists therein, one that light cannot displace. Its origins are not known, but most believe it to be the work of a malevolent being.”

“The path out of the cave is a steady walk uphill, and can be traversed without torches or other light. However, if your mind wanders, you will feel compelled to alter course, to investigate something, or take a rest, to feel everlasting calm, or anything else that you might be tempted to focus on.”

“What happens if you do get distracted?” Derrick probed.

“The darkness devours you,” Jurnigan replied. “Usually we don’t send practitioners through until they have proven themselves in lesser ordeals.”

“But we won’t be travelling alone, we’ll each be with one of you three,” Hadley added hopefully.

“Doesn’t help.” Mira shook her head.

“We’ll be holding hands or locking arms yes, but you can just disappear. I could find myself squeezing empty air where you used to be.”

“No worse than taking up arms any given day,” Finn interjected. “Never know if you’re coming back.”

“That’s how I approach it.” Mira inclined her head towards Finn. “Get into battle mode, and march non-stop until I’m out of the cave.”

“That’s fine for the military folks, but what about them?” Jurnigan gestured towards Dierdre and Derrick.

Derrick let go of his thoughts for a moment, like Dierdre had described. No flashes of insight came. Instead he found his fingers clenching his bow. Mira noticed, then looked towards it and then to Derrick, nodding.

“Like notching an arrow, invoke Clay. Walk out.” He said.

Dierdre considered this. Thus far her training had been more reactive, more defensive.

“I believe I can do that too, sort of. Like when I awaited your arrow during practice. I’ll have to keep that state of mind while walking.”

“It will work,” Pennirell said reassuringly.

Jurnigan frowned.

“It seems reckless. It’s too soon for them. We could scout the last waypoint with the five of us. Rejoin them after, back at the prior point.”

Mira shook her head.

We are going to need them. Same as before, back in the forest by the iron market.”

“She is right.” Pennirell turned towards Jurnigan, who was pacing anxiously.

This is the first time Dierdre or Derrick had seen the three members of the order disagree. Derrick felt the weight of the situation descend upon him. He tried mentally

reaching out again. Again his mind remained unencumbered with brilliant flashes of insight. This time he found himself speaking.

“There is no other way. We must go.”

They all looked at him. He shrugged, looking at Dierdre. She acknowledged his point.

“Very well then. At least you go in with open eyes. The next waypoint is thirty minutes from here. Start readying yourselves.”

The next waypoint stood in an open field near an old stone tor. There was no one else around as far as they could see in every direction. The three guards moved through practiced motions, rechecking weapons, belts, and other gear. Jurnigan sat quietly. Derrick fidgeted with his bow, practicing invoking Clay while walking. Dierdre did the same with Leaf and her staff, with mixed results. Pennirell was the only one who looked to be at ease.

Rachael saw Mira’s swords and approached her. They drilled with short swords, filling the air with blurs of silver and chinking metal. Finn and Hadley practiced knife evasion drills. A few minutes later they all disengaged. They were ready. Weapons were put away and they grouped up for the transit. Pennirell locked arms with Rachael, then turned back to the group and spoke.

“Be ready for anything when you exit the cave.”

They disappeared.

“He likes his dramatic touches, that one,” Finn said wryly. Jurnigan laughed, grabbed him and Hadley, then disappeared.

Mira looked at both of them. They nodded, then locked arms with her. Derrick hesitated, then spoke up.

“I feel like we should all be in contact.”

Mira gave a questioning look.

“Gut feeling,” was all he had in reply.

Mira shrugged, then turned forward and extended her arms behind her.

“Don’t trip on my feet.”

Derrick and Dierdre each took a hand, then each others’. They took a moment to settle into their mindsets, then stepped into the waypoint.

Derrick saw nothing to tell him they had arrived, then realized suddenly that the air got colder. The smell of carrion overwhelmed his senses briefly. He was aware that his feet were moving. Debris choked the path, he had to kick away sticks and rocks with nearly every step. Keep moving. He could feel both Mira’s and Dierdre’s hands. He tried to speak, but the effort caused him to stumble. Focus. Keep moving. Horrible sounds rushed in at him from all sides. He visualized notching an arrow and invoking Clay, going still in his mind. The noises subsided.

Dierdre thought about her practice intercepting arrows with Derrick. She felt calm. She let go any sense of judgment or fear about the darkness. She opened her

senses fully, like when she perceived Sirinha's recognition of their ruse. She went too far.

The source of the darkness siezed this opening, flooding her with emotions. Crushing sadness overpowered her mind. She thought of her parents, certain something was wrong. She began to lose focus.

Derrick's hand closed on thin air. He stopped. Mira urged him on, but he dug into the earth, invoking Clay further. He reached down with his empty hand, touching the ground where she stood. He felt earth, bones, rocks and other detritus, but no Dierdre. A growl came from nearby. On reflex he struck it with a stone fist. He felt fangs and bones break, then heard a heavy thud. He kept searching.

"Head of a femur," he said to himself, his medical training taking over. He felt calm, as though in surgery. He moved several more bones, then got a small jolt. He felt a small piece of wood, perhaps a sapling. He picked it up. It buzzed in his hand. He stood, then started moving his feet again.

They trudged on for what seemed like hours, then it was suddenly gone. A large hand pulled him quickly to the ground. He instinctively protected the sapling as he rolled. He heard metal clanging. By the time he had the chance to look up Rachael was putting her sword away. Two shadows lay dead.

A third ran down the path that leads away from the mouth of the cave. A shape suddenly leapt out of some bushes alongside the trail and took him down. The figure got up, but the shadow did not. The hooded figure walked back to their group.

“That was half clever, Finn. How’d you pull that off?” Jurnigan smiled. Coming from him that was high praise indeed. Finn doffed an imaginary cap in his direction.

Pennirell was tending to an injured man lying on the ground at the mouth of the cave. He looked at Derrick, then pointed urgently. They all turned.

“Where’s Dierdre?”

Derrick’s mind was reeling. He held up the sapling.

Hadley gasped, then looked away, certain that she was dead.

“Are you sure that is her?” Mira turned to face him.

“Where were you all that time?” Rachael asked.

“We were only thirty seconds behind you. That’s how long it took me to find her. That and whack a cougar.”

“You stopped in the cave. Time passes differently there. We have been out here for over five minutes.” Pennirell mentioned gently. “I have never seen one survive an encounter in the cave. Let us hope that is all of her.”

“Tell us what you experienced,” he continued after a pause.

“We need to clean up here first,” Jurnigan pressed.

“Of course, I’m getting ahead of myself.”

Mira attended to the injured man, healing his leg enough for him to walk. The others dragged the three shadows to the mouth of the cave. Jurnigan removed their swords, then heaved each body into the darkness. Snarls and the sounds of animals fighting ensued.

Lastly he picked up the swords. One at a time he threw each into the darkness, releasing its blade before it entered. He kept one scabbard. After ensuring it had no tracking devices within he gave it to Rachael as evidence.

They took cover in the brush along the side of the path. Jurnigan looked at the new arrival.

“We’re here scouting. What were those shadows doing with you?”

“’bout to throw me into the cave. I wouldn’t bow down. Makin’ an example of me.” He shuddered.

“I’m Rachael, what is your name?” She tried a gentler question.

“Hugh. Hugh Pittman. I’m from Wrexham, but came here to work in the mines over at Orme. Filthy greys run it now.”

“What can you tell us of their numbers?”

“Too bloody many. They control all the roads in or out. You must be mad clever to get in here. Or just mad.”

“Does their control extend to your home town?”

“No, at least not when I left a month ago. They been comin’ in by the shipload ever since. No telling how many by now. I got to get home and see to my family. Thanks for fixing my leg.”

“You are most welcome,” Mira smiled.

While listening Pennirell had found a stick of shoulder height, suitable for taking walking. He spoke a few words into it. Its outline became hard to see.

“Take this with you. It will aid in not being discovered. Fare thee well, Hugh.”

Hugh took the walking stick and watched as the blurring spell masked his outline. He held out his free arm, turning it over, impressed by how it disappeared into the background.”

“Mad clever, then.” He smiled and disappeared into the forest.

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“We may need to consider an alternate route home, if they figure out this is where the shadows disappeared,” Jurnigan noted.

“Agreed.”

“What about Dierdre?” Derrick looked forlorn.

“We must bring her along and hope that she comes back to us,” Pennirell said gently.

“Is there nothing we can do to help?”

“Have you tried reaching out to her?”

“Yes, with all my focus.”

“Then you are doing all that can be done.”

Hadley walked over and presented Derrick with a leather quiver from one of the shadows. Derrick slid the sapling into it, then slung it over his shoulder.

They marched in silence through the woods.

Soon they came to a bluff overlooking a seaside town next to the base of the mountain. The scale of the operation surprised them. A half dozen large ships sat in the harbor, with dozens of smaller ships ferrying goods and personnel to the shore. Ore-laden boats slowly plied their way out to the vessels. Thousands of people toiled, all under the control of shadows.

“They’re supplying an army,” Jurnigan whispered.

Pennirell nodded, then turned to Rachael.

“What does your training say – is this occupation, or extraction?”

She thought for a minute.

“Extraction. It does not look like they plan to launch an invasion from here.”

“I fear you are right. We have some sense of their scale, but as yet still no knowledge of their base of power.”

“Can we learn anything more here?”

“Not up here. We could try to get down to the docks, might overhear something useful.”

“No way we all get down there.”

“I can do it,” Finn offered.

“Me too,” Mira volunteered.

Rachael nodded to Pennirell.

“We’ll wait here. Return before nightfall.”

Mira and Finn made their way down the hill through the brush and low trees, then paused near the edge of town. A checkpoint blocked the road, forcing them to find another way in. Finn pointed to a stable. They climbed in through the window of an empty stall.

They peered out, looking down the central path towards the main door. A stable hand lingered by the entrance, listlessly pushing some hay around. Mira cast a blurring spell around herself and Finn, then moved towards the door. They paused in the shadows by the last stall. The stable hand turned away to fetch more hay, giving them an opening.

They stepped onto a sidewalk, blinking as their eyes adjusted to the direct sunlight. Mira released the spell and took on the appearance of an old woman. Finn extended an arm to help her walk, acting as her son. They moved around the corner and joined in with other foot traffic. Shadows stood on every corner, keeping a close eye on things.

They stopped in a bakery where Mira bought a loaf of bread to complement her disguise. Nobody questions an old woman out shopping for food. She and Finn continued towards the waterfront unhindered.

Accessing the docks would not be as easy. Shadows guarded every entry, inspecting each porter and load. None of the works on the docks were lingering nor making conversation. They watched for a few minutes, then concluded the docks themselves were no longer the target. They wandered inconspicuously along the street

watching the foot traffic. Finn saw a tavern and tugged Mira's hand. They followed two porters inside.

"May we join you. My mum here needs to get off her feet."

"Oh I'm fine. He worries too much, this one," Mira spoke in an elderly voice.

"No problem ma'am, plenty of space. Name's Glenn," the larger porter offered.

"Much obliged. Everyone's so busy lately, s' nice to catch me breath. I'm Agnes."

Finn listened, noting her name, then stepped away to the bar with the other porter.

"Aye, working nonstop since last Tuesday. At least the pay is good."

"No time off for the weekend, then? Oh my, whatever for?"

"Some big project, but none of them greys will say what. Big push for the next two weeks, ten more ships to load. After that who knows."

"I don't love them, the greys," Mira said quietly.

"Don't let 'em hear you sayin so. I have to say you're not alone in your opinion. I got no work back in my village though, so I have to make do."

Finn and the other porter returned holding drinks, conversing.

"Would either of you like some of our bread?" she offered.

"You are most kind."

Mira savored the bread and took a large bite of her own piece. She took her time chewing to allow the porters to resume their conversation unprompted by her.

"How long we got til next shift?"

"Thirty-five minutes."

“Still just ore?”

“Charcoal too. Overstreet says some boxes too, sealed wooden crates. No idea what.”

“Don’t matter, I suppose. Pay is the same.”

“Not these. Can’t be dropped. Special handles and all.”

“Premiums?”

“Think so.”

The conversation drifted over to the weather. Finn tapped Mira’s foot under the table.

“Time to get moving, eh sonny? It was a pleasure meeting you two lads.”

“Likewise, ma’am.”

They made their way onto the street, then began retracing their steps. They travelled a few blocks, then came to a standstill. Two greys and a man in a black outfit of similar cut to Sirinha’s stood at an intersection. They were checking papers for every person.

“Can you do papers?” Finn whispered.

“Yes, but the black suit would sense it. Takes overnight for the spell to dissipate. We need to avoid them.”

Finn surveyed the surroundings. Shops lined the street on both sides. Two queues formed, one for pedestrians along the sidewalk, and one for carts and animals in the street. They would pass three more shops to their left as they advanced in the queue

before coming to the intersection. Finn sized up the buildings. The middle shop had a second story that might provide another way out. He nodded towards it, a butcher shop.

After a minute of shuffling they stood beside the open door of the shop.

“Finny my lad, we need something for the stew.”

“But we’ll have to start over in the queue.”

“Some things can’t be avoided. Come on laddie.”

As they stepped inside Mira caught movement out of the corner of her eye. The black suit looked up as they departed the queue.

“Bloody queue is bad for business this time of day,” the shopkeeper complained.

“Aye, ‘s no good for me feet either,” Mira said as she walked up to the counter. She quickly grabbed the shopkeeper’s hand. He fell forward onto the counter. She slipped behind and propped him up on a stool.

“Asleep. Gotta move. Greys coming.”

They ran into the back room and up the stairs. They exited a window onto the roof, then Mira cast a strong blurring spell. They traversed the two remaining buildings towards the intersection, then stared down at the cross street.

They climbed down and were halfway across the street when the alarm sounded. They continued into an alley at full run, dodging people as they went. To the people working in the alley there appeared as no more than a flash of color and a slight puff of wind, however to hounds they present an unmistakeable scent trail. They heard barking a block or so behind them.

Two shadows on horseback followed on parallel streets. They gained sight of Mira and Finn just outside the stable entrance. Both drew their bows and fired.

An arrow thunked into the wall of the stable just above Finn's head, showering him with fragments of rock. The second arrow sank into Mira's shoulder. She stumbled but kept running. They ducked out the stable window and back into the forest, their horseback pursuers momentarily thwarted by the buildings.

A short way into the forest Mira stopped, the arrow sticking out of the back of her shoulder. She wiped some of her blood on her hand, then performed a shrill bird call. Finn felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

A bird flew down and landed on her open hand. She spoke quietly to the bird, wiping her bloody hand on it gently. The bird flew a short distance in a direction perpendicular to their travel then stopped. It sat on the ground, then flew again. It repeated this into the distance.

Mira resumed running, Finn on her heels. Soon they heard the hounds and horses clear the stables and enter the woods. Quickly their barking grew more distant as they followed the more obvious scent trail.

"That should buy us enough time to reach the others and get out of here."

Mira collapsed as she entered the small clearing where the others waited. Jurnigan and Derrick rushed up to her. Jurnigan rolled her gently onto her side, raising her injured left shoulder. The arrow entered from the back, just inside the shoulder blade. The tip poked slightly out the front, blood stained the front of her tunic red.

“Damn thing skewered her,” he snarled as he cut the fabric, exposing the arrow point.

“We got about a five minute head start, was the last thing she said,” Finn said breathlessly.

“I need to stabilize her for transport,” Derrick stated urgently.

With stone shears he removed the length of shaft protruding from her back, snapping it off flush with her skin. He quickly wrapped her shoulder in a tight bandage to secure the piece that remained inside. Jurnigan shouldered here and they got moving. They headed back towards the cave entrance.

The grey forces secured all the roads and footpaths leading in and out of town. Hounds scoured the area. Fortunately the cave with the consuming darkness was not regarded as a viable escape route.

They made it to the cave without further resistance. Before they entered Derrick stopped Jurnigan to check Mira’s pulse.

“We have to save her now or she won’t be alive when we exit. Put her down on her back.”

He opened his pack and and unrolled an instrument kit he had been preparing over the past few weeks. He pulled out several sharp instruments and held them in front of Jurnigan.

“Fire, please.”

Jurnigan pulled out a small piece of wood from an unseen pocket and rubbed it between his hands. It flared up into a bright flame.

Derrick sterilized the instruments then knelt down next to Mira. In two quick motions he made an incision then removed the arrowhead and remaining segment of shaft. Blood overflowed the incision.

“Slow her pulse. I need to see what to fix.”

Pennirell placed his hands on here, invoking Leaf as calmly as he could muster.

“Good. Hold that. I see it. The head nicked an artery. Hand me that needle and thread.”

Hounds bayed in the distance.

“We need to be gone in three minutes.” Jurnigan gazed into the distance.

Derrick stitched furiously, growling in response to being rushed.

“Will it hold for ten minutes?” Pennirell looked on.

“I think so. I will carry her. Please collect my surgery kit and pack.”

Derrick scooped her up gently and walked to the cave, invoking Clay as he went to steady his hands. Through his anger he managed to think I dare the cave to try anything on my patient.

He walked straight in and down to the waypoint. He was so intent on protecting her that it did not occur to him that he had never transited a waypoint solo before. He simply entered.

He walked out by the old stone tor in diminishing daylight. He set Mira down on a smooth patch of earth and checked her pulse. Pennirell joined him and laid the kit down beside him. Derrick saw deep red leaking from his sutures.

“No!” He swung the quiver off his back, temporarily contacting the sapling it held. “No! I’m not losing you!” He screamed with not just his voice, but his entire being.

He grabbed the makeshift scalpel and reopened the incision.

A voice echoed inside a dark place. A brief shimmer of light. A flash of emotion. Anger. Then a pause, followed by a strange transition. Love. A leaf moved on the sapling.

Derrick worked furiously, barking orders at Pennirell and Jurnigan. Despite this she was slipping away. Derrick yelled for more input from the two spell practitioners.

“This is the limit of my ability, I can do no more.” Pennirell sighed.

“I need more energy to heal this artery. I cannot get it by myself.”

“We are losing her,” Jurnigan said heavily.

Dierdre knelt down beside Derrick and put her hands on Mira. She reached into the earth and drew such power that Pennirell and Jurnigan both drew back. Grass within a thirty foot radius bent towards her. Life flowed into Dierdre, and then to Mira.

Derrick guided the artery back together, where it sealed. He did the same to the incision. Mira gasped, then began breathing normally again.

Dierdre sat back, hands on her knees, smiling. Withing giving it a second thought Derrick hugged her.

“Welcome back.”

“She alone did what together we could not,” Pennirell confided with Jurnigan.

“What have we got here?”

“At least she’s on our side.” Jurnigan slapped him on the shoulder.

“I respect your admonitions about the cave. I was not fully convinced myself until Derrick spoke up,” Pennirell offered as an olive branch.

“It just felt wrong. Yet here we are – we’d have lost Mira without them. My instincts on this sort of thing are generally reliable.”

“Maybe you sensed the true danger, not knowing it was more to Mira than Dierdre.”

“Perhaps. But enough ruminating for now. Let’s hear from Finn what they learned.”

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Finn detailed the events from the port town, with Mira joining in about halfway through. When they were finished Jurnigan stopped pacing and faced the group.

“What I can’t figure out is how they are keeping an operation this size a secret. Why are none of the local Lords outraged over this theft?”

“The grey forces may be more subtle than we thought,” Rachael put forth. “These lands are hotly contested, ever changing from one hand to another. This whole operation could be on lands in the middle that neither neighboring Lord feels confident they could take.”

“Discreet payments to one or both parties may be enough incentive to look the other way. Further, otherwise idle hands from their villages are finding work, thus removing some causes for unrest in their realms,” Pennirell added to her comments.

“They are hiding most of their cards, for sure,” Mira spoke while testing the movement of her left arm. “The folks there don’t like them, but think no more of them than any other strict, authoritarian Lord. I doubt anyone in that port has ever heard a grey blade when drawn, nor has any idea how they are made.”

“We need to know who is financing this, and where they are based,” Rachael concluded. “We are going to need more sustained surveillance. This information is alarming, but nothing Lord Dubuque can act on.”

“You are correct. What do you suggest next?” Pennirell looked at Rachael.

“None of us are trained spies. Our two best covert people are now compromised, hounds would see through any disguise if they returned. I think it is time we return. Lord Dubuque has people he could send in.”

“What are the odds he buys in?” Jurnigan spoke from behind, having resumed pacing again. “He might say it’s too far from home to be of concern.”

“The iron market is less than a day’s ride from his realm on horseback, that may be a better place to start,” Pennirell suggested.

“Agreed. He will not like like greys that close. I believe he will act upon that,” she stated with some confidence.

They departed via the stone tor waypoint and regrouped on arrival. They transited the next few waypoints in the same manner, finally appearing in the tent by the great oak. A startled guard snapped to attention, then reached outside and rang a bell.

“Welcome back, ma’am,” he said towards Rachael. “Someone will be along shortly to collect you.”

Five minutes later two of Lord Dubuque’s personal carriages pulled up.

“Ever ridden in one of these?” Pennirell asked Rachael. She shook her head. “I’ll try not to scratch the upholstery,” he added with a grin.

Riding was such a pleasure after so many hours of walking. Dierdre looked out the window and watched the scenery go by, reminiscent of riding trains back home. As they approached the manor she smiled that this would be her first visit with neither bindings nor subterfuge.

The carriages stopped in front of the main house. Lord Dubuque, Hav, Stamford and a handful of servants stood waiting. Mr. Woogins bolted from Hav’s side, running directly to the carriage Dierdre rode in. She stepped out and threw herself on the lawn.

“Woogie!”

He pounced over her, his paws landing on either side of her head. He licked her forehead then lay directly on top of her, tail wagging furiously.

“He do this often?” Jurniga asked Hav.

“Never, not before their arrival.”

Lord Dubuque received them in his dining room. Rachael began delivering her report. Her matter-of-fact tone and detailed notes lent credence to the incredible events that transpired. Finn and Hadley confirmed key points when asked. Lord Dubuque stopped her when she described the stake-out in the woods by the iron market.

“You say you felt a thrumming energy emanating from this Sirinha?” His expression indicated he was having a hard time believing this.

“A short demonstration may help,” Jurnigan offered.

Lord Dubuque eyed him suspiciously, having recalled his prior display at the Sheridan Inn. Despite his misgivings he nodded assent.

Jurnigan closed his eyes. The air in the room began to vibrate, then pulse. The intensity grew quickly, soon everyone felt a deep bass sensation in their chests. Lord Dubuque moved to the edge of his chair, intrigued. The windows began to vibrate, followed by the plates and glasses. Stamford raised an eyebrow towards Pennirell.

“No harm will come,” he said reassuringly.

The pulses subsided. Lord Dubuque turned to Rachael.

“Was that the phenomenon you felt?”

“Yes, sire. Albeit more distant, and,” she paused to think of the right words.

“More restrained.”

“Meaning?”

Pennirell stepped in.

“Meaning one of a few things. It could be that Sirinha is not yet skilled enough to conceal her power, which I believe to be unlikely. She could be so powerful that nothing can conceal her true abilities, which is also unlikely. I believe she let out just enough to act as a gauntlet, thrown down as bait to any that might be tempted by such challenges.”

“Are such things possible?” he wondered aloud. “How does one defeat such a foe?”

“Employ a few new elements from us, along with tactics your guards already know. We can cover this later.” Pennirell reassured him.

“Thank you. Ms Donahue, please continue.”

She continued on faithfully, even including the meeting of the two forest dwellers. Lord Dubuque spoke a private word to Stamford, who stepped out. Finn and Hadley were corroborating her account when Stamford returned with Mrs Bram. He turned to address her.

“Have you any oregano in your stores? I do not recall this herb.”

Pennirell admired his acumen in finding a way to independently verify a fact so quickly.

“Why yes. We’ve only just gotten it a month ago. Came by ship, that one. The roast chicken two nights ago had it.”

Stamford remembered this, then nodded towards Lord Dubuque.

“Thank you, Mrs Bram. That is all.”

Rachael hesitated when she got to the cave, it was just too fantastic.

“The next leg of our journey was a nightmare made real. I have no words for the darkness we had to traverse in the cave. We nearly lost Dierdre in the passage.”

“Is this element contained within the cave, or is it germane to the threat posed by the grey forces?”

“It is a singular thing, wholly within the cave to my knowledge.”

“Very well, we may return to it later. Proceed.”

She detailed the mining activities, the port city and the vessel traffic. Finn stepped forward to describe his operations in the town with Mira. Lord Dubuque

listened intently to everything. When they had finished he sat back and thought for a minute.

“Ms Donahue, recommendation.”

“Further surveillance. We observed real threats, but of unknown immediacy. Infiltrate the iron market, given its proximity. Send vendors with viable wares to sell. Transfer information in the resupply carts. Consider sending a spy to the north as a longshoreman seeking work.”

“Mr. Pennirell, your thoughts?”

I concur with Rachael. We also need to know where those ships were going. A vessel could be employed to track their movements.”

“I see the point, however the hire of an entire vessel for such a length of time is prohibitively expensive. Let us learn more from the iron market before spending more on this.”

Pennirell remained silent. He was frustrated their scouting expedition findings were not sufficient to warrant a larger response. However he could not fault him for being pragmatic. Pennirell exchanged glances with Jurnigan. He shrugged and returned a look that indicated it was not his idea to involve Lord Dubuque.

Stamford noticed the interchange.

“Do either of you have anything to add?”

“I fear the looming threat is more immediate than our observations convey. However I cannot fault his Lordship for acting only upon direct evidence.”

“And?” Lord Dubuque prompted, sensing that he was holding something back.

“Conventional responses may prove too slow to be effective. We must effect some sort of flanking maneuver, something to get ahead of them.” He opened his mouth to say more, then thought better of it.

“You have something in mind.”

“Unconventional tactics can sometimes prove valuable. However, your Lordship,” Pennirell gestured around him at the orderly manor.

“Point noted. We will discuss this no further. Mr Ashwood, please accompany Mr Pennirell and Jurnigan to a suitable location where they may talk freely.”

“Aye, my Lord.”

The three of them rode back to the tent under the great ok.

“Henge waypoint?”

“That’ll work. You ok to go solo?”

“Aye.”

They reconvened in the woods just outside the henge. Finn made a point of not contributing to the conversation, but stayed within earshot. Lord Dubuque need to maintain plausible deniability, and at the same time stay informed.

“I know some profiteering sailors back in Morgansea that would relish the opportunity to relieve an ore ship of her payload.”

“Ha!” Jurnigan slapped Pennirell on the shoulder. “I was hoping you had a trick or two tucked in those fat sleeves. Privateers – we don’t even have to pay them.”

“Well, not their salaries at least. We will end up exchanging something for their knowledge gained, and perhaps some of the goods sold.”

“How long have you known them?”

“Since my youth. I learned to sail with a few of them before they chose that line of work.”

“How long would they need to get up north and back?”

“Less than a week, assuming typical weather.”

“Do we risk tipping our hand if the greys catch them?”

“They will not have any information to share. All we give them is a tip on the location, and mention that we might know a discreet buyer.”

“What’s the worst case outcome?”

“If they get captured alive and forced into service as conscripts, adding to the grey numbers.”

“How good are they?”

“They have survived this long.”

“I don’t see how we can say no. We don’t have a lot of other options. Can you brief them on the special threats they will face?”

“Yes. We will not accompany them, but you and I can supply them with a few useful tools. Further, their captain is a man of several talents.”

“Let’s go.”

Pennirell turned to Finn.

“Mr. Ashwood, we shall visit Morgansea briefly. I shall seek to acquire some more oregano from a spice trader, as my stores have recently run empty. I trust you can find your way back independently?”

“Aye.” Finn smiled and departed.

[36]

Pennirell and Jurnigan arrived in Morgansea and headed directly to the waterfront. They walked past the usual working docks, full of merchant ships and activity, down to a quieter section. The ship they sought was moored by itself. The planks underfoot in this part of the docks could use some maintenance. The exterior of the ship gave the same impression, but it was a ruse. The Corvus was a tightly run ship with unseen armaments.

Pennirell made a curious call as they approached. A man appeared atop the gang plank, arms crossed.

“May we board, good sir captain?” Pennirell asked with more pomp than necessary.

“I’m not sure, your last tip nearly sent me to the rocks.”

“I did not tell you how to steer, I just shared a location. As I recall you did quite nicely for a while after that haul.”

The man’s expression changed to a grain. He waved them aboard.

“Thank you, Captain Rowe. Please meet my associate, Mr. Jurnigan.”

As soon as Jurnigan stepped aboard he felt the ship pulsing beneath his feet. He felt a similar energy when he looked at the captain. He closed his eyes and reached out with his senses.

“Damn! Did you enchant the whole ship?” He exclaimed, voice brimming with enthusiasm.

“More than that. The very planks within her still live. She still has the soul of her original tree. She has further enchantments too, but she is a proper spirit in her own right.”

Jurnigan wandered down the deck, dragging his hand along the rail. He noted very few nails. Joints and seams in the wood were hard to find. A boyish grin covered his face.

“How on earth did you pull that off?” He asked while looking up at the mast.

“Ah, some things are trade secrets. Perhaps another time.”

He gestured for them to enter his quarters.

“What have you got?” he asked after closing the door behind him.

Pennirell explained the situation, and of their need for intelligence about the grey fleet. Captain Rowe listened intently, his eyes focused on the map that covered his table. He sat quietly for a while after Pennirell had finished.

“Sailing into a military fleet is vastly different than dealing with a solitary ship. Further, these grey vessels likely have enchantments of their own. At first glance this is suicide. But you already know that. So then, what is the new angle you propose?”

“We have recently made some advancements in useage of darkness that we can share. Target the rearmost ship of a convoy and make your approach at night. Wrap the darkness around your ship as a cloak. Becalm the target, then wrap it as well, thus blocking any emergency signals. Subdue her crew with this tincture. Remove the materials then follow at a distance, impersonating the rearmost ship, to ascertain their port of call.”

“Hold it. Follow? We’ll be making good our escape once we have the material.”

“We need to know where they are headed.”

“Ah, so these are the ulterior motives you mentioned, the intelligence part of this play. You did tell me this is a loaded target, now I see what you mean. There is a difficulty in your plan. Surveillance is best done unladen, for maximum speed. If we take enough goods to pay for the trip we will be too heavy for the second task.”

“Take both boats then. Conceal yours, and keep up appearances on theirs. Once you learn the destination you can set theirs to follow closely enough to buy you a day or two head start.”

“The idea is sound, what premium is offered for the second, more dangerous task?”

“We have nothing to bargain with. It is our hope the contents of the sealed crates will valuable enough to cover that.”

“And just as likely they hold unsaleable goods like grey blades. There is no bounty for removing those from circulation, I’m afraid. At the moment I am inclined to

pursue the cargo opportunity, assuming ore alone as recompense. I am disinclined for the latter.

“I don’t blame you.” Jurnigan had been quiet until now. “Flying into a hornet’s nest isn’t a good idea. Is there another way to get this done?”

They both turned towards him.

“Take the ore. Then while their crew are above decks go down and plant tracking stones in a few crates. Make it clear we only took ore and don’t care about stuff we can’t sell. Make for home. Leave them tied in binds that disappear after a day. They’ll sail for home rather than pursue. Once the crates are offloaded we need is one stone to hit the ground, then Mica would know where it is.”

Pennirell got up and started pacing, hand on his chin.

“If there handlers are skilled the stones will remain off the ground.”

“How about add some to the ballast? They wouldn’t suspect those,” Jurnigan countered.

“You’re getting closer,” Rowe noted. “A fully laden ore ship will not need to offload much ballast, however they will likely need to do some balancing.”

“That will gain us knowledge of the harbor. Let us push our luck a bit further. Leave some ore behind, saying your stores are full. Mix some tracking stones into the ore itself. Ore handlers will not be skilled practitioners like those dealing with the crates.”

“Done. We shall sail tomorrow. Please prepare the tracking stones for both ore and ballast, as well as your other remedies.”

They saw Captain Rowe and the Corvus off the next day at dawn, then made their way back to the center of the waterfront.

“Why didn’t you propose tracking stones the first time?”

“Direct surveillance is always better. There are many things that can be learned that way, like harbor fortifications, vessel counts and others. I wanted to see if he was open to the idea. I harbor no grudge that he was not.”

They walked into a market that sat opposite the main wharf. Merchants from every corner of the known world peddled their wares here. Pennirell led the way to the section with Mediterranean goods.

“So you’re actually buying more oregano, eh?” Jurnigan noted with a laugh.

“Oh yes, it is most delicious. I gave my last bit to the forest dwellers. I shall also be getting some more pasta, it is lovely with my tomatoes.”

After completing the purchases they went for tea at a place along the waterfront walk. They sat quietly eating bread and cheese, enjoying a moment of calm. Jurnigan motioned towards the horizon.

“Can she help?” He tilted his head towards the isle where Gwendolyn resides.

“She already has, quite a bit. We could not have given Captain Rowe the means to cloak two vessels in darkness without her insight.”

“Right, I know about that. I mean for later. When things get personal.”

“She is not one to take orders.”

“No, but she does not take kindly to threats nor direct attacks. Could be useful against someone like Sirinha.”

“I had not considered her for front line duty. You make an interesting point. Her powers have abated little, if at all.”

“Are you worried about brining in the rest of the order?”

“Yes, at least until we can be sure who we can trust. I believe at least one from our ranks is actively engaged with this business of the coils.”

“Have you got any ideas for figuring out who’s who? Discerning loyalties and all that sort of intrigue makes me sick.”

“I am just skilled enough to know that I am out of my league. I could ferret out answers once or twice, but in so doing would reveal my hand and lose the larger picture. However we have just befriended one is astute in such matters. Perhaps he could help.”

“You can’t be serious. We barely know him. We don’t know where his true loyalties lie.”

“His loyalties will be to protect his lands and his authority to rule. Lords are tied to the land in a way that we are not. We must make sure our goals remain aligned with his. I do not see an issue there.”

“Fair enough. However, exposing the secrets of the order to him is going too far.”

“I suppose you are right. If not the direct approach, we could ask how he’d uncover hidden motives or players. Perhaps he can give us a scheme to follow.”

“That’s more like it. An advisor.”

They arrived back at Pennirell's residence by mid-morning. Mira was teaching Dierdre and Derrick more advanced forms of disguise. Pennirell motioned them inside and followed them down into his study. He briefed them on the visit to Morgansea and the plans for the Corvus. Jurnigan mentioned the idea to enlist Gwendolyn's help and the risks it brought.

"Do we want to rely on Lord Dubuque this much?" Mira asked.

"Do we have a choice?" Derrick countered. "Do we know anyone else as capable in political matters? At least for the moment our goals are aligned with his."

"I believe that last point is our strongest suit to play," Pennirell commented. "The order itself is decentralized by design, so that no single effort could destroy it. The dangers of aligning with regular authorities is that they will eventually want to give orders, then seek full control. We are structured to disappear when that happens. We go underground and resurface in friendly realms, or remain completely out of sight for as long as it takes. This has the drawback of never being able to know all the members, their whereabouts and loyalties."

"Thus we only ever align with local authorities during times of strong alignment and need. During such alliances, even though they are temporary, we have both benefited from such action. I believe now is one of those times."

[37]

The Corvus made good time, rounding the promontory of the Great Orme in just over a day. Captain Rowe blurred the vessel, having mastered these spells years before. He has never been a member of the order, but he has the abilities of a natural practitioner. He and Pennirell have been exchanging knowledge since their youth – sailing lessons for spells and other skills. While he does not possess the inventory of Pennirell, the spells that he practices are ones he knows very well.

He and his crew watched the activity in the harbor the rest of the day. By late afternoon several ships had departed, with one more about to leave. No other ships appeared to be nearing completion of their loading, so this is the break they sought.

He studied the ship as they finished their preparations. The Corendra was crewed by mostly conscripts, overseen by a half dozen Shadows and one person in the now-familiar black military outfit. The ship weighed anchor just before dusk. The Corvus slipped in behind, her enchanted planks silent in the water.

Over the years Captain Rowe had perfected a method to transfer the energy that normally was dissipated as sound – such as the cavitation of air beneath the hull, or the

slap of a wave – into forward motion. This tactic gave him the edge in speed over any other vessel of similar size.

The Corendra had no idea another ship was approaching until her sails went slack and the Corvus pulled alongside. Darkness enveloped both ships, blocking light and muffling sound. The Corendra sounded the general alarm, which could be heard through the dense darkness as a distant, muted clang.

Before boarding his crew fired arrows with small pouches in place of arrowheads. The pouches exploded on contact, forming small clouds that soon covered the deck. The sound of unconscious men falling was the signal to move. His own crew had previously ingested tea containing the antidote, rendering them immune to the effects.

Captain Rowe followed the boarding party, bow already notched with a special arrow. Pennirell had warned that the wearer of black would likely be skilled enough to counter the sleeping mixture, and must be dealt with separately. Soon Rowe spotted him by the forecastle, working the beginnings of a spell.

He aimed, went quiet, then fired. The stone-tipped arrow struck the black suit in the side of the head, just above the ear. He fell with a heavy thud, audible through the dark. This tactic was of his own devising. An arrow that shot to kill carries with it the energy of that intent. This energy can be perceived, just as Dierdre caught the certainty that Sirinha radiated. This energy precedes the arrow, just as bow wave arrives before the ship. A skilled practitioner can read this intent with enough time to react.

However, a knockout arrow carries almost nothing that can be perceived, aside from its rounded stone payload upon impact. Devoid of any points or edges that could

cause fatal injuries it sails silently through the air. Captain Rowe has neutralized dozens of practitioners more skilled than he in this manner. Pennirell was most impressed by this ingenuity, and taught him a multitude of spells in return.

His crew formed a human chain and began passing ore sacks from one hold to the other. Rowe tied the black suit securely and blindfolded him. Just then a few conscripts walked up the stairs from the hold, hands above their heads in surrender. The air was now mostly clear of the sleeping mixture, so they remained conscious.

“Do any of you want freedom from this vessel? I offer safe passage on my ship.”

“We cannot abandon. We have the stone under the skin,” the front-most replied.

“Show me.”

He pulled his collar aside, revealing a lump below the neckline on his back, behind his left trapezius muscle.

“Cannot be removed lest it explode. Same if we kill the maker. Good thing you didn’t.”

“I can safely remove that. How many of you wish to leave?”

“Six of us total. We’re a light crew.”

“Come, quickly. My doctor will heal you fully once we are away.”

He produced a leather pouch from his belt and had one of the men hold it open. He cut just below the stone on the first man, and caught some of his blood in the pouch. Once the bottom of the bag was saturated, he called out the stone with a gentle spell, being careful not to touch it. It fell into the bag. Surrounded once more by blood it remained inert. He repeated this process for the other five stones, then enlisted their

help. Together they gathered all the grey blades from the unconscious Shadows, and carried the black-suited maker to the stern. They tied off the wheel to maintain a fixed course. He had them draw all the swords and cast them overboard, keeping the scabbards. He released the occupants before the blades hit the water. Next he released the becalming spell, and both ships began moving again. Lastly he had two of the conscripts place the maker on the rail. He tied the back of stones to his vest.

“I had not yet made up my mind what to do with you, but now I know. Any man that places stones into others does not deserve to be spared.”

He slit black suit’s throat and pushed him over. About a minute later they saw a flash of light and heard an explosion, its sound muffled by water.

Eighteen minutes after the initial boarding they were away. The Corendra maintained its original course, crewed by six Shadows that would wake up in a few hours.

“Mr. Briggs, report.”

A stocky man walked up to him.

“Sir. We loaded three hundre ore sacks, each fifty pounds. Seven and half tons. Ballast stones placed. Ore stones placed in bags and resealed.”

“Very good. Please have the Helene heal these men. They will accompany us back.”

“Aye, sir. A word, sir.”

They stepped into his quarters, while another kept watch on the conscripts.

“I think some of those bags have work done on them. You should have a look.”

“Thank you. One of the conscripts is suspicious also. His stone was inert. He may be a spy.”

“They don’t trust no one, them greys.”

Captain Rowe went below decks with Briggs. Three ore sacks radiated energy that he could not identify. They proceeded to the doctor. Rowe selected the man with the fake stone.

“Please accompany us.”

The pulled in two others as guards and walked down into the hold.

“What can you tell me about these three bags?”

“I don’t know nothing. They got ore in ‘em.” He spoke with a small air of defiance.

Captain Rowe reached out with his senses. He could feel energy consistent with a low grade practitioner.

“Hoping to work your way up to Shadow by watching the conscripts?”

The suspect’s face gave nothing away, but a small spike of panic energy was plain as day.

“Let’s try this again. I’m going to open one of these bags right under your chin, so you can take a good look.”

The panic now spread to his face.

“N-no! They’re rigged to explode. Unless you know the spell. I don’t. Only the maker does.”

“Toss these three ore sacks overboard,” he said to Briggs.

“Thank you for that one bit of truth.”

He placed his hands on the injured shoulder and healed it. He voiced another command and the man fell unconscious. The two guards carried him up to to the doctor, who was just finishing up with the other five conscripts. They placed the spy on the table, where she and Rowe inspected him for other tracking devices. They found none, and confined him to the holding cell. They then went below decks and inspected every ore sack again.

The task took them several hours, during which time the Corvus was making all speed back around the Great Orme towards Angelsey.

“It would make sense that they would employ tracking stones, as we did on their ore, would it not?” he asked her.

“I would. If the stones have had enough time to let the spell set, then it will be nigh impossible to detect, even if we open every bag,” Helene replied.

“We shall use caution when offloading this then. Perhaps we should not sell it in Morgansea as planned, but further afield.”

“Also wise, unless we want them in our home port.”

“Unless our friends know a way to neutralize such spells. We shall require them posthaste upon arrival.”

“Aye.”

[38]

Rachael Donahue accompanied Peter Harcourt and Taylor Martin to the iron market. They pulled small hand cart containing metal craft for sale and some crates for ore purchase. Peter and Taylor are both trained covert operatives in Lord Dubuque's realm. Rachael was along both for security and to help identify persons based on her prior experience. She dressed as a merchant, carrying smaller weapons concealed in her garments. Their cover story was that Peter and Taylor are husband and wife merchants, with Rachael acting as her cousin.

The iron market sits at the intersection of three realms. Lord Dubuque's lands lie to the south and southwest, Lord Stratton's to the east, and Lord Phillips to the north and northwest. The market is physically on Lord Phillip's land, however he has never shown much interest in this small community market, far out in the country side. He maintained his focus on his larger markets to the north and west. Lord Stratton was similarly occupied elsewhere, with her main interests lying to the east. This combined lack of attention has allowed the iron market to thrive as a place where one can purchase goods that span the spectrum of legality. The few sheriff's resources charged with this

region were corrupt and open to bribery, thus day-to-day law enforcement fell to the locals.

They pulled up to an open stall at the southeastern edge of the market and began to set up. Shortly thereafter a thickset, gruff man approached them.

“Pay up. Fee’s due.”

“What? Before we’ve sold anything?” Taylor asked.

“Stall fee. 10p.”

She considered the practiced way he said this and decided to go along.

“There you go mister...?” She left the question hanging.

“Jenkins,” he spoke while walking away.

They finished setting up and quickly began taking customers. They enjoyed brisk business all morning.

“Decent business, but we haven’t learned anything yet,” Rachael observed quietly.

“Patience,” Taylor replied.

“Try to look a little more bored,” Peter offered helpfully.

“Come on, let’s go and find some lunch. Peter can cover for a while.” She grabbed Rachael by the arm and they walked towards the center of the market. Once there, Taylor and Rachael exchanged a knowing look, confirming this is the place Mira had described as containing the waypoint. They recognized Jenkins sitting at the edge of the small clearing with another thug, and a third, very large man. Mira’s information only included the first two.

“What do you make of him, the big guy?” Taylor asked.

“Bad news. Same energy as her,” she said with a frown.

Taylor thought for a minute.

“You’ve really taken to this energy stuff, eh? Too much time with that odd crew?”

She said lightly, grinning.

“Yeah, looks like. But I can feel it now, plain as day. I guess I was ignoring it before, since the world didn’t just change overnight for me.” She noted a skeptical look on Taylor’s face.

“Watch.”

She laid her fork and knife flat on her palm. She concentrated, then the fork slowly began to hover an inch above the knife. She released it. Taylor’s eyes grew wider, but not by enough for anyone else to notice. The large man next to the thugs looked immediately around, having felt the use of energy. Unable to pinpoint it, he resumed his feigned indifference. Taylor looked from him back to Rachael with a questioning face.

“Yes, I think so. I won’t do that again. Convinced?”

“No. And yes. My training tells me to ignore such nonsense. But my instincts tell me you are being sincere. And that big guy definitely reacted.”

“So what do we do next?”

“We listen,” Taylor said while looking towards a large party entering the seating area.

“You don’t know that’s what he meant.”

“Two tons by lunch sounds pretty clear to me. We’re a full half ton short. Mine is slowing a bit.”

“Rubbish, it ain’t the mine’s fault. He’ll tear you up if you say that.”

“No, it’s true. We dug the same as before. The seam is ending. We got to move somewhere else.”

“Ain’t nothin left. Everyone diggin out in such a hurry. Bound to end sometime.”

“Where’s it all going?”

“You don’t ask, if you know what’s best.”

“What for? This ain’t gold. Just iron ore. Why all this fuss? It’s not like we’re at war or nothin.”

“I ain’t speculating. However I did hear there’s a lot of traffic going west. Mostly moving after nightfall.”

“Where you hear that?”

“I got my sources.”

“Don’t matter. We’re short today. Won’t get paid til we find another half ton.”

“Don’t like that bloke. Creepy.”

“Don’t have to like him. His money is good enough.”

Rachael and Taylor stood and made their way out of the food vendor’s stall, having stayed as long as they felt comfortable.

“We should watch them and see who their buyer is,” Taylor suggested. “Let’s go relieve Peter, he can tail them.”

They hustled back back to their stall and updated Peter. The miners were still finishing lunch when he identified them. He moved in a wide circle, pretending to shop while maintaining contact. When they left he moved to a parallel aisle and followed their progress. They left the market heading north on the main road. Within a few minutes they turned right onto a well-worn path into the hills. Peter continued north, then doubled back when they were out of sight. He heard horses approaching and stepped off the road. Two riders passed by heading south, both in nondescript cloaks. He walked normally down the road until they were out of sight, then slipped into the brush. He moved quietly through the forest cover to a hillside overlooking the mine. Several tunnel entrances could be seen, with people coming and going frequently. Carts of ore-laden earth exited the tunnels, then were dumped in the clearing for sorting. Peter watched them work until four o'clock.

A cloaked figure walked up the path into the clearing, dressed similarly to the two riders.

"Well? Do you have my two tons yet?" A gravelly voice asked.

"It's here," said the lead miner, gesturing to a pile of sacks.

The hooded man handed him a small pouch of coins. The miner counted the contents.

"You're short."

"You're late."

"Right. We're through here. You find another lot to work this pit. Your deadlines ain't possible no more." The other miners nodded agreement.

The hooded man considered this, then growled and began walking away.

“Deliver it to my carts in the market.”

Peter laid low until the hooded man was gone, then worked his way back towards the road. He stopped in the last bit of cover, his way blocked. The hooded man stood at the intersection of the foot path and the main road. He held his head cocked at an angle, listening for something.

Peter sat utterly still. He recalled odd warnings from those three curious folks, instructing him to clear his mind at times like this. Given the sense of unease he got while looking at the cloaked man, it no longer seemed odd. He envisioned himself as part of the greenery, just another bush. A feeling of calm washed over him after a few minutes.

The hooded man resumed walking. Peter waited until he was sure his target had arrived at the market before moving again. He had no trouble spotting the two ore carts that stood waiting. The miners arrived shortly thereafter, pushing small carts by hand, each laden with a few hundred pounds.

The hooded man conversed with two others that looked like the riders he saw earlier. Just then the giant from the marketplace center wandered over. He spoke to them while gesturing back over his shoulder. He pointed to the section of the market containing his stall. He felt fear well up in him momentarily, until his training kicked in. The big man turned suddenly and looked directly at him. Peter kept walking nonchalantly past them. One of the hooded men broke off to follow him. Peter stopped at a garment merchant's stall. He held out some fabric, turning to view his follower.

The hooded man lingered a few stalls back, not trying very hard to remain unnoticed. Peter estimated him to be one of the Shadows that he had been informed about.

Peter weighed his options. As a new arrival at the market he could play innocent and walk right up to the Shadow and ask for directions. He momentarily considered losing him, but decided against it, not wanting to arouse suspicion. He chose to act unaware of the Shadow and return to the stall. As he approached he blinked slowly several times at Taylor. She stood and stretched, taking in the surroundings. Peter walked behind their small table and sat on a stool. The Shadow came to their stall and began looking at their merchandise, saying nothing. Their goods gave no details about their origins – all the items could have come from any of the neighboring realms. Frustrated, the Shadow picked up a piece of cutlery and walked away.

“You need to pay for that,” Peter insisted.

Rachael stood to intercept him, but Taylor put a hand on her shoulder. The Shadow kept walking, paying them no attention. When he was gone Taylor spoke.

“Regular merchants would not stand up to organized thugs like that, not alone. That was a test.”

Rachael sat back down. Peter briefed them on his observations of the ore buyer. Rachael confirmed the hooded figures are Shadows, albeit with their cloaks inert, thus fully visible. Peter sat thinking, then leaned forward on his stool.

“Cloaks are great for rain, or hiding. But they are a liability for fighting, they block peripheral sight and noise. Why wear them all the time?”

“I believe for intimidation. Faces in shadow are harder to read. The cloaks also give them some extra abilities. When the cloak is active the upper body nearly disappears. These are also their lowest ranking soldiers. They have some skills but are not accomplished practitioners. Higher ranks are more skilled and do not need special garments to become invisible. Sirinha never wore one.”

Rachael paused, then looked at each of them.

“They’ve made it clear they run this place. Now what?”

“We track their ore movements.” Taylor produced a small pouch of stones.

“Your friends assured me they can follow these. We need to get them onto those carts. We also need to assess their numbers. We will create a small disturbance and see who shows up.”

They closed down their stall just before dusk, then moved in closer to the center of the market near other vendors that would also be staying the night. They made sure they had a clear view of the waypoint. The ore carts Peter had seen earlier were gone, but others were lining up. The carts were closely watched, getting access to one would not be practical. Several ore merchants were still active, however, providing another avenue to pursue. The other part of their cover story was to purchase small quantities of ore for their metal shop back home. Rachael and Taylor visited the nearest vendor.

“Good evening, sir. We need to buy a few bags, what have you got?”

“Evening, ladies,” replied a white-haired man with broad shoulders. “Just this over here is left.” He motioned to a small pile of ore bags next to a barrel containing samples.

Rachael walked over to the samples and scooped up a handful, drawing the merchant over. Taylor slipped in behind him and moved to a large mound of sacks. She slipped stones into two bags, then stood up straight.

“What about these?” She asked with a hand on one of them.

“Sold. Those are going out tonight.”

“Well business seems good. Fair price?”

He snorted.

“They tell me the price,” he muttered quietly.

“Where’s it all going?”

“I don’t ask. They aren’t a very forthcoming lot. Carts start off to the south, that’s all I know. Everyone can see that, though. You must be new.”

“Yes. We’re selling our metal craft and getting some raw materials for the trip back.”

“Oh, is that so? Back where?”

“A half day’s travel east,” she lied.

“The quality of this batch is a bit rough,” Rachael said from behind. “How much?”

“Five bags to the half crown.”

Taylor whistled and shook her head.

“Too rich for us. We’ll check a few more prices.”

“S’fine with me. I’ll be here if you change your mind.”

They visited three more stalls, and were able to successfully place one more stone. They eventually returned to the first vendor to buy. They negotiated three bags for a quarter crown. They each carried one, and sent Peter back for the third.

Next they secured everything for the night, then discussed the plan.

“We may need to be ready to leave in a hurry in the morning, carry some extra provisions.” Taylor advised.

“Where do we want to put it?” Peter asked about the device that Pennirell and Jurnigan had prepared.

“The old thieves’ clearing is out. Too heavily watched. That’s about the right distance, though.” Rachael offered.

“How about the mine you watched earlier?” Taylor turned to Peter.

“The location is good, but do you think they’ll take retribution on the miners? Might think they did it.”

“Can’t risk it, so that is out. How about the hills due east?”

“That’s our escape route in case things get too hot.”

“West of the main road, and north of the old thieves’ clearing is all that’s left. It’s all forest and brush in there.”

Peter snuck away from the market and crossed the road. He ducked into the shrubs and made his way into the forest for a hundred yards heading west, and as much again to the north. He found a small clearing, then took three leather pouches from his belt. He set the largest of the three flat on the ground, still sealed. Then he opened the

other two and poured them onto the third, being sure their contents mixed thoroughly. He immediately felt the heat of the reaction. Pennirell estimated fifteen minutes before the mixture burned through the first bag, at which point one must be far away. Peter made haste back to the edge of the road.

Ore carts were being maneuvered around on the road in a painfully slow dance. Peter could not appear directly from the forest here without looking suspicious, but he also could not wait for the reaction to complete either. He crept farther north, away from the activity near the market.

He heard a sound that froze him in his tracks. Two handlers were brining hounds down the road from the north. As they grew nearer those on his side of the road started pulling at their leads, directly towards him. Peter went quiet again, clearing his mind despite the fear. He settled his breathing. Slowly he felt the same calm descend upon him as before when he was following the Shadow. He went deeper still, driven by the urgency of the situation. Momentarily all concept of self and mission vanished.

He blinked and came back to himself as the sound of the dogs grew quieter. They were moving to his right, towards the market. Time to move. He dashed across the road and into the cover on the east side, then worked his way back to their section of the market via the eastern hills. The commotion was just starting as he returned to their cart.

“It just activated. I could feel it from here,” Rachael said, pointing with her gaze towards its location.

“Any issues getting back?” Taylor looked at Peter, who was sweating.

“Hounds, just up the road to the north. Delayed my crossing back over the road.”

The two thugs that occupied the bench near the center remained unaware, however the larger, third man reacted instantly. He manipulated something on his belt, then blew an inaudible whistle. Several Shadows convened around him near the central clearing, including the hound handlers.

“Seems to have gotten their attention,” Rachael observed.

Just then a figure walked out of the waypoint. She strode with a casual arrogance that was unmistakable. Rachael recognized Sirinha immediately. She looked away to settle her thoughts, ensuring she did not send a spike of recognition energy her way.

“That her?” Peter asked.

Rachael nodded. They overheard her speak to the large man.

“Good work, Olafur.”

She began giving instructions, then went quiet. When she opened her eyes again she was pointing to the location of the device. Four more Shadows emerged from the waypoint, each carrying two buckets. They placed in a row on the ground and stepped aside. The handlers brought the hounds over and had them sniff each bucket. A few hounds raised their muzzles to shake soil off.

“Oh no! They have our scent. There were eight of us on the last incursion. I’d wager that soil is from where each of us lay in wait for them, south of the thieves’ clearing.” Rachael looked at Peter and Taylor.

“I have to get out of here. I am now a danger to the mission.”

“Your scent is all over the cart, the supplies and even us. If you cannot stay then we all must go,” Taylor noted.

“Suit up. Abandon mission,” Peter said quietly.

“Which way?” Taylor looked to Rachael.

She indicated east, the same route they had taken before. Peter shook his head, pointing to the northern end of the market. Two handlers were taking hounds east into the hills.

“Ok, east is out. The main road will be watched. North and west is out. What about south and west, back across the road?”

“The thieves’ trail goes west, and another goes south from their clearing. That’s where we were last time. That might be possible.”

The hounds and their handlers that were gathered in the central clearing headed west and north towards the device. Sirinha, Olafur, and the Shadows followed them.

“We go south and west then. Even if their traps and markers still exist in the woods there it is our best shot. The henge waypoint lies that way farther west.”

They moved casually to the southern end of the market encampments. Those huddled around the center for safety overnight talked in hushed tones as they watched the events. Nobody noticed a few people walking around in the twilight. They crossed the road without incident and slipped into the woods. Rachael remembered the approximate route they had taken during their previous escape, this time she attempted to navigate it in reverse. Precision was not necessary, head southwest until the river. She ran through the fading light with less difficulty than she expected. Soon they came

to the trail that runs north-south, from the thieves clearing to the river. The river runs southeast here, with the trail ending on its eastern bank. She stopped just before stepping onto the trail.

“Duck under any branches that cross the trail, they are rigged as alarms.” She ran faster now, Taylor and Peter on her heels.

Olafur had taken the lead, and led the hounds and their handlers to the place where Peter had deployed the device. Sirinha followed, stopping occasionally to listen, head cocked slightly to one side. The hounds were not much use yet she considered, perhaps different makers were at work.

Two hounds yelped then went quiet. They lay strangled by a mass of roots. Olafur knelt down, then placed his hand on the earth. The roots relaxed, releasing the two dogs before they suffocated. One of the other hounds followed a scent trail to the center of the now-dormant roots, then barked. He found a hit. One of the prior intruders had returned.

Pennirell made the device to create the appearance of an active practitioner nearby. Contained within the sealed pouch were enchanted roots that would grow rapidly once free of the leather container. They would constrict anything moving near them. During their expansion they would also release a large amount of easily traceable energy. It was this energy that Olafur tracked. He looked up from the two injured hounds to Sirinha. She returned his gaze with a small shake of her head. No she has not figured this out yet.

She walked to the center of the roots by the hound that matched a scent. She saw the remains of a leather pouch. This could be the source of the scent. She spoke a few words into it then let it drop to the ground, where it sparkled faintly. She picked it back up and pocketed it.

“It was enchanted. Its maker need not have been here. Olafur, do you sense any ongoing spells at work?”

“Only the remnants of the one on the roots here. Nothing else.”

“It’s a decoy. Back to the waypoint, now!”

They ran back to the center of the market. Sirinha let each hound smell the pouch, which also had Peter’s scent. They immediately began tugging on their leads. Minutes later they stood around the cart where the three had been, just fifteen minutes earlier. The dogs were given access to items of fabric and leather such as bedrolls and other garments from the cart. They picked up the trail immediately.

Rachael was moving at a full run. She realized she could now sense the enchanted branches without needing to see them.

“Duck and roll.”

Taylor and Peter followed suit. They were nearly at the river when they heard hounds in the distance. They kept moving.

“Duck.”

Peter was the last through. He stepped on a loose rock while ducking the branch. He felt a crack and went down hard. Rachael and Taylor dropped to his side.

“My ankle. Can’t use it.”

They each got under an arm, then hobbled the remaining distance to the river. The hounds grew louder.

“We’ll never make it back up the river to where the thieves’ trail crosses.”

Rachael spoke while looking back towards the hounds.

“I know another trail that goes west, farther down river, just before the bridge,” Peter offered.

“There’s no trail along the banks going south.”

“We can float. Grab that log over there. Free it from the bank, then point it downstream. We keep only our heads up, on the far side.”

They rolled the partially floating log the rest of the way into the river. Rachael shivered as she submerged in the chilly water. She was glad to have the log for support, she could barely swim with the weight of her swords. The log moved rapidly once in the main current. Soon they rounded the corner and were out of sight.

The two fastest handlers arrived with their hounds moments later at the end of the same trail. The dogs ran a couple steps into the water, then stopped. The scent trail ended here. Soon they were joined by the other Shadows, followed by Sirinha and Olafur.

“They did not trip any of the branch spells,” she said while looking around. “We are being tested.” She turned to the lead handlers. “Could you ford the stream here?”

“Hard. Better to cross upstream at the main trail.”

“Yet no scent trail leads that way.”

“Correct.”

“Cross. Find their scent again on the far side.”

The first handler led his dog into the river. Soon the water became too deep to walk. The dog began swimming. The handler, also a Shadow, sank under the weight of his armaments. The dog reached the far shore and climbed out. It yelped along the bank looking for its handler.

Soon a figure crawled ashore on hands and knees, gasping for air. He had unbuckled his sword belt, and removed his cloak and vest. He climbed to his feet and moved away into the brush with his hound. They picked their way slowly through the dense forest, unable to find any obvious trail.

Sirinha cocked her head to one side. She went quiet, then spoke.

“Olafur, how many swords do you sense in the river here?”

The big man knelt and placed a hand on the river bed in shallow water.

“One. A grey. None other.”

“Either the intruders were unarmed or did not cross here.”

She and Olafur looked around. She called over a Shadow who was bearing a torch. Olafur pointed to a depression in the sand where a log recently lay. Sirinha turned to the fastest Shadow.

“Get riders and dogs to the bridge.”

He took off running to the east on a direct route to the main road. She turned to the remaining handlers.

“Take the river trail north to the main crossing. Bear west over the river. Flush them south.”

They departed, leaving only Sirinha and Olafur behind.

“I shall notify the council of these coordinated incursions. We will need to accelerate our plans. Let’s get down to the bridge.”

Rachael was shivering nonstop when Peter finally identified their exit.

“Leave something on the log,” Taylor said through blue lips. “To keep the hounds leading them down river.”

They each cut a strip of clothing and tied it to the log, then shoved it back into the current. They helped Peter up and resumed hobbling. A short distance up the trail Peter spotted in the faint moonlight a sturdy stick suitable for use as a crutch. They wrapped the top with some leather straps and were on their way at a much faster pace. Thirty minutes later Rachael sensed something.

“Stop. Off the trail.”

They slipped into the undergrowth and crouched down in the shadows. Moments later four men walked by, heading down towards the river. Once she felt they were far enough away she gave the signal to move again.

“Were they Shadows?” Taylor whispered.

“No. Probably just thieves.”

Taylor was curious about Rachael's new abilities, filing it away as something to ask later. An hour later they reached the edge of the clearing holding the henge waypoint.

"Let's move quickly. Once there, grab my arms."

"Are you certain about this?" Taylor worried. She and Peter had never seen waypoints in action before tonight.

"You saw yourselves those arrivals at the market. Now is not the time for further doubt."

They reached the edge of the henge when the hounds came at them. Two handlers had made the longer trip up the northerly trail from the river, being able to move at full speed. Rachael silenced the first hound, her sword flashing briefly in the moonlight. Taylor produced a dagger and sank it to the hilt in the second. The two Shadows were not far behind. They drew their swords, filling the air with shrieks.

The first was no match for Rachael. She felled him in a half dozen moves. The second closed on Taylor. Her dagger offered little resistance to a sword. She dodged the first slash, but was caught by the second. Her leather vest took the brunt of the damage. Peter stepped from behind a henge stone and clubbed the shadow with his crutch, breaking his collarbone. The Shadow moved the sword to his left hand and thrust it into Peter's abdomen. He fell in a heap.

Rachael removed the Shadow's left arm, then knocked him out with her hilt. She took his beacon stone and suicide amulet, then threw them into the woods. She did the same with his left arm, but kept his sword and scabbard.

“Quick, grab Peter.”

Rachael dragged the Shadow into the waypoint, while Taylor did the same with Peter. They locked arms, then disappeared.

The four of them collapsed into the tent under the oak. The guard saw the blood and rang an emergency pattern on the bell outside. Rachael instructed the guard to help Peter, while she tied a tourniquet around the stump of the Shadow’s left arm.

Derrick jumped out of the carriage before it had stopped moving. Rachael pointed to Peter, who was fairly pale by now. They loaded him and the unconscious Shadow into the carriage, then climbed in themselves. They were moving again in under a minute since their arrival.

Stamford gave orders when they unloaded. Derrick took Peter and a host of orderlies into the doctor’s quarters. Another took Taylor in the same direction. Guards took the Shadow. Rachael handed the grey blade to Stamford. He looked first at the sword, then at Rachael.

“Get some rest. You can deliver your report first thing tomorrow.”

Four Shadows pulled a log ashore just south of the bridge. The hounds barked excitedly nearby. Sirinha wandered down to the water’s edge. She held a torch over the log and saw the three pieces of fabric tied on. She spat on the ground, her expression full of rage. Olafur had never seen her lose her cool before. He stepped back.

“Twice! Twice they have gotten away. It is time we stop waiting for them to come to us. I will find them.”

[39]

The Corvus tied off at her usual berth in Morgansea. Captain Rowe disembarked and walked from the dock to the nearest patch of exposed earth. He placed a small stone directly on the ground. He felt it pulse a few times, then picked it up and returned to the ship.

One half hour later Pennirell, Jurnigan and Stamford arrived, having travelled by waypoint. Stamford was dressed as a merchant, giving away nothing about the identity of his true employer. Captain Rowe invited them aboard and into his quarters.

“May I speak freely?” He asked, looking at Pennirell.

“Fully. Mr. Green may hear everything.”

“I fear we may have brought back more than we bargained for. We will require your assistance before anything may be offloaded.”

He detailed the events from the operation, finishing with the five conscripts and the Shadow-in-training. He then brought forth the six scabbards from the grey blades. Stamford recognized them immediately, having taken one into custody the night before.

“I will gladly pay a bounty for the weapons you destroyed. I will retain the scabbards for my employer,” he offered.

“Done. What about the matter of the prisoners?”

“Free the five. The sixth will accompany us. I will pay the customary price for the capture of a spy.”

Captain Rowe nodded agreement.

“Now to the matter of the ore. I fear it may be traceable once on land. Three bags were obviously marked, which we threw overboard. However, subtle spells could exist in the remainder that I cannot detect. We do not want to reveal this location to the entire grey fleet. Stamford’s eyebrows rose at this alarming comment.

“To that end I sought to sell the ore in Caerleon, en route back. Once we came within sight of the harbor we abandoned the idea. It was swarming with activity. Dozens of ships from the same fleet were taking on ore, and heading north, presumably to the same destination as the one we intercepted. We docked to maintain appearances, then took on supplies. Talk on the docks indicates ore is coming in from the north and east.”

Pennirell and Jurnigan looked at each other.

“The iron market carts are likely headed there.”

“Further, the volume of activity has nearly doubled in the last six weeks. But hints indicate an end may be near. Once they have all they need, what will they do with all this ore?”

“I think we may find out soon enough,” Stamford thought aloud, “now that we have thoroughly kicked the hornet’s nest.” He turned to Pennirell. “Let’s see the ore.”

Captain Rowe led them down into the hold. Once there, Pennirell stepped aside, deferring to Jurnigan’s skill with metals. He stepped forward and laid his hands on a sack, then opened it. He thrust his hands in, fingers spread. He shook his head. Next he pulled out the wooden tool he had used to detect the spell in the earth. He sank it into the contents of the sack, which contained ore and some soil.

“The ore is clean, but the soil is not. Has the same delicate lacework spell I felt in the woods by the market. If this hits the ground they’ll know.”

“Can you remove it?”

“Not fully. I could get most of it, but a few grains here and there would get through. We can’t afford to offload this stuff here.”

Captain Rowe’s eyes narrowed, frustrated by the prospect of a hold full of unsaleable goods.

“Sell it in Londinium. Conceal the identity of your ship,” Stamford offered.

“We’d still lose money. The profit on ore is not that high.”

“I have other goods that require transport. We can cover the shortfall.”

“You’ll need to scour your hold once it’s gone,” Jurnigan added. “I can teach you the process.”

He nodded, then turned back to Stamford.

“How soon can you load your goods?”

“By nightfall.”

“Done. We sail tomorrow. I wish to be rid of this business sooner rather than later.”

The three of them returned directly to Lord Dubuque’s manor, arriving just before nine o’clock in the morning. Rachael’s report had been postponed until their return. They all convened in the large state room where Lord Dubuque conducted most of his business.

Rachael delivered the details of the previous day along with Taylor, whose injuries had been healed enough for her to move around. Peter was still recovering from surgery the night before and would be out of action for a while.

After the report Pennirell looked concerned, then took the floor.

“They are showing a disturbing amount of organization and learning. The soil samples with our scent will prove to be a persistent obstacle. Hounds will be able to detect the scent for weeks until it fully decays.” He went on to share the exploits of the Corvus.

“The time for small-scale incursions is coming to an end,” Stamford spoke.

Pennirell raised an eyebrow, pleasantly surprised. He had been worried that the current evidence would still not be enough to warrant larger action.

“The scale of the ore operation points to war, I fear,” Stamford continued. “The observations made by the captain removed any doubt.

Lord Dubuque considered the input.

“Have we learned anything from the prisoners?”

“No, neither has shared anything useful.”

“Bring the one you captured last night with his sword before me, outside.”

They moved to the training grounds while Stamford retrieved the injured Shadow. He emerged from the prison entrance with his remaining hand manacled to his waist. Stamford handed Lord Dubuque the grey blade. He opened it a couple inches. The noise was even worse than he expected, yet he showed no reaction. He sheathed it, then walked over to the Shadow and placed it at his feet.

“What is the name of the soul you imprisoned in it?”

“Susan,” the Shadow said with derision.

“Give me a reason not to execute you.”

“Sparing my life may buy you leniency from your future masters. But I make no promises.”

“What will they make with the ore in such large quantities?”

“Your subservience.”

“You’ll need to do better than that. Details, please.”

The Shadow laughed.

“Mr. Jurnigan, I have heard that you know how to release the one within such a weapon. Would you be so kind?”

Jurnigan stepped forward. The Shadow looked directly at him.

“She will find you.”

Jurnigan spoke a low command, releasing the blade. Everyone shielded their eyes from the flare of light. Nothing remained of the Shadow but ashes.

Dierdre let out a small sob.

“I felt her pass by. Susan.” She covered her eyes.

Taylor looked at Rachael, her face a question. Rachael nodded, confirming this is real.

“Bring forth the other.”

The prisoner from the ship was marched out, stopping in the center of the charred circle of earth where the previous one stood.

“Greetings. I am the Lord of this realm. What shall I call you?”

“James.”

“Where was your ship, the Corendra, headed?”

“North s’all I know. They didn’t tell me no names.”

“How many days under sail is the voyage?”

“Four to six, per the weather.”

“Why did you join their ranks?”

“I saw two choices – either be bowing down to them or join. I don’t like bowing.”

“Do their methods bother you?”

“I don’t have that luxury. None of your Lordy types helped keep my village from being overthrown. Busy getting rich instead. And your kind didn’t give me no option to join up and improve my lot.”

“A valid grievance. Where is your village?”

“On Angelsey.”

“What do you hope will happen next, James?”

The question caught him by surprise. He stopped and thought a minute.

“I don’t know. Are you going to kill me anyway?”

“No. If you help us we may have a hand in restoring your village, one day. If you decline you will reside in the dungeons, for the foreseeable future.”

James looked around him. Most of the folks assembled seemed like regular folks, not nobility. Some of them looked kind.

“If I help you it has to be in secret. That way if you lose I can still get in good with the greys. Keep me in the dungeons. I’ll help from there.”

Lord Dubuque was stunned by this response, though he did not show it. How far along are the grey forces in their war preparations that this man would prefer to remain in the dungeon than have freedom in this realm? How is nobody in the whole of the Isles aware of this? The level of corruption must be more rampant than anybody knows.

Lord Dubuque nodded. He approached James and waved Stamford over.

“Agreed. You shall remain in custody. No harm will come to you. If your information proves valuable we will release you after we prevail. Until then appearances will be maintained. Let us begin with your observations of their numbers and tactics.”

He turned to face Stamford.

“Please escort him to an isolation cell where you may talk freely. Dismissed.”

[40]

Sirinha approached the dias slowly. She kept her fear in check, presenting an air of confidence.

“Twice you have failed to capture anything but scent and fabric. Explain.”

“Council, we face an organized adversary. The level of skill deployed so early is singular, none of our other operations have encountered anything like it. Based on experience forces like these are not used until full scale conflict.” She worked hard to ensure this hinted that some of the blame lay with the council’s intelligence, without saying it. Anything less would look like she is making excuses.

“We do not normally tolerate such failures. However, a ship was taken the same day, confirming your statement. We will spare you this time. Move to the next phase. We will alert the other makers. Do not fail again. Now go.”

Sirinha bowed, then walked away seething with anger.

[41]

The Corvus moored in Londinium the next day under a false name, the Flanders. Decorative planks at the bow and stern disguised her profile. Captain Rowe disembarked with Briggs. They found buyers within the hour for all the goods, not unexpected in a city this size. Soon his men were handing off goods to longshoremen and payments exchanged hands. The ore was the last to be offloaded. Captain Rowe had seen to that, since he wanted to depart immediately once it was ashore.

Two hours later the hold was nearly empty. Rowe stood on the dock watching the operation. His men placed the ore sacks onto carts, which were wheeled into the warehouse situated at the base of the dock.

During transfer one of the bags fell off the edge of a cart and onto the dock. A faint pulse of energy echoed through the wood. Rowe maintained his composure while slowly looking around to see if anyone else noticed. None of the contents had spilled, so he was hopeful the signal went no further.

Two docks over a clerk in the attached warehouse looked up from his desk. He wore nondescript clothing befitting his position, but always with a layer of black underneath. He wandered out of his small office and stood looking at the docks and warehouses that stretched away to the left and the right. He closed his eyes momentarily but sensed nothing further. He returned to his desk.

Twenty minutes later the Corvus pushed back, then made for the ocean. Meanwhile the ore kept moving. Half of it was already out the other end of the warehouse being loaded onto a horse-drawn cart in the street. One of the sacks snagged a loose nail on the cart, spilling a few ounces onto the one beneath it. The worker was in a hurry so he just folded the snagged corner under the sack and swept off the small portion with his hand.

The clerk ran the length of his own warehouse away from the water, and out into the same street. He spotted the cart just as it began to move.

“Stop! Stop the cart!” He yelled as he ran alongside.

The driver pulled the reins, visibly annoyed.

“What’s all this, then?”

“This ore was stolen! Where did you get it?” The clerk demanded.

“I paid in full. Hands off my goods.”

“Who sold it to you?”

The driver pointed to the open door leading into the warehouse directly behind the clerk, then shook the reins to start moving again. The clerk wanted to reclaim the ore, but could not spare the time. He ran the length of the building to the waterfront

office. He was relieved to see more of the ore still there. He approached the clerk for this store, whom he knew.

“Where’d you get that ore? It’s stolen,” he said with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder.

“How do you know that? The bags aren’t even labeled. And why didn’t I hear about it. It’s not on the list.”

He weighed his options. He did not know enough to merit blowing his cover, so he elected for a softer approach.

“Call it a hunch. I know some folks. Said a ton and half went missing. Unlabeled sacks. Don’t want a lot of attention.”

“Oh, right, that kind of thing. Curious. This bloke just showed up and sold us one point five tons. I paid for it fair and square, though. If this is officially recognized as stolen I want recompense.”

“Fine. We can sort that out later. Who sold it to you?”

“Came off the Flanders, a Captain Jones. Seemed normal enough.”

“Where can I find him?”

“Gone. ‘Bout a half hour ago.”

“Thanks. I need to inform some folks.”

“I don’t want to know.”

Riders galloped at full speed down the banks of the Thames, heading towards the sea. No ships matching the description of the Flanders were seen. The river was thick

with ships, making the job of finding a single ship very difficult. The riders, two Shadows and a black suit, stopped at the end of the road. Several ships were heading seaward through the estuary, and one of which could be the Flanders. Two ships were heading north, and four south. The black suit cursed his luck.

The Corvus was the rearmost ship in the estuary. Captain Rowe sensed something was wrong. He scanned the banks with his glass, and saw the riders. Fearing a general search of all vessels he decided to give them a direction. He focused his attention on the black suit, then sent a small pop of recognition energy at him. The reaction was instant.

“That one. Send ships after her,” he pointed to the Corvus.

Captain Rowe gave the order for hard to port, indicating a northerly heading. It was already dusk, he should have until full dark before any ships would get close. He maintained course for close to an hour, long enough to be over the horizon. He then blurred the ship and turned south for the channel. He and Briggs watched two grey war ships move quickly past to starboard, heading north.

“That was close,” Rowe shared.

“Aye. Glad to be rid of it. And them.”

“For now, at least. I have a feeling we are not done with their type.”

“Southern ocean’s nice this time of year.”

The captain sighed.

“If we do that will there be anything to come back to? Are you prepared for a permanent change of scenery?”

Briggs watched the fading horizon.

“Not quite. Me mum still lives in Morgansea. Hate to see her polishin’ boots for them.”

“Same here,” he nodded. “We may need to let a few of our associates in on this. And for the rest of the journey remain on full alert. We gave them a bloody nose back by the Great Orme, they will deploy ships along all coasts from here to home.”

“Aye.”

[42]

Pennirell and Jurnigan called a private audience with Lord Dubuque. He received them in his state room, with Stamford standing by the door.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with us,” Pennirell began.

Lord Dubuque gestured for them to sit.

“What is the matter you wish to discuss?”

“We seek to involve others from our order, but there are many factions. We are purposefully decentralized. We need a means to discover who we can trust, going more broadly than our normal personal contacts and means that have sustained us thus far. We must find a way to made decisions based on their actions rather than their words. Jurnigan and I are not experts in this arena.”

Jurnigan laughed.

“You are too kind, Julius. One of your prized tomatoes would fare better in political circles than I.”

Lord Dubuque smiled, then did a rare thing. He spoke directly from a feeling, rather than share one of his normal, measured responses.

“You should train with Hav.”

Jurnigan's face expressed question.

"You will find in him a kindred spirit. Wooden weapons only. If you cause him permanent damage none of your peculiar skills will protect you from me."

Jurnigan smiled, then stood and bowed.

"That sounds like a much better use of a fine morning." He excused himself.

Lord Dubuque turned to face Pennirell.

"We find ourselves in the same plight. For an operation of such magnitude to exist with no public response indicates they have help. We must invent scenarios that will reveal true motives, yet without burning bridges with our allies nor tipping our hand to our enemies. A most delicate balance."

Pennirell listened intently, nodding.

"This is nothing new. Survival in my position requires a constant level of this sort, albeit performed on more natural schedules and fully concealed. The challenge now is to act quickly enough to be useful, without obvious contrivances to justify the urgency."

"We shall begin by moving on the iron market, with the stated purpose of quelling lawlessness that is spreading across our border. It is likely no one will react, as that region has changed hands many times. Further, it seems the grey operation has already peaked, so they may choose to ignore it also. However, it will set the stage for the next phase."

"That also gives us control of another waypoint. What do you have in mind once the market is secured?"

“That is when it gets interesting.”

Jurnigan walked from the main house over to the training grounds. The area was buzzing with activity. Several groups worked on various drills. He recognized Rachael leading one and Hav leading another. He picked up an oak training sword and joined Hav’s group, earning him a curious look.

“His lordship suggested this would be a better fit for my skills than that,” Jurnigan replied with a glance over his shoulder to the state room.

Hav laughed, then resumed the drill. They broke a half hour later. The guards and soldiers split into groups, chatting informally. He joined Hav and Rachael.

“Fancy anything a little more advanced, Mr. Jurnigan?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

He and Hav picked up their wooden swords and squared off. Without warning Hav attacked with several quick slashes. Jurnigan parried them easily, moving more quickly than Hav expected for such a large man. Hav increased the velocity and sophistication with each encounter, testing his limits. All the guards gathered around to watch. Soon the air filled with staccato bursts of wood on wood, with Jurnigan’s laughter the only other sound.

The speed further increased. Rachael thought the oak must be close to breaking. Then in a flash of movement too fast for most to see Hav parried Jurnigan’s thrust and placed the tip of his sword on the larger man’s chest.

“Well done!” Jurnigan laughed, wiping sweat from his brow. “I’ve not been bested by common tactics in ages.”

“Common tactics?” Hav questioned.

“You didn’t use any other energy besides your own muscles. Most remarkable.”

“What other tactics have you faced?”

“You’ve a bit of the smithy in you, as does Ms Donahue. If you leverage that you can go half again as fast, perhaps more.”

“Go on.”

“Your father forbade metal weapons with you. Ms Donahue,” he gestured for her to step forward. “Have you training blades without edges?”

A soldier presented one to each of them.

“Thrust at me.”

She thrust directly at his stomach. The blade glanced away, yet he did not move. Hav strode over and repeated the attack, with the same result.

“You can also use it to direct your own blade.”

He attacked Rachael at half speed. She parried his moves easily. Then one strike seemed to pass right through her sword. He finished the downward stroke and rested the blade atop her collarbone. She looked at her own blade for signs of damage or some trick.

“I flicked mine aside with energy, avoiding your block. Once past your defense, I let it return to its original course.”

“Is that like the hovering knife trick?”

“Same idea.” He turned to Hav. “You are both likely doing a little bit of this already. Have you ever wondered why the oaken blades feel so clumsy? It is not just their inferior balance. You must move them by brute force alone, unless you have skills like Mira or Dierdre. No doubt you are guiding your metal weapon with intuitive nudges. We can improve that.”

“Please do another demonstration.”

Jurnigan faced Rachael. They began at half speed with the dull metal swords, then accelerated, approaching full speed. After just a few seconds her sword flow halfway across the yard. Jurnigan’s tip rest atop her sternum.

“I never felt it coming,” she said incredulously.

“That’s because I cheated,” he replied, beaming. “Here, let me show you.”

During the past week at the manor Derrick took advantage of his time by teaching medicine to the doctors on staff and from the village. Dierdre and Mira attended also, to better learn anatomy and where to direct healing energy. Word got around and soon a steady stream of sick and injured villagers lined up at the door. For Derrick this was the first time since his arrival that he felt truly useful. Previously he felt like a fifth wheel, despite his contributions.

In addition to attending Derrick’s lessons Dierdre worked on her uncommon ability to draw power on a large scale. She sought to articulate the process well enough to teach it to others. Derrick and Mira were not having much luck with it yet, so she contented herself by practicing solo, ensuring her ability to connect remained strong.

During such sessions she felt she was falling into the earth. The the depth and breadth of the connection defined the boundaries of her awareness, now miles deep. Coming back to her regular self was both comforting and disappointing.

She found that if she connected to the earth under a stream she could also sense the water. One day she visualized a fountain for fun, only to later hear a couple of staff persons were rushed to the doctor with fright from having seen a water demon. She made sure nobody was near for subsequent practices.

Lord Dubuque and Pennirell emerged from the house in late afternoon, having spent the better part of the day strategizing. They were making light talk on the front steps when Pennirell stopped talking suddenly, then looked across the yard at Jurnigan. He nodded, then ran over. Pennirell turned to Lord Dubuque.

“I believe a stone has just dropped. Have you a map room?”

They hurried inside to a room containing three large tables, each covered with a stack of maps. Pennirell looked at Stamford.

“Please have Mrs. Bram bring a large cooking or mixing bowl, the biggest she has.” He turned to Lord Dubuque. “Your Lordship, I do not know how Mica will react to the presence of a non-practitioner, we have never done so before. If you wish to remain please consider that she is a force of nature, and will not share a human perspective about Lordship over lands.”

“Undersood.”

Mrs. Bram swept in with a large wooden mixing bowl in her arms. Pennirell smiled and thanked her, then set it atop a map of the Isles. He began gathering darkness into the bowl, forming a black pool with a mirrored surface. He summoned Mica with his customary greeting. The room trembled, then she rose up, a column of shiny granite.

“Greetings. Swirling matter accelerates. Others work this process also,” she said.

Pennirell frowned. The enemy is using similar tactics.

“Audience. Not expected.”

“Indeed. Matters do accelerate. We operate where we must. These are friends.”

Mica turned slowly to each of them. Stamford tensed visibly, fighting the urge to avoid her gaze. Lord Dubuque’s expression conveyed nothing. Jurnigan smiled, having met her before.

“Why do you deceive?”

She extended laterally from the bowl, stopping inches from Lord Dubuque’s face. He looked puzzled, and turned to Pennirell for guidance. Pennirell gestured, encouraging him to reply.

“To survive.”

Mica turned to face Pennirell.

“Why do you not hide yourself as he does?”

“I do, but not to you. I reveal myself to those I trust. Mr. Dubuque here is a cautious man, as one must be in his position.” He cringed at the last detail, having directed the conversation to the subject he wished to avoid.

Mica snapped back to Lord Dubuque.

“What is your position?”

Lord Dubuque filling in without missing a beat.

“I help manage the goings-on of this area, for people.”

“Can they not see to their own affairs?”

“I help settle disputes when they unable. Sometimes one side is unhappy, and would do me harm. I am thus accustomed to revealing the minimum necessary, for safety.”

“He is helping me and Jurnigan with the matter involving the other makers of stones, the ones who seek to control all forces, including you,” Pennirell added.

“I see, Proceed.”

“We felt a stone drop. One that we enchanged. Can you tell us where?”

“On the far side of the green island. Near the nexus you call Creevykeel. A stone struck sea bed.”

“One of the ballast stones.”

“Yes, a larger stone.”

“The nearest major port is Sligo.”

“Stanton.” Jurnigan nearly spat the name out.

“Yes, if anything is going on over there he would be the first to know. Given how long the operation has been underway, it seems likely that he is complicit. Or has been removed.”

“You’re not removing him from his home soil. He has too much power there.”

Pennirell turned to Lord Dubuque and Stamford.

“Manfred Stanton is a member of our order, one whose motives have always been questionable.”

“Exquisite. Will you part with it?” Mica interrupted, staring at an ornate ruby ring on Lord Dubuque’s hand.

“It is a symbol of my office. I am expected by others to wear it.” He shrugged at Pennirell.

Mica settled a bit in stature, managing to look crestfallen despite manifesting as a column of granite. Lord Dubuque read this reaction, and continued.

“There is another in our family belongings that is not tied to my office. I would be honored to give it to you. Would you like to see it?”

Mica perked up, nodding.

“Mr. Stamford, will you please retrieve the firestone?”

“Does it have a story?” She asked eagerly.

“Oh yes. I am told it comes from far away lands below the equator, where forests are so dense they are called by a different name – jungles. These jungles reach all the way to the sea. The legend says it was once mounted atop the staff of a great ruler of people, but I cannot substantiate this claim.”

Stamford returned with a a grape-sized globe of ruby, faceted edges shimmering. Mica rose and displayed more excitement than he would have thought possible. She extended a paddle shaped hand. Stamford placed the stone atop it, then stepped back.

“Lovely,” she spoke while inspecting it closely. “I shall put this on my topmost shelf.” She turned to Pennirell. “I will depart now. Are we agreeable?”

Pennirell nodded, smiling warmly. Mica sank back into the pool of darkness in the bowl, then he released the spell.

“Does she normally get repaid with gem stones?” Lord Dubuque asked with a hint of humor.

“Heavens no, I could never afford it. Seeing curious glances, he continued. “Natural forces such as Mica rarely share all modes of communication with us. Language is most common. However, our written symbols rarely convey any meaning. Such is the case with Mica, yet she dearly loves our stories, legends and myths. Thus we sit together and I read. She has the most refreshing curiosity for our customs and actions.”

“Were I to offer a guess every minute for the rest of my days I would never have predicted that reply,” Lord Dubuque remarked. “Tell us more of this new find.”

“Your involvement is more crucial than ever. Manfred is a skilled practitioner. If he is involved it will be difficult for any of us from the order to approach unnoticed. Your people will be more effective at gathering intelligence,” Jurnigan replied.

“We will need to learn both the actions of the grey forces, and if they have enlisted his aid, or anyone else from the order.”

“It seems like a stretch for the greys to be based there,” Jurnigan mused. “Perhaps a local stronghold, but that location is ill-suited for controlling the Isles and anything on the continent.”

Lord Dubuque stepped back, then moved to another table with a larger map.

“Sound logic. Their ambitions are most surely larger than our fair Isles. Still, we must begin somewhere. Hold on...” He thought for a minute. “Something does not line up. Our guest from the Corendra said four to six days under sail. Sligo is perhaps two. Perhaps she was destined for another port, before diverting for Sligo. Stamford, what is within range for that length of voyage, starting at the Great Orme?”

He paused to do some quick mental calculations, then traced a rough circle on the map. It intersected islands to the far north, the coastline of the Norse people, the peninsula of the Danes, and Lisboa. Pennirell nodded agreement with this estimate.

“Of all those I would center my operations here.” Lord Dubuque put his finger on the Danish capital. “Plenty of resources such as timber and food, fast connections to the continent, and good sea access.”

“Olafur,” Pennirell said. “It would fit. Now we have two locations to investigate.”

“The Danish Queen is a person of solid morals. She would not abide this. Let us hope we are wrong,” Lord Dubuque added.

Just then Pennirell stopped, then put his hand on a pocket attached to his belt.

“Our friend has just moored back at Morgansea.”

“The grey fleet operates at our capital, but still in secret. I was not there long, but I saw no evidence of the grey forces acting in league with the crown,” Captain Rowe conveyed to Pennirell, Jurnigan and Stamford in his quarters aboard the *Corvus*. He went on, and shared the details of his journey and pursuit by the greys.

Stamford was visibly relieved to hear they are not getting help from the crown. Lord Dubuque's authority stems from there, further he is one of a handful of Lords widely reputed to be in good standing with the queen. If she were deceiving her most loyal allies it would be cause for alarm. Thankfully that does not seem to be the case. Stamford exhaled.

"Thank heavens for one bit of good news. We will send emissaries to the crown as planned," he spoke while looking into the distance. He turned to face the captain. "Is this ship fitted with the means to transport shellfish?"

He eyed Stamford suspiciously.

"My buyer dearly loves a stew concocted from them, using a recipe from Lisboa. I hear they are in season. There is a fair port on the northwest coast of the green Isle, named for such things."

"Sligo."

"The same."

[43]

Lord Dubuque's forces moved on the iron market the next day. He had sent word to Lord Phillip as a courtesy, since the market is on his land. The whole operation was bloodless, with each encounter involving an overwhelming force versus an unsuspecting target. The troops took the checkpoint on the main road first, taking care that none of the enemy remained free to warn the others. A special team led by Hadley and Finn went ahead to secure the waypoint, to ensure none left by that route.

Upon their arrival Olafur moved to respond, then reconsidered after seeing their insignia and numbers. The two thugs beside him watched nonchalantly, they were accustomed to larger forces coming and going. Olafur looked around to see if he could muster enough support to free the waypoint and warn command. The sound of hooves ended that idea. He looked around, concerned by the timing of this incursion.

Jurnigan appeared in the waypoint. He spoke a sharp command in Danish. Olafur did not react visibly, but he could not hide the energy of surprised recognition of the language.

"That's him," Jurnigan said, pointing at Olafur.

Six bows drew on him, the archers standing in an arc around him.

"Please remove your weapons and tracking devices."

Olafur slammed his palm into the earth, sending a shockwave in all directions that knocked over the archers and the two thugs-in-residence. Jurnigan rode it out easily, then drew his sword. Olafur did the same, facing him in the central clearing. The archers regained their feet, but found their steel-tipped arrows pinned to the ground. The two men traded a quick flurry of blows and parries, then faced each other again. From behind the archers Hadley quietly loosed the stone-tipped arrow he had notched during the initial swordplay. Its larger-than-usual stone struck Olafur cleanly in the side of the head. Jurnigan capitalized on the opening, and struck him on the head with the flat of his blade.

Olafur fell with a thud. The archers quickly trussed the unconscious man while Jurnigan removed his weapons and stones. He also discreetly picked up Hadley's arrow. That tactic offered an advantage they did not want to lose just yet.

Once Olafur was secure they ran a pole through the ropes. Two archers lifted one end onto their shoulders, and Jurnigan lifted the other. They stepped into the waypoint and were gone.

Hadley and Finn oversaw the rest of the operation. They encountered little resistance, and by mid-afternoon the area was under their control. Merchants resumed selling their wares, and cooking fires were rekindled. Just another day at the iron market.

The two thugs eyed Hadley suspiciously, unsure of their fate. Finn approached them.

“Jenkins?”

One of them shifted uneasily.

“Who wants to know?”

“A fair question. I am Finn, in the employ of Lord Dubuque, who is charged with the realm to the south. I bring word that we have no quarrell with you nor any merchants. Please carry on with your business as before. Lord Phillips, on whose land this market resides, has been notified. We are not at war. We are quelling the various forms of lawlessness that have been spilling over our borders.”

Jenkins glanced quickly at his partner, Mabrey at the mention of lawlessness. This was not lost on Finn.

“If you have information on the former operatives, a reward is on offer.”

“Didn’t say much, those folks. Not sure I know anything,” Jenkins said with a hint of defiance, testing the generosity of his new hosts.

Finn acknowledged him with a small nod, choosing not to press the matter further.

“Point taken. We’ll be around.”

A handful of Shadows were captured without a fight, while others fled up the road to the north. Pursuit was given for a short distance, but a few escapees no longer were cause for concern. The captives were gathered on the main road next to the market. Mira arrived by waypoint to assist in their handling. She lined them up along the edge of the road, with their swords on the ground in front of them. She walked along, noting which ones carried grey blades. Two of the eight did, and were separated from the

others. Next she removed their beacon stones and collected them together with those taken from Olafur. The prisoners boarded a secure carriage for transport back to the dungeons. A second carriage containing hounds unloaded nearby, to clear out the woods on either side of the road. Mira gave a stone to each handler. They were to deposit them in the woods during their search, giving the impression that Olafur and the Shadows went to ground.

Afterwards she looked around with a concerned expression. She knelt, placing a hand on the earth. Something is not quite right,” she said to Hadley and Finn.

“You mean because she’s not here?” Hadley asked.

“Not just that. Something else. They did something to this area. Until we learn more treat all conversations as unsecure, even if nobody is around. Something subtle is at work here. I need to have the others look at this. I’ll return shortly.” She departed via the waypoint.

An hour later Mira returned with Pennirell, Jurnigan and Dierdre. Pennirell agreed with Mira’s analysis, but could offer no further insights. Jurnigan employed his wooden dagger in the earth, but was also stymied, earning him a worried look from Pennirell.

Dierdre went last. She sat cross-legged and reached down into the earth. She felt the nearby thrumming of the waypoint, its energy a glowing nexus in a giant network. She reached outward in an expanding radius, then suddenly snapped her eyes open.

“She’s here.”

They all looked at each other in surprise. None of them sensed anything. Just then the elderly woman sweeping the walk darted forward in a flash. She grabbed Dierdre and pushed her into the waypoint, then disappeared with her. Sirinha laughed at the irony of using the same disguise that Pennirell had employed at this same waypoint a few weeks earlier.

The three of them stared at the empty waypoint, shocked by this turn of events. Pennirell barked out a destination for each of them. They departed and checked as many known waypoints as they could. Finding nothing, they reconvened at the market.

“She is more formidable than we suspected. We must inform the others, and be ready to move if we receive any signals.”

The news hit Derrick especially hard. The others felt the gravity of the situation, but remained outwardly stoic.

“She’s like my sister,” he said to Mira. “I know it’s not rational, but since I’m older than her I feel like it’s my responsibility to look after her.”

“I think they may have gotten more than they bargained for in her,” Pennirell said optimistically.

“Yeah, in my experience it is hard to control the called,” Mira added.

“Further,” Pennirell continued, “she is no ordinary being. None of us can sense the depth of her strength.”

“I know. She’s stronger than me. I still feel like a brother who had let the family down, though.”

After two waypoints Dierdre realized she could not memorize the locations. Sirinha must be working a blurring spell or something else that interfered with normal recognition. She would be at their mercy when they reach the destination. She had to act.

Dierdre tripped over her foot, falling quickly to the ground with a squeal that she hoped sounded weak and frightened. When her hands hit the ground she drew in life like she did when she helped heal Mira. Sirinha fell to a knee, suddenly light-headed. She reached out, but could feel no spell at play.

“Stop it! What’s happening to me?” Dierdre cried out, acting like she felt the same energy drain as Sirinha. She pulled harder, now plants, shrubs and small trees joined the grass in bending towards her. Sirinha fell to hands and knees, wondering what strange force had fallen upon them. This close to the ground she noticed the bending blades of grass, all pointing towards Dierdre.

“You!” She rasped.

Dierdre clubbed her on the head with an oaken forearm, then halted the energy draw. She realized she could hold this energy within her, not just channel it for healing. She also realized she is completely lost, and next to someone she cannot control when she regains consciousness.

She contemplated killing her, but something held her back. Not like this, not with strength from the energy draw. She dropped a stone concealed within decorative pieces of wood woven into her belt. Sirinha had removed the pouch of stones she was

meant to find, a technique Pennirell had them all employ. She surveyed the landscape. The forests were different here, she must be quite far away. She considered hiding as a tree, but decided against it. Someone as skilled as Sirinha would sense her, and she probably will not fall for the energy trick a second time.

Dierdre carried her to a nearby tree. She sat her down by the trunk, then encased her in its thick roots. She sank the roots as deeply as she could, and after they reached their limits she sank raw energy further still, consuming much of the quantity she had drawn. Hopefully this will take some time to remove.

She returned to the waypoint and retrieved her stone. She memorized the signature of the waypoint, then tried departing to every destination she knew. None were connected to this point. Time to move. Her instincts pointed west.

She ran.

[44]

Peter Harcourt and Taylor Martin returned to the waypoint under the oak the next day, with two envoys from the crown. They were sent to act as trusted observers, to assess the veracity of Lord Dubuque's alarming statements.

Mr. Hicks and Ms. Lapine were naturally skeptical people, with a history of staying level-headed despite trying circumstances, earning them the trust of the crown. They reluctantly took the assignment, seeing it as little more than a fool's errand. However, the strength of Lord Dubuque's reputation carried the day.

One trip by waypoint helped soften their demeanor. They had both looked with disapproval at Peter and Taylor when they instructed the carriage driver to let them out on the edge of a nondescript field, by a small brook.

"I thought you said we were in a hurry," Hick said with not-so-thinly-veiled condescension.

Peter was very glad he had spent the last week learning this mode of travel. No time for a lack of confidence now.

"We are, I assure you. Right this way."

A short distance later they stepped into the waypoint. Peter and Taylor each grabbed an arm, nodded at each other, and departed.

“One down, four to go,” Peter smiled.

He paused to let them realize they were no longer in the same place. Four hops later they stood in the tent under the oak. The guard rang the bell. A short carriage ride saw them to the manor. Lord Dubuque, Hav and Stamford greeted them.

“Thank you for coming. We have much to discuss,” Lord Dubuque addressed them warmly.

“This is highly irregular,” Hicks noted with a scowl.

Hav smiled.

“A sentiment I have shared since this whole business began. Yet the events of the day seek not my approval, it seems.”

Hearing this from Hav intrigued Hicks. He glanced at Lapine as they entered, conveying a hint of curiosity. She recognized this look, and returned it.

They briefed the envoys in the state room, covering the events of the past few weeks.

“You say you have some of these Shadows in custody at present?” Lapine asked. “And the weapons of old?” Her education in history both recent and ancient lent her some foreknowledge of these matters.

“Indeed. You will see that these are not extinct relics from forgotten legends. Two yet remain on our premises, the rest have been destroyed. The creation of such an

obscurity requires an act of murder. The two bearers will stand in judgment for their actions. I urge you to attend.”

“By all means.”

They reassembled outside. Stamford brought the first Shadow onto the lawn, in the same section of charred earth as before.

“He had no useful information to share,” Stamford reported.

“Hav, please present the weapon to Mr. Hicks.”

Hicks took the grey blade, then opened it partially. He flinched visibly at the howling terror that erupted from it. The Shadow laughed. He sheathed it.

“What was the name of your victim?” Lord Dubuque asked coolly.

“Henry. Died squealing, the coward.”

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“You are all fools. Playing your silly games of feigned politeness. Your day is at an end.” He spat on the ground.

“Mr. Jurnigan, if you would be so kind.”

Jurnigan placed the sword at the Shadow’s feet, then stepped back next to the group, standing alongside Ms. Lapine. He spoke a low command, during which she sensed a great deal of energy moving.

The sword flared up in a wall of sound and light. They shielded their eyes. When it died down the Shadow and the blade were gone.

“Be at peace, Henry,” Jurnigan said softly.

Lapine stood with a hand over her mouth, stunned. Hicks responded by pacing, trying to process this wholly unexpected input.

The second Shadow behaved with the same defiance, and met the same end. They questioned the Shadows-in-training, who still carried standard blades. None knew anything more than was already apparent to Lord Dubuque. He sentenced them to remain in the dungeons as prisoners for the duration of the conflict.

Finally they came to Olafur. He was held in an old cell, warded against his particular talents. The lowest level of the dungeons dates from a time long before the current era, a time when wards were more commonly needed.

Lapine paused before approaching the cell, sensing a similar well of energy as she did from Jurnigan.

“This man is...,” she paused. “Different. Like him.” She pointed to Jurnigan.

“Yes, they are practitioners. A sort that many considered long gone, or at least an exaggeration of the truth. Yet here they are.”

“Is that not outlawed?” Hicks asked.

“Can you outlaw the rain?” Jurnigan replied. “Can you pass a law banning destructive storms? Make shipwreck illegal? The comings and goings of those who can wield energy are no more subject to the writ of law.”

Laughter filled the cell. They turned to face Olafur.

“Your education is ill-timed. We who have embraced all forms of power are so far beyond you that your actions henceforth are academic. I shall be free of this place soon enough.”

“If we lose, then at least I die with honor,” Jurnigan spoke quietly. The area fell silent. “Too late you will realize the power you court does not bow. It will consume you, and your existence will resemble those souls you trap in your blades.”

Olafur leapt from the back of the cell and slammed into the grate of warded bars. The ground shook. Hicks steeled himself and looked him in the eyes. He saw a feral animal, a predator. He suppressed a shudder.

“I was going to say it’s not too late for you. I see I was mistaken.” Jurnigan walked away.

“What’s the play?” Hicks asked back in the state room.

“We are sending a vessel by sea to Sligo, to assess the forces they are amassing there. We need you to accompany that team,” Lord Dubuque said to Hicks. I trust both of you are versed in the use of arms?” They nodded. He turned to Lapine. “We need you to accompany another team to the Danes’ realm, to confirm or deny the existence of a stronghold.”

Pennirell interrupted them by jumping out of his seat.

“One of Dierdre’s stones just dropped!”

Lord Dubuque turned to the two envoys.

“Do come along. You do not want to miss this,” he said with a genuine smile.

Thirty minutes later Hicks emerged from the map room with an expression somewhere between confusion and panic. Hav clapped him on the shoulder.

“When you woke this morning and considered possible futures, I’ll hazard that none of them looked like this.”

Hicks nodded.

Pennirell and Lapine rejoined them an hour later, having just finished reading with Mica. Lapine’s expert knowledge of history proved to be an irresistible draw for Mica. She shook her head, as if to clear cobwebs.

“Back to matters at hand. We depart for the great Isle tomorrow then?” She said to Pennirell.

Dierdre ran with effortless strides. The trees passed by more quickly than she had ever seen before on foot. She realized she was running on the energy she had drawn earlier. Far in the distance behind she heard the faint sound of hounds. Sirinha is free.

A deer stopped in its tracks nearby, then swiveled its ears towards the hounds. It bounded off in the same direction as her. She ran alongside for a while, keeping pace with a deer at full stride until it chose another path.

“I could get used to this,” she said aloud.

Moments later she stopped, drained of her reserves. As she carried little food of her own, she concluded it best to preserve that for later, and run on borrowed energy. She knelt and placed both hands on the earth. She drew in energy methodically, being careful not to damage the plant life that supplied the energy. She pulled shallow and wide, reaching over a hundred yards all around. She drew for several minutes, then rose and resumed her flight.

Running in this manner was full of joy, despite the circumstances. She felt the landscape around her, never once having to think about where to place her feet. The forest faintly glowed with life. She felt whole, fully connected. The sound of the hounds faded behind her, eventually disappearing.

A short while later she came to a wide river. She doubted that running in this mode would disguise her scent, so she floated downriver before crossing to buy more time. When she exited on the far side she was drained again. She began another draw, shivering, but was interrupted.

“Right. What’s all this?” An angry voice asked.

She looked up to see three men walk into view from the forest, each armed.

“Look what the river washed into our laps,” said the same voice. Its speaker eyed her in a manner that left no doubt about his intentions.

She increased the power of the draw frantically. She reached deeply, as with Sirinha. The two flanking men fell quickly unconscious. The leader shook his head, then continued approaching. She reached differently, targeting him. She pulled hard, but his well was deep enough that he’d reach her before going down. She rolled once quickly, back to the water’s edge. She put one hand on the riverbank, and the other in the moving water.

She released his energy into the flowing water, becoming a conduit rather than a reservoir. She felt the flow increase. The attacker’s eyes grew wider when he realized her tactic. He quickened his pace, knife drawn. She let go and thought of herself as a

wide drainage pipe she often saw along roadsides back home. He fell. She stopped the draw, fearing she may kill him by accident. She checked his pulse. He was alive.

“If I can’t kill you I can at least put you to work.”

She took his knife and cut small strips of fabric from her shirt. She tied them on the backs of their belts, then arranged their shirts to conceal the fabric.

“I’d love to see you try to explain this when they get here.”

She considered nicking herself with the knife and putting a few drops of blood on them to magnify the scent, but found her hand recoiling. She stepped back, nodding slowly as she realized it unwise to voluntarily share blood with one like Sirinha. Time to move. She looked deeper into the forest and was gone.

Captain Rowe surveyed the Corvus. Nearly ready. He stood still on deck, enjoying the calm of the pre-dawn light. Footsteps on the dock broke his reverie. A group of people approached, speaking in low tones. He peered over the rail.

“Four of you? Are you sure? This will be no holiday outing.”

Mira laughed.

“Just send down the walk already.”

“That’s gangplank, lubber.”

Mira boarded, then introduced Peter and Taylor. Hicks followed and introduced himself.

“The Genevieve is a fair ship,” Hicks said with an admiring look.

“Thank you. She takes care of us, so we return the favor.”

They departed soon thereafter, just as the sun broke the horizon. Hicks stood at the stern, watching the land fade. Once they were at sea turned to observe the crew at work. The men moved very little. Few commands were spoken aloud. He found this surprising. As a former fleet officer himself, he had a feel for such things. A well-run ship had more noise, more activity. Yet here they are, under full sail and not a movement to waste.

Through the silence he made a second, more unsettling observation – there was no wave noise on the hull. He considered the ambient noise more fitting to standing on a dock in a glassy bay. He wandered along the port rail, absent-mindedly dragging his hand along the wood. He stopped suddenly, his fingers now telling him something is amiss.

“Where are the nails? The joints and seams?”

Captain Rowe smiled, having appeared from thin air as far as Hicks could tell.

“Oh, right.” Hicks made the connection. “You’re friends with those curious chaps Pennirell and Jurnigan. There are shenanigans afoot here, aren’t there?”

The captain laughed out loud.

“Never before have I been so honored to be the culprit of shenanigans.” He placed both hands on the rails then looked at Hicks.

“How much do you want to know? Are your motives simple curiosity? Or do you seek to add a shenanigan or two to your own arsenal?”

“Such things can be taught? Legends attribute everything to birthright.”

“That is why they are but legends. The kernel of the truth is that some are predispositioned to certain tactics and not others. The fiction is that it ends there. The lines are not hard and fast. Of larger import is the lack of cultivation of late. All have gifts, albeit largely untapped in this day and age.”

Hicks considered all he had seen in the past twenty-four hours. He concluded there is little point in denying what is plainly before him.

“Does it take long to do?”

“A lifetime. But some useful basics can be learned quickly.”

“What would make the most sense given the duration of this journey?”

Rowe smiled broadly.

“You have just done the first. An open mind is the very foundation. Next, let someone test you to assess your starting point.” He closed his eyes for a moment.

Mira bounded up from the hold.

“What’s up?” She asked, looking directly at the captain.

Hicks stood there with his mouth open.

“Mira, will you please help Mr. Hicks decide the best way to add a shenanigan to his repertoire?” He walked away laughing.

She turned to Hicks, a look of confusion on her face.

“I can explain.”

Concurrent with the departure of the Corvus, a team of five readied at the waypoint under the oak. Pennirell, Jurnigan and Derrick stood quietly in the tent, listening to Rachael describe waypoint travel to Lapine.

“If we get split up you must be able to do this alone.”

Lapine looked terrified. Jurnigan walked over and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I saw you react to my energy earlier, and to that of Olafur. You already possess the basics. You are not starting in a void. You may rely on that ability, it does not depart in times of crisis.” He smiled.

“Further, you are not going it alone, not yet,” Rachael added.

Lapine exhaled, then stepped forward and extended her arm. Several hops later she found herself atop a windy bluff, looking westward out to sea.

“Welcome to the great Isle. Our home Isle is back that way.” Pennirell pointed to the horizon. “From here we go northeast.”

Lapine turned to follow him, then stopped.

“Do any of you have a glass?”

Pennirell produced one and handed it to her. She looked again towards the sea.

“I do not recognize that ship nor her flag. Do you?”

Pennirell looked, then handed it to Jurnigan.

“So they’re flying a flag now?” He growled.

Pennirell turned to Lapine.

“That insignia matches one we have seen.”

Derrick pulled out a folded piece of paper.

“Like this one? I sketched this a while back as a way to remember.”

“Yes, it was found tooled into the leather worn by a Shadow.”

Lapine inspected his sketch. It matched the flag, even though he did not look through the glass. This independent agreement of facts registered in her mind with more gravitas than she expected. While she was pleased that her hosts seemed trustworthy, the event left her feeling uneasy.

They kept moving through the waypoints, avoiding people and towns. By mid-morning they reach the waypoint where Dierdre had dropped her stone. The area was deserted. Jurnigan walked around, inspecting the ground.

“Prints from dogs and people.”

Pennirell knelt near the source of her energy draw. Much of the grass was brown, still bending towards a common point.

“She did a big draw here, to what end?”

“Take a look at this,” Derrick called from the edge of the ofrest. He pointed to a jumbled mass of roots, many of which lay shattered.

Rachael picked up a small piece of black fabric from the edge of a splintered root.

“Did she trap Sirinha in there?” Derrick asked.

“Perhaps. If she escaped then we have little chance of finding her unless she drops another stone.”

“She escaped. You don’t bring hounds unless you lost something.”

“This leaves us with a difficult choice – continue towards the Danes, or remain here with hope of a new signal,” Pennirell said, mostly for Derrick’s benefit.

“That’s not a choice we get to make. We cannot afford to sit still. There is no time, and we’d be targets here,” Jurnigan answered.

Derrick was visibly crestfallen.

“She is still out there,” Pennirell said hopefully.

They returned to the waypoint and continued their journey, arriving on the Danish peninsula by noon. Pennirell and Jurnigan altered everyone’s appearance to match the local attire, then they proceeded into the capital city Kobenhaven. They saw nothing amiss while walking through the city, but began to detect hints at the harbor. Three ships sat in port with hull profiles matching the one they had seen at the coast earlier. None of these three flew any flags.

Jurnigan walked down to the docks, inquiring for work. He adopted the persona of someone on the run, looking for out-of-the-way shipwork with no questions asked. He got consistent replies, all pointing towards a location across the peninsula.

“That fits, they’re not going to set up shop here any more than Londinium. Not until they are ready to move on a large scale,” Jurnigan deduced.

Lapine looked concerned.

“Do you have a different viewpoint?”

“No. It’s more the feeling I get when looking at those vessels. It matches what I felt at the coast when using the glass.”

“Dread,” Rachael said.

“Yes, that’s it. I could not put my finger on it until you said it.”

“It means there are those like us on board,” Pennirell said. “To project nameless fear that defies identification takes skill.”

“Need to get going.” Jurnigan led the way.

They left town and worked their way back to the waypoint. Three hops later they stood on the western shore of the main peninsula, just south of a large bay. The all faced silently to the north. The scale of the stronghold was larger and more formidable than anything they had ever seen. The fortress itself was a medium-sized city, and the surrounding town continued for miles. Hundreds of ships lined the harbor.

“They plan to take the seas first,” Lapine surmised. “We are all dependent upon trade now. If they control it they can finance any army they want.”

“That is part of it, most certainly. I fear there is more,” Pennirell said heavily.

Lapine looked curiously at him.

“What could be more than control of the seas, then the lands?”

“I feel we are near the tear.”

Jurnigan nodded.

“The coils,” Derrick said, making the connection.

Lapine was about to laugh, but stopped. She knew the old legends as well as anyone, but like most people did not take the ancient ones seriously.

“The underpinnings of all reality. Ripped. Here.” She said this aloud, pointing towards the citadel.

“Yes, in that keep over there, made of stone and clad in iron,” Jurnigan said while handing the glass back to Pennirell. “That also answers the ore question. Siege engines will be of no use against that. No wonder they all seemed to confident.”

“If they believe it impregnable then perhaps they are not in a hurry to finish the business with the coils,” Derrick added hopefully.

“Either way, we shall have to find a way into that crypt and stop the process, before it becomes irreversible,” Pennirell put forth.

“How many ships do you count?” Lapine asked. “I will need to report items to the crown that all may understand.”

“Three hundred active, another one-fifty in construction,” Jurnigan replied a couple minutes later. Rachael agreed.

“Ms Donahue, how large an army could you house there?”

“Thirty thousand.”

“This is sufficient to get the attention of the crown and her fleet. We should return.”

“Yes. With the caveat that we should wait and travel at dawn. Many waypoints here are unfamiliar, requiring visual cues to verify our course.”

“Agreed,” Rachael said. “However, can we go back one waypoint into the forest? We are too exposed here in sight of that... place.”

[45]

Hadley and Finn sat eating at a food vendor's table in the central area of the iron market, when a couple dirty miners approached them. They talked in low voices, pointing at something in their hands, and back up the road towards one of the mines. Hadley and Finn became animated, wearing expressions of poorly disguised excitement. Hadley leaned to speak directly into Finn's ear, then departed by waypoint.

Everyone nearby noticed the quiet commotion, but said nothing. They all knew the implications, and each began scheming ways to cozy up to these new arrivals and get a piece of the new find.

Stamford arrived later that day by carriage with an entourage. They set up a stall and began transacting with their miners. The interest around the market was palpable. No realm had set up an official shop here in over twenty years. Stamford took it a step further, erecting a tent complete with Dubuque colors. Two guards stood at the door, sending the message that only private audiences would be entertained.

Of particular interest were the ore buyers that came in from specific regions. Each would return to a different realm, and convey information to different ears. Stamford met with them individually, and deftly ascertained each buyer's point of origin by name-dropping and mentioning special prices for known players with verifiable

credit, provided confidentiality could be maintained. He shared different messages to each, containing at least two findings – one common ore or precious metal of interest to the Lords, and another esoteric one that would attract a practitioner.

At the end of the day they closed the tent. Stamford sat back and smiled. He truly enjoyed this sort of maneuvering. Despite the deceptions, this type of action generally came to resolution without bloodshed.

“The game is afoot,” he said to Finn.

“Aye. Sneakin’ about, but with words. That’s how I see it,” he replied with a grin.

The Corvus came within a half-day’s sail of Sligo when another ship intercepted her. They sailed alongside, claiming to have an urgent message to share. Captain Rowe slowed the Corvus to allow the other to keep pace, not wanting them to know her true speed. They drew within fifty yards, off the port rail.

“Plague!” A sailor yelled. “Approach no further!”

“Mira, what do you sense?” he quietly asked her.

“Lots of energy over there. They’re not even bothering to mask it. They think us regular merchants.”

“I concur. We play along, until nightfall. Mr. Briggs, please converse with them and convince them we are leaving. Then set heading full about, with drag. Let’s fill up our stores.”

“Aye, captain.”

After turning the Corvus around, she moved southwards at one-third their previous speed, while still under full sail. Some years back Captain Rowe had devised a way to enchant the hull, giving it tremendous drag. This drag captured the energy that would otherwise propel the ship forward. The other two-thirds of the energy filled vast reservoirs he had built with Pennirell's help.

At dusk he cloaked the ship with darkness, the spell drawing power from the reserves below. They resumed their northward heading, and sailed past the grey blockade. They reached Sligo by midnight, but could not approach any closer than three miles. The sea was choked with vessels.

"I cannot count their numbers in darkness," Hicks told Rowe at the starboard rail, looking east. "Can you?"

"Not with the accuracy you need." He exhaled.

"How long can you give me?"

"Sensibly? None. We should leave now. Aggressively, I'd say we need to be over the horizon by dawn proper. Is the light of nautical twilight sufficient?"

"Probably."

"It will have to do. We cannot fight our way out against these numbers. Instruct Mira, Peter and Taylor how to perform your estimations, we may get it done faster with more of you."

The next few hours aboard the Corvus were nerve-wracking. Everyone knew the desperate flight that awaited them. Weapons were checked and double-checked, then checked again. Sails were readied, able to be deployed with a moment's notice.

Mira went above decks to look around. No moon was to be seen, both a gift and a hindrance. They would be harder to detect by starlight, however it also delays their ability to observe the target of their mission. She saw Hicks back at the stern, checking his gear. She walked over to him.

“You feel ready to use any new stuff with that bow?” She had spent their short time in transit helping him develop skills with Leaf, his test having shown a predisposition in that direction.

“I believe so. Working with the wood during draw is the farthest along, since I can repeat that motion freely. I also think I am developing a better feel for distance. I was a fair shot before, but there is a new element now.”

“Good. Once we are done counting we’ll trade quills for quivers in a hurry.”

Nautical twilight is the time during which rays from the sun are visible, but the sun itself is below the horizon. The light bends in the atmosphere, allowing dawn to appear to arrive before it should, and twilight to extend past sunset. Captain Rowe watched for its arrival, then dropped the cloak of darkness in favor of a blurring spell. A black silhouette on a brightening horizon would do them no favors. The blurring spell should prove effective until dawn proper, when the sun breaks the horizon. He blurred the whole ship except for the crow’s nest, the small platform atop the tallest mast. This he kept clear, to maximize the visibility for the spotters.

They sat hip to hip on the tiny planks, tied in to keep their hands free. Each had a tethered glass, hung around their necks to prevent it falling. They began their work the

second the darkness was removed. Captain Rowe flipped an hourglass to mark their start.

Agonizing minutes ticked by as they sailed slowly past the bay. Eight minutes later they climbed down.

A flicker of light caught the sentry's eye. He looked again, but saw a fading star on the horizon, barely visible in the last minutes before dawn. He resumed his route on the dock.

A small boat launched from one of the shallow water docks near shore, carrying two crew and four passengers. They sailed into the harbor then headed south towards the blockade ships. Three Shadows and a black-suited Maker were en route to relieve a crew that had been at sea for a week.

One of the Shadows looked towards the horizon at the fading purple light. Then he rubbed his eyes and looked again, with a questioning look. The Maker noticed.

“What do you see, second Shadow?”

“My eyes seem to be still blurry from sleep. The horizon presents an odd line there.”

The Maker snapped his head in that direction, concerned. He spotted the fuzzy line immediately. He pulled out his glass, but could not determine anything conclusive. He reached out with his senses but felt nothing.

“Is it just a trick of morning light?” The Shadow asked.

“There’s no such thing, unless... there. See those low clouds? They can cause it.”

The Maker was privately relieved. He was recently promoted, and did not want to sound a false alarm.

Captain Rowe and Mira stood at the port rail, looking east towards the small craft. They felt the searching presence of the young Maker.

“That was close,” Mira sighed.

“We’re not done yet. They match our southbound heading.”

“Can we turn west, head out to sea, then resume south?”

“If we are spotted that route is too easy to intercept. Our best chance is to break through heading due south, if we are to stay ahead of them.”

“Should we remove them?”

“Not yet. There is no way to get close enough without him sounding an alarm. From this range he can still reach shore directly.”

Mira started pacing. Cat-and-mouse games are not her forte. She prefers direct action.

“Mr. Briggs, please inform the crew we are now under double silence.”

The sun broke free of the eastern horizon, removing all traces of predawn light. A fair wind blew, making for choppy conditions on the water. No traces of clouds remained.

“Second Shadow, what do you see now?”

“Same blurry spot to starboard, on the horizon.”

“Conclusion?” The Maker presented the tone of a training question, hoping inwardly to get a second opinion to support his own.

“Cloud layer is gone. No fog.” The Shadow looked through the glass, then checked to see if the lens was clean. He looked again.

“I think I saw some whitecaps that were larger than the rest, near the unclear spot.”

The young Maker kept looking at him, expecting an answer. He did not want to be the first to suggest that it might be a ship.

“It’s beyond my training to say for sure, but it looks like there is a ship there. Maybe it rides low and we can’t see the hull.”

“And the masts?”

“Can anyone row that fast?”

“No,” the pilot spoke from behind. “We are going half again as fast as any team can row.”

“The facts point to a ship, but can you hide a whole vessel?” The Shadow asked.

“Not by any method I know,” the Maker replied. “Prepare to signal ahead to the blockade vessel. Ask if any of ours are performing maneuvers with some new masking ability.”

The other crew member pulled two flags from under a bench then stood at the bow.

Captain Rowe spotted the flagger on the other vessel.

“Mr. Briggs, how soon until flag range to the blockade?”

“Eight, maybe ten minutes.”

“Run her down.”

“Aye, captain.”

The Corvus altered course to port, on an intercept heading. Briggs walked around, calling all to battle stations with silent hand signals. They closed on the smaller craft quickly, within minutes they could see the faces of those on board.

As with other phenomena, a bow wave of energy precedes the arrival of the event itself, allowing some foreknowledge for those who know how to look. Here the literal counterpart was evident to all aboard the transport vessel. The Corvus could not be seen directly, even at this close range, but the crew knew they were in danger. The flagger tried to send a message but they were still out of range. The pilot turned hard to port to try to outrun them, but their speed was no match for the larger ship.

At ten yards the Shadows stood up, looking to the pilot or the Maker for guidance.

“Is it a whale?” The Maker asked.

“If that beast knocks us over, grab a bench plank, they float,” the pilot replied.

Upon impact glimmers of the the Corvus became visible.

“Abandon ship!”

The Shadows and crew leapt over the rails, but the Maker stayed behind to try a desperate tactic. He stepped over to the single mast and grabbed the sail with both hands. He spoke a command and the sail erupted in bright flames. He dove overboard and swam straight down, and felt the keel of the Corvus brush his feet as she passed over.

When he surfaced he still could not see his attackers. He swore, then looked up. A puff of smoke hung just above, remnants of the sail fire.

“At least I got that right. Command will need to know about this.”

“Damn, we almost had them silently. That flare tactic was genius, and nearly suicidal,” Captain Rowe observed.

“Summoning flame as such indicates an energy practitioner at work, correct?” Hicks asked.

“Yes, a Maker,” Mira answered.

“As in ‘Maker of Stones’?” He clarified.

“Correct.”

“They take the old texts rather literally.”

“Captain, the blockade ships are reacting,” Briggs interrupted. “Three ships closing each side, the two big ones in the distance holding their locations.”

“They still don’t know the nature of the emergency, do they? Could have been a shipboard failure,” Hicks estimated.

“Were it normal flames, yes. That Maker managed to flare it green, to signal intruder alert,” Rowe informed them.

“Mr. Briggs, hard to port. We cannot let these flanking ships catch us in the middle.”

The Corvus altered course, now heading due east, directly for shore. Once outside the trajectory of the inbound ships she turned hard to starboard, heading south along the coast. They passed within two hundred yards of the grey ships.

“We have but a few minutes until they pick up that Maker and learn we’re here. Options, Mr. Briggs, Hicks?”

“The vessels closing on our former position are out of the running,” Hicks observed. “But we do not know many line the blockade. If we break through, can you outrun them?”

“If it comes to a race we are in good fortune,” Briggs replied. “But it won’t. That Maker will alert command, and they’ll send word ahead by waypoint. They’ll launch ships from every port ahead of us.”

Captian Rowe nodded.

“Then we must do the same,” Hicks concluded. “We must inform the crown fleet.”

“Yep,” Mira chimed in. “Got anything you can toss us overboard in that’ll keep us dry? Don’t fancy a swim while armed.”

“The supply dory can be lowered while under sail,” Briggs informed.

“We need to be farther south, I know a waypoint around the next headland.”

“Is that far enough away? Do we risk landing in their laps once we set foot on shore?” Hicks worried.

“I concur. Based on everything we know we must assume the immediate area is under their control.” Captain Rowe turned to face Mira. “How much farther to the next one?”

“At full speed, maybe another three hours.”

“Mr. Briggs, make ready the dory, keep it on standby.” He turned to Mira and Hicks. “Four of you will go. Peter and Taylor will join you. You will need the extra arms. Mr. Hicks, please share a copy of your tallies. In the event your route is difficult.”

[46]

Dierdre ran until nightfall, hoping she had created enough distance for a few hours sleep. She sat down in a glen deep in the forest, on a large rock and pulled out her meagre emergency rations. She looked around for edible plants, but did not find anything, other than the faint glow she had noticed earlier. Now that she was no longer moving at full clip she looked more closely.

Life pulsed everywhere – on the surface of the ground, rocks, trees, and even under the soil. She had read at university about the fungal networks that connect in a vast web underground, now she could feel it. There was so much life it was overwhelming.

She wandered around the glen, following the tiny highways and byways formed by the miniscule roots, when she noticed a curious void. There was a small circle, perhaps two yards across, that was utterly black. At its center stood a mushroom of deepest crimson. She approached it cautiously, so much so that she laughed at herself, realizing she had been acting like it might explode at any moment.

“Hang on, those things can emit spores,” she caught herself. “Maybe that explains the black radius.”

She stopped at the edge of the dark plot staked out by the mushroom. This felt important, so she looked for a way to collect it, settling on the small leather belt pouch containing her food. She finished eating and pressed the remaining rations into her small first aid kit.

She inhaled deeply a few times, then held her breath while she walked up to the solitary fungus. She felt she ought not touch it, so she dropped the pouch over it and grasped it through the leather, sealing it with drawstrings. She hung it on her belt and looked down. Light had already begun encroaching on the now mushroom-free soil.

She stood up and looked around. Time to move. Darn, no time for sleep. She drew energy and continued west.

Pennirell and the rest of the team on the Danish peninsula transited back one waypoint into the forest to make camp for the night. They hiked away from the path into the dense trees, with Pennirell and Jurnigan warding the ground behind them. While they cannot disguise their scent from hounds, they can set up traps and alarms to alert them if discovered.

“What do you think the crown will do with this information?” Derrick asked Lapine over cold rations.

“Confront them with her fleet. Lift the veil of secrecy and rally support from others.”

“How versed is her highness on matters of practitioners?” Pennirell asked.

“She considers the subject a quaint practice of the past, at least publicly. I do not know all who are retained privately. Do you see the need to change that? The sheer scale of their operation is enough to spur action.”

“The fleet will need to be prepared, at minimum. Based on our experience thus far, they will place a Maker on every vessel. If the fleet engages with only common tactics they will suffer heavy losses.”

“Your friend had little trouble with the Corendra, will their other ships be better defended?”

“The good captian is a skilled practitioner in his own right. His approach to the target ship was anything but conventional.”

“I see. What do you suggest?”

“We are not in a position to equip every ship with a practitioner. There is not enough time, and our numbers too few – at least as far as we know. However we can educate her military with tactics that can diffuse many skills employed by Makers. These can be quickly learned and require only common materials. However, the troops and commanders must believe the threat from the Makers is credible.”

“Hmm,” Jurnigan grumbled. “Yet another demonstration. Can I break some stuff this time?”

Lapine smiled despite the gravity of the situation.

“A question.” She stood and began pacing, one hand on her chin. “Where did the greys get all these Makers? Have they been recruiting candidates from our lands? Do

young energy weilders announce their presence somehow, making them visible to watchful eyes?”

“It seems likely they have been mining our ranks. This is an issue I have pondered for some years. I have not seen as many new candidates as in years past. But how does this help us now?”

“The young recruits may have been lured by the promise of power and prestige, then realized only too late who they signed on with. We may be able to win many of them back, if we pardon past transgressions and offer freedom after the grey threat is removed.”

Jurnigan whistled, then shook his head.

“You political types think in ways that often make me question your ethics, and your sanity. But you might be on to something here. If we can convince them our side isn’t hopeless.”

“Their future with the greys is already hopeless, they just don’t see it yet.”
Derrick leaned forward. “Lapine’s idea is the only path with nonzero hope for a life worth living. There is logic to that, and even compassion.”

Pennirell leaned back, thinking.

“I know a spell that may help, an old one. The rite of remembrance helps someone look beyond the trauma of recent events towards deeper memories. If a Maker came from a good family then that relation may be brought back to the surface.”

“Could you add another one to not just look beyond recent events, but remove them, or make them forget?” Rachael wondered.

“Yes. It adds more risk to the recipient, but could prevent them snapping back to their current disposition. No doubt the greys have done something to them. If we can remove it the odds of success improve.”

“One catch,” Jurnigan said from behind, now pacing himself. “The greys don’t do things halfway. I’d bet half of Julius’ tomato crop the greys did blood rites to those young Makers. That’s a lot harder to remove.”

“It complicates spell delivery, but I believe we can adapt. We will also need to draw blood to administer the counter-spell. Fortunately I know someone who has already worked out how to do this.” Pennirell smiled.

“Will it work on the Shadows too?”

“It should, though we must target the Makers first. They are the most deadly at distance, and more valuable if they join our ranks.”

“Yeah, and I’m not sure I feel right pardoning Shadows, not after what they do to make those blades,” Jurnigan added, his brow furrowed.

“I sympathize, but consider that no Shadow-in-training could perform such a rite. They will have help from powerful Makers, the kind one does not say ‘No’ to,” Pennirell countered.

“I agree. I’m afraid we must take any who are willing to come back, if we are to defeat them,” Lapine added.

“That will be the true test.” Derrick said, to his own surprise. “After the spell takes effect, if they become willing to join us then there is still good in there. A goodness worth saving. If they still resist once free of the grey conditioning, then not.”

Jurnigan considered this, then looked to Pennirell. He nodded agreement.

Jurnigan sighed.

“Ok, so it is.”

“Would you propose an alternative? Would you kill them instead?” Lapine pressed.

“No. You’ve convinced me that saving those who were coerced is worthwhile. I fear our test is still too vulnerable to fakery and deceit. I would prefer a more concrete means to know.”

“Me too.” Derrick said. “I’d like a process that is more black and white. This is a little too... grey.” He ducked.

Jurnigan laughed, then punched Derrick on the shoulder.

“Can we send him back? Get the stones to call someone else?”

Word of the lode found near the iron market spread like wildfire through all the realms on the home Isle. Lord Dubuque’s people deployed to each realm began to hear things. They paid particular attention to the reaction of undercover greys, and sent reports home. The picture that emerged would have surprised and alarmed Lord Dubuque three months ago, but now it served only to confirm his suspicions.

About half the realms on the home Isle have been compromised or are in league outright, mostly in the north. A handful on the green Isle have joined the grey ranks as well.

“In a pitched battle the grey forces combined with the realms sympathetic to their cause would roughly equal those of the crown and her loyal realms,” Stamford said while pointing to a large map.

“While disturbing, it carries a message of hope. They are not yet past the tipping point for a dominating victory. We must now place our bets that our teams have gathered sufficient evidence to rally support,” Lord Dubuque answered.

“Once other realms are on board we can move openly, decisively.”

“Not just yet, unless we want to invoke the pitched battle you described. If the greys believe we are as yet unaware, it offers an advantage. We can take steps to slow supply routes through seemingly unrelated acts such as tariffs and inspections. These otherwise innocent methods can yield further insight, while offering little incentive for them to pursue open conflict.”

“Yes, of course you are right. I seem to have been getting ahead of myself. Meanwhile we can deploy covert teams more aggressively to destroy key assets. This will anger them, but give no clear realm onto which to assign responsibility.”

“We’re going to need more practitioners,” Lord Dubuque said heavily. “This goes against laws laid down by my father, but I see no other way. You have seen how they handle themselves. If the greys can field legions of their Makers our troops unaided will be lambs to the slaughter.”

Stamford exhaled, relieved.

“I concur, and I am glad I am not alone in reaching that conclusion. I did not relish the idea of trying to change your mind on the matter,” he confided. “Further, I

have given this a great deal of thought, so I do not say this lightly – I believe we must grant them their own status within the realm or realms across which they reside. I do not believe we can control them by direct force. We can barely contain that monster Olaf, and we needed their help to do so. If we apply pressure they will simply disappear.”

Lord Dubuque stared out the window for several minutes.

“Coming from anyone but you I would dismiss the proposal out of hand. However, I fear you may be right. What are you considering?”

“A realm within a realm. They may live freely among our lands, provided we have a means to gather assurances about their intentions. Appoint a council that must meet with us periodically – say, each solstice and equinox. We must have a way to air grievances or bring rogues to justice. Just as they could request of us.”

“What about the crown?”

“They must swear loyalty.”

“If they do not? Suppose they wish to retain the right to refuse an unjust order, an order that to us seems fair, but would ask them to violate something unseen.”

“Would the crown tolerate that? It would set a dangerous precedent.”

“Yes, it would, and I don’t know. I shall have to discuss this privately with her when the time is right.”

“Something Jurningan said troubled me, that the comings and goings of those who wield energy are no more subject to the writ of law than the rain.”

“He is an idealist. We shall focus on Pennirell, and appeal to his pragmatic nature. However, on one account the larger man is correct – we do not control the assignment of these powers at birth. Instead we should choose what actions are most appropriate once we discover such a talent. I am confident we can reach an understanding.”

Lord Dubuque pulled out a map of the realm just to the north.

“Now, to the pressing matter of Lord Phillips unfortunate choice of allegiance.”

The Corvus maintained her secrecy for another quarter hour, reaching to within a half mile of the blockade before being spotted. She ran over a bell buoy that had a blurring spell of its own. Alerted by the noise, lookouts were able to spot her diminished wake. Captain Rowe’s wave harnessing spell reduced her wake to that of a much smaller craft, but could not remove it entirely. The greys scrambled small, agile boats to intercept, thinking her to be a craft of one mast and less than a dozen crew.

The Corvus turned hard to port, heading southeast and closer to shore. They intended to pass between the beach and the innermost blockade vessel. The first intercepting ship pulled alongside minutes later, immediately disappearing inside the massive blurring spell. The grey crew were surprised to be looking up ten feet at the railing of a four-masted ship. The Corvus’ crew dispatched them quickly, leaving their vessel foundering.

The grey ship emerged from the blurring spell devoid of all crew. Lookouts on the nearest grey vessel sounded the general alarm. Forces on shore reacted, driving

horse teams into action turning giant winches. Slowly a chain began to emerge from the water ahead of the Corvus, secured on one end to the land and the other to the large vessel they were skirting.

“Mr. Briggs, full power to the wells.”

The Corvus slowed to one-third of her previous speed, the rest of the forward energy transferred to the reservoirs, which were now half depleted from the massive blurring spell. They crept up towards the chain with several smaller grey vessels in tow, keeping a wary distance until more support arrived.

“Ready the grapple,” Rowe ordered at one hundred yards.

At fifty yards they fired. A large grappling hook was shot via a deck-mounted crossbow over the blockade chain. The hook pulled a line of special rope with it. Once it splashed into the water, the crew released a wound capstan that pulled the rope quickly back. In seconds the hook securely caught on the chain.

“Release!”

A torrent of white hot energy burst from one of the reservoirs, lancing down the line. The energy met the grapple and attached blockade chain with a flash of intense heat and light. The hook and several links of the chain melted. The Corvus shot through at full speed, having also released the hull drag. The smaller grey ships were no match for her at full speed, and receded behind her.

“That will buy us a couple hours. Everyone get some rest. We may not get another break til home.”

Dierdre ran straight through to daybreak, and found herself looking at an unfamiliar coast. She turned left, facing a mixture of west and south. She looked down the beach but saw nothing to confirm or deny that direction led back home. Seeing no other option she moved to run that way. A force stopped her in her tracks, like an unseen blow to the stomach. Danger.

She retreated to the woods a short ways back from the coast. The ground was soft from a recent rain, reminding her of why wooden shoes were invented, and giving her an idea. She transformed her feet into tripods of branches that would leave no scent trail, and walked north in a shuffling pattern. She walked three miles, hoping this would be far enough to evade any hounds that might have tracked her to that beach. The shuffling gait also left no recognizable prints, but left her exhausted. She found a hiding place among the trees, and dropped her stone on the ground. After a few minutes she picked it up, sank her roots into the ground and became a small tree. She had never fed this way before, and hoped it would work fast enough to effectively supplement her tiny rations.

Derrick, Pennirell and Jurnigan stopped in their tracks, startling Lapine and Rachael. The group had arisen at dawn and already transited two waypoints en route back from the Danish peninsula.

“She is not far,” Pennirell said urgently.

“Don’t you need Mica for that knowledge?” Lapine inquired.

“Only for long distances. A drop within a few miles can be felt directly.”

“That way.” Jurnigan pointed west.

“Can others hear it too?” Rachael looked concerned, her hand unconsciously moving to the hilt of her sword.

“Not usually. The call of each stone is different, and easy to miss if you do not know it in advance. However, Sirinha has demonstrated she is no ordinary foe, and we must assume the worst.”

The group accelerated to a full run, led by Jurnigan. Fifteen minutes later they reached the edge of the forest, looking out at the coast. They saw riders on horseback following hounds along the beach. They crouched in the undergrowth and watched. They counted a dozen riders and twice as many hounds, but thankfully no sign of Sirinha yet.

“We must be very close,” Pennirell whispered.

“How? With that many hounds if she’s within a half mile they’d go straight to her,” Lapine questioned.

“She’s transformed herself,” Derrick answered.

Lapine looked at him blankly.

“We didn’t have time to go over Leaf and Clay during the briefing,” Rachael apologized.

Lapine rolled her eyes, then opened her mouth to protest, knowing the legend as well as anyone here.

“You must find her.” Pennirell looked at Derrick.

He nodded, then sat cross-legged. He closed his eyes and began reaching out like Dierdre had taught him. He visualized her, ingaining a familial link between them. A vivid image formed in his mind, then the direction became clear. He opened his eyes and pointed. He moved to stand, then immediately dropped to the ground.

“Stay down!” He whispered urgently. “She’s here too.”

They all froze. Jurnigan slowly pulled a wooden dagger from his belt, spoke quietly into it, then pressed it into the ground.

“Let’s move. That may draw her out.”

They crept through the brush inside a light blurring spell to mask sounds without hindering visibility. When they stopped Jurnigan closed his eyes and activated the spell he placed on the dagger. A crisp, ringing wave of recognition emanated from that spot. Anyone receiving it would get the message loud and clear – I see you.

A dark blur sped across the landscape in reply, cat-like in its quickness. She cursed immediately upon seeing the dagger, realizing the trap. The dagger flashed brightly for a second, intending to temporarily blind the onlooker. Derrick loosed a stone tipped arrow.

They heard no sound in reply. Sirinha was nowhere to be seen. Several Shadows turned their horses to close on the location of the dagger. Lapine turned to Pennirell.

“We must retreat. We are outnumbered.”

“I’m not leaving without Dierdre,” Derrick stated flatly.

“You are both correct. Listen up.”

Derrick transformed into a block of sandstone to match the local geology, while the rest of the party retreated. They moved at full speed and allowed some noise to escape, giving the appearance of of panicked flight.

Sirinha was forced to choose between pursuing Dierdre or the whole group. She dare not call for backup and divulge that Dierdre had escaped, it had taken all her guile to get these Shadows and hounds onsite with minimal questions asked. She quickly weighed her options. If she sends Shadows alone after them, they will not stand a chance. If she pursues as well, she may gain more captives, but she would lose Dierdre. Others already knew she had kidnapped her, returning with anyone else would appear weak.

She sent ten of the twelve mounted Shadows and their hounds to guard the nearby waypoint, since the most likely course of action is escape. That quantity of Shadows and hounds may delay them sufficiently that she may yet acquire both targets. She led the other two Shadows and their hounds back into the woods to find that blasted girl.

Derrick sank into the soil. He found that he could move around underground easily, like an inchworm. He could expand in one direction as a long cylinder, then contract and pull the rest of himself along to catch up. He moved in the direction he had previously sensed Dierdre. After a few motions he stopped to reorient himself. He reached out again with his senses, visualizing the connection. She is very close now.

Before moving again he tried to sense Sirinha. He was relieved to feel her dark presence more than a hundred yards away towards the north.

Derrick moved twice more then struck a root that he knew was her. He gently surfaced next to a small tree, then climbed branches facing away from Sirinha until he reached the crown of the tree, where he resumed his stony appearance.

“What’s up, sis?”

“Thought you’d never find me,” she said sleepily. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Working on a plan to thwart her royal evilness. How are you holding up?”

“Better, now that I’ve had a snack. Roots rock.”

Just then they saw Sirinha stop in her tracks, head cocked to one side.

“Uh oh. Quiet time.”

The both dropped into passive listening mode, reducing their energy to nearly undetectable levels. Sirinha looked up, her face angry, then resumed her methodical search.

Jurnigan brought the group back to the beach, at a point north of Sirinha. They had departed the waypoint path in the woods, then looped back in a wide arc to evade the hounds. They crouched behind a low dune covered with sea grasses and observed.

“Three on three. We’re not going to see better odds. Let’s move.”

Lapine bristled at being ignored in Jurnigan’s reckoning, but bit her lip. Swordplay was never her forte. Rachael sensed her frustration, and turned to her.

“Can you handle the dogs?”

Lapine nodded. They set off down the beach behind a tight blurring spell that was nearly invisible against the monochrome sand backdrop. Pennirell dropped the spell and they emerged, weapons drawn.

Jurnigan faced Sirinha, Pennirell and Rachael each went after a Shadow. The Shadows drew their blades, releasing low, ghoulish howls that chilled Rachael to the core.

She engaged the nearest Shadow, defending against his lightning-fast barrage of attacks. He was laughing between salvos, enjoying himself. Rachael employed every tactic she had recently learned from Jurnigan to keep from being sliced to ribbons. She attempted an attack of her own but he easily parried it.

She heard dogs yelping behind her, at least Lapine is faring better. The Shadow looked momentarily, and snarled at the fate of his hounds. Rachael grabbed a handful of sand and flung it into his face, followed by a dozen savage strikes. Despite her onslaught she succeeded only in nicking his shoulder. He laughed and attacked again.

Pennirell faced the second Shadow, sword drawn. He recognized from the bladesong that this is an elite fighter. He drew in power, then released it in a focused bolt, mere atoms wide. It sliced the Shadow in vertically in two. He turned to help Rachael.

The Shadow had sliced her forearm open to the bone. The two moved so quickly the he dare not use another energy spell for fear it may also hit Rachael. He gathered wind and drew sand into a small vortex, manipulating its position with sword-like motions from his hand. Which a quick thrust he sent it into the face of the Shadow and

held it there. Rachael siezed the opportunity. She dropped to a knee thrust low, sending her sword straight through his abdomen. She followed by pulling directly back into an upward block, anticipating his downstroke. She parried while stepping laterally, then replied with a flat backhand, beheading him.

A scream erupted from behind them. Sirinha and Jurnigan faced each other, swords drawn. His beard and left shoulder were burned, she had a puncture wound above her sword arm.

Pennirell swiveled to Rachael.

“Bandage that, then watch for openings. Do not stand still if she focuses on you.”

He joined Jurnigan. She unleashed a torrent of fire-orange energy, which Pennirell deflected into the sand, turning it into glass fragments for a dozen yards around them. Jurnigan fired a similar blast back at her, but she absorbed and quickly returned it. The force pushed both of them back several feet, their boots leaving troughs in the glassy sand.

Lapine tied a quick bandage on Rachael’s arm, then turned towards the fight. The two of them saw no way to aid without getting in the way. Rachael began creeping around the back of their remaining opponent.

Sirinha thrust at Pennirell with a sword that grew in length, covering the distance faster than could be done with footwork. Jurnigan felt it coming, and parried it upwards, the blade extending past the two of them. Pennirell sent a bolt down the blade itself, turning the hilt red-hot. She cursed and flung it to the ground before the heat engulfed her hand.

She raised both hands up to shoulder height, her face in intense concentration. Pennirell and Jurnigan were shocked to find themselves being lifted off the ground, placing them at a severe disadvantage.

Rachael closed in from behind, hoping she is too focused to notice her. She thrust at the back of her torso, only to have her blade knocked out of her hand by an unseen force. The last thing Rachael remembered was flying backwards into a sand dune.

By now Dierdre and Derrick had time to transform back and creep into the dunes nearby. Derrick had retrieved his bow from its previous hiding place, and shot a stone tipped arrow at her head.

Sirinha sensed it in time to deflect it a couple of inches, enough to reduce it from a knockout blow to merely an infuriating one. She held the other two in mid-air and turned to face them.

“Last resort time, distract her.” Dierdre took off running towards the water using all her enhanced speed. Derrick fired several more arrows to draw her attention.

Dierdre reached the water’s edge just as Sirinha was returning her focus to the two practitioners. Dierdre put a hand on the sand and the other in the sea, once more became a huge conduit. Sirinha snapped her head towards her, but it was too late. Dierdre drained half her energy into the sea in a matter of seconds. Sirinha dropped to a knee. Pennirell and Jurnigan fell to the ground, shaken and gasping for air. Dierdre pulled harder, until Sirinha finally fell over.

“Stop!” She screamed. “Do not touch her.” She ran over to them.

The tip of Jurnigan's sword hovered just above Sirinha's throat.

"You can't kill her now. Not after I did that. That's why I waited to do that, in case you could finish her first."

Jurnigan's face was angrier than she had ever seen it. He looked to Pennirell. Lapine spoke first.

"She is right. If you kill her now, you will irrevocably damage Dierdre. You may even create the next Sirinha, in her." She looked at Dierdre.

"I can feel it. What she just said is right, but I can't explain it."

"I can," Pennirell said while looking at Jurnigan, nodding. Jurnigan sheathed his sword.

"Dierdre drew in healing energy, as she did with Mira. At the core of this process is love. If you use that to kill, so too dies your own capacity to love. You were wise to wait before using that tactic. We must leave quickly, we have no means to restrain her when she wakes."

Jurnigan paced, clenching his fists.

"We can't just leave her. She'll kill untold numbers before we get another chance."

"What about the forgetting spell you talked about last night?" Lapine offered.

Pennirell looked at Dierdre. She was looking into the distance, moving her body slowly to see what that idea felt like.

"I don't get the same burning feedback when I consider that. Is that good enough?" She looked back at Pennirell.

“Yes. The sensation you get is what will also happen to you. Did you feel anything else?”

“Coolness. A calming sensation.”

Pennirell nodded and quickly grabbed Jurnigan’s arm. They knelt next to Sirinha to prepare the forgetting spell. Rachael walked over, rubbing her head. Derrick had just revived her from unconsciousness. Pennirell addressed her.

“Hold your sword above her, at the ready. If she wakes, all is fair play.”

Two minutes into the spell Sirinha twitched, nearly getting her run through. Lapine hoped she would wake, so they could be done with the terrifying woman. Moments later Pennirell cast some powder over her, which shimmered as it fell.

“It is complete. On a commoner the spell is sufficient to remove the events of the prior day. With her, I do not know. Let’s move.”

They collected the two grey swords and ran back down the path to the waypoint. As they neared it Pennirell turned and spoke.

“No time for subtleties, follow me. Jurnigan bring up the rear.”

He ran into the clearing at full speed, directing a loud flash and a bang on the far side of the waypoint, momentarily distracting the Shadows. He barrelled over one and pushed another aside, then leapt in, transiting before he hit the ground. The others did the same, giving the Shadows no time to react. One of the hounds bit Jurnigan’s boot as he entered, and came along for the ride.

He fell out of the waypoint on the other side, tucking into a roll. The surprised dog let go, then crouched into a fighting stance. Jurnigan spoke gently to it, calming the frightened animal. Rachael felt the deep energy of a spell at work.

“She’s coming with us,” he pronounced.

“We have no time for this,” Lapine protested.

“Correct. You don’t have enough time to change my mind. Now let’s go.”

She looked to Pennirell for support, but he only shrugged. She resigned herself to the decision, then was struck by Jurnigan’s sudden change of demeanor, from wanting so fiercely to kill Sirinha, to a show of kindness towards an animal. Intriguing.

The seven of them entered the waypoint, heading home.

[47]

Briggs lowered the service dory containing Mira, Peter, Taylor and Hicks. They had slowed the Corvus via the hull drag technique, both to ease the launch and to top off the reservoir they had depleted when breaking through the blockade chain. The small craft hit the still water and quickly fell behind the moving ship. They raised the single mast as the Corvus released her hull drag and leapt away.

Hicks took command, his prior fleet experience coming in handy. They sailed quickly into a sheltered cove and beached the craft, then scrambled ashore over the bow. Once ashore Mira took point as the one with local waypoint knowledge. Four shapes in dark green hoods watched them climb the bluff that surrounded the cove, then stepped in front of them.

“Come no further. These are sovereign lands.”

“We seek passage only.” Hicks spoke politely.

“You come from the sea occupied by greys. Punishment is death.” They drew swords.

“We fled the greys,” Mira said calmly.

“You are lying. None escape their forces in so feeble a craft.”

“We were dropped from a warship. We gathered information about their numbers. We must deliver it to those that would oppose them.”

“Show me.”

Hicks stepped forward, then unrolled his tally sheet, complete with hull silhouettes and counts next to each. The leader moved to take it, but Hicks would not let go of the papers. In the blink of an eye he drew a knife and placed it on Hicks’ wrist.

“Consider your actions,” Hicks spoke evenly. “If you could have expelled the greys you would have by now. Their numbers grow ever stronger. Look.” He pointed at the tally sheet. “You may copy these numbers if you wish, but I must deliver this to my superiors.”

“You would let us copy this? With no resistance.” The leader said suspiciously.

“No grey would do that,” another spoke from behind.

“We’re headed for the Leenaun waypoint, you will see no more of us after that,” Mira added.

“What does it look like?” The leader turned his blade towards her.

“The split oak stands there. A fractured standing stone next to it. Flat ground two yards across, then sloping down to a small brook, with a pool.”

They laughed and put away their swords. Mira looked confused.

“When was the last time you were there?”

“Six years ago.”

“You cannot be a grey. None of them still alive know what it used to look like.”

“What’s it like now?”

“You’ll see.”

They walked in silence for the few miles to their destination. Peter and Taylor gasped when they saw it. An earthen wall lined with stakes surrounded the waypoint, on each hung the cloak of a Shadow. Mira walked up to one, lifting it gently to see the punctures that spelled doom for its former owner.

“I like your bravery, but you’d better be careful if they turn their full attention on you.”

“We’ll die before we let the own us.”

“It may come to that,” Hicks spoke from behind. “Soon they will arrive not by waypoint, but overland in numbers too great to resist. Would you fancy an opportunity to go on the offensive?”

“Give us the numbers first. Then talk.”

Taylor stepped forward and handed them her copy. He compared it to Hicks’ version, then tucked it away.

“Aye then. Speak your part.”

The Corvus sped southwards after dropping the dory. The next hour passed without incident, but the crew knew this would not last. They maintained the blurring spell, which when combined with the wave energy conversion rendered them nearly invisible to ordinary observation.

Far to the south on the green Isle a ship left port. Two Makers wearing black paced her deck, one middle-aged and the other in his early twenties.

“You’re certain you can recognize her again?” The older one confirmed.

“My feet touched her keel. I felt the fullness of the signal.”

“Good. Let us begin the rite.”

The young Maker swallowed hard, hiding his fear. He pulled up his sleeve and held out his wrist.

“If you survive I am confident you will be awarded the next rank,” the older Maker said as he pulled out a curved knife.

The young Maker sat alone atop the crow’s nest, tied to the mast to prevent him falling over. He was light-headed from loss of blood, but maintained his focus. Finding the other ship was his only path to survival. Thirty feet below him the elder Maker performed a ritual with his blood, using it to detect a signal that had previously passed through it. He used his superior power to amplify the detection, spreading out across an area miles wide. Each hour that passed would require more blood to keep the rite alive.

The younger Maker’s job was to focus on the signal he felt from the Corvus, and to stay alive.

Their ship hugged the coast as it sailed north under full power. Two hours later he felt it. Tears of relief ran down his face. He wiped them quickly, ensuring none could see them. The reaction of the crew told him the older one had received the signal. The ship changed course, heading closer to shore.

Briggs stood with both hands on the starboard rail, looking towards the horizon to the southwest with Captain Rowe.

“Here they come.”

“Call all hands to battle stations.”

The grey ship, the Gatherer, began a sweeping turn to match headings and pull alongside the Corvus. Despite the blurring spell the Gatherer closed directly on her, the blood spell offered pinpoint accuracy as long as the source Maker survived. Despite this Captain Rowe maintained the spell, to at least deny them knowledge of her layout and weaponry until the last minute.

Less than an hour later the Gatherer pulled within the radius of the blurring spell. Rowe released the spell, and redirected the energy to a crossbow.

“Aye, all in sight now. No more dancing, let’s finish this,” Briggs growled.

Captain Rowe sighed, preferring always to avoid direct conflict.

“It is upon us. Get that Maker on board.”

The Corvus steadied to match the Gatherer more closely. Two crossbows fired grapples at the main mast, one latching around the base, another at a point two-thirds of the way to the crow’s nest at its peak. The vibrations startled the young Maker. He peered down anxiously.

They emptied a full reservoir into the bottom grapple, snapping the mast and starting an intense fire. They spun a wound capstan on the top grapple, pulling the mast towards the Corvus.

The young Maker panicked, trying to untie himself from the doomed mast. He could immediately see it was hopeless. Four armed crew surrounded the deck where he would land. If he survived the fall he knew he was too weak to defeat four attackers.

Just before impact the four crew pulled a square of sailcloth taut, breaking his fall. They cut him free of the mast, disarmed him, then wrapped him tightly in the sailcloth. Two rushed him below decks and put him into a warded cell, powered by another reservoir. He recognized the energy of the ward as the same one he felt earlier that day.

Several Shadows and the elder Maker crossed to the Corvus across the fallen mast before they could scuttle it. The Shadows jumped on deck and drew swords. Captain Rowe could not see the Maker, but felt his approach. He released the spirit of the nearest grey blade, incinerating its carrier and starting a small fire. Two crew doused it directly, but it sprang back to life. He circled the flame to find the Maker working to engulf the whole ship. He let fly a stone tipped arrow, catching him cleanly on the skull. He fell hard, and was set upon with swords, then thrown overboard. The flames leapt higher, catching the main sail. Briggs cut it loose while the crew put out the remaining flames.

Both ships now lacked main sails, but the Corvus began to pull away. Captain Rowe resumed the wave energy spell, giving her a much needed boost the Gatherer could not match. The crew of the grey ship watched as the Corvus went silent and slipped away.

Briggs oversaw the deployment of a smaller reserve sail on the main mast. Satisfied, he joined the captain. The fetched the doctor then went below decks to visit their new guest.

The young Maker sat on the bench in his cell, back against the wall. He sat upright for fear of falling asleep in the hands of the enemy during battle.

“At ease, son,” Captain Rowe said warmly. “We know what they did to you. We proffer no such cruelty. That was mad clever what you did during our first encounter.”

“And damned lucky for your second act,” the doctor added. “You could have survived one more blood-taking, two at most.”

He tried to act with defiance, but could not muster the energy.

“Who are you?” Was all he could manage to say.

“I’m Captain Rowe, Cassie is our ship’s doctor, and”

“I’m first mate. That’ll do for now,” Briggs cut in.

“You’re aboard a ship who’s identity will remain secret for a while longer now that you are here. What is your name?”

“I’m a Maker,” he spoke with effort, but it came out sounding more like an apology than a threat.

“Clearly. But you are also a young man. Raised by a family. What is your name?”

Dim memories of parents tried to surface in his mind, but he could not grab them through his exhaustion. He watched them slide back under.

“Sam.” He was surprised to hear himself say.

A crew member arrived with a hot bowl of stew, making his mouth water.

“We still have a fair journey back, Sam. Regain some strength.”

Sam hesitated. Captain Rowe ate a spoonful, then slid it inside the cell. Sam waited until they were gone then devoured it. He did not remember falling asleep.

Jurnigan led the scouting party along the bluff to the last waypoint on the great Isle. The last two points are not connected and the half hour trip must be traversed on foot. Dierdre was in the process of explaining her escape from Sirinha when Derrick interrupted.

“Wait, the last waypoint you used was the one with the torn-up roots?” He asked, sensing a disconnect.

“Yes, I ran from there to the place you found me.”

Derrick looked at Pennirell, realization dawning on his face.

“That is over eighty miles from where we encountered you. In less than twelve hours.”

“Oh, right. I ran on borrowed sunshine. I was about to get to that.”

Lapine turned to face her.

“What did you say?”

“I drew energy from the plants. They derive it from sunlight through a process known only to them. I borrowed some, but not enough to cause damage. They will refill on the next day’s light.”

“And thus she walks on the light of the sun,” Lapine said solemnly, then looked at Pennirell. “It’s from the same text as the legend of the coils. Seemed like hyperbole. Perhaps not.”

They all looked at Dierdre.

“What? Don’t other practitioners run alongside deer sometimes too?”

Pennirell shook his head, speechless.

“Don’t worry sis, you don’t creep me out,” Derrick chimed in. “Earlier today we were sticks and stones, running with deer is par for the course.”

Dierdre laughed, then continued with her recount of the events. She told of the light she saw in the glen, and the fantastic web it revealed. When she described the dark void and the crimson mushroom they stopped dead still.

“You found a Bloodcap?” Jurnigan showed genuine surprise.

“You could see it?” Pennirell whispered. “And its void?” He stared into the distance.

“Yes. In fact I have it right here.” She started to reach for the pouch, but was stopped by several people shouting at once.

“Don’t touch it!”

“Don’t move!”

Dierdre froze, then pointed to the pouch containing it.

“How are we not dead?” Lapine asked.

Pennirell looked closely, and breathed a sigh of relief upon realizing it was in her rations bag.

“That pouch is strongly enchanted to seal tight, to keep food edible longer. Do keep it in there until we may safely handle it.”

“Is it deadly? We have lots of poisonous mushrooms back home too.”

“Worse. It is a direct link to the darkest forces in existence. Forces that consume from within, leaving nothing but a rotting husk when they are through,” Lapine said gravely.

“They are also invisible. Utterly.” Pennirell looked at her in awe.

“Then how did they get their name?” She pushed back, not yet convinced.

“The name is from the old texts, folklore, and legend, so I do not know. I personally have never heard of direct experience, until now.”

Jurnigan stepped forward.

“Folks, let’s get going. Talk on the way.”

They walked in silence. After a few minutes Derrick decided he did not want to dwell on all the doom and gloom, and changed the subject.

“Could you do it now? The deer running thing?” He asked with a grin.

Dierdre nodded, then looked to Pennirell and Jurnigan to see if they had objections. Pennirell smiled, and for the first time that day so did Jurnigan, boyish excitement in his eyes.

She knelt and drew energy. The two practitioners looked sideways at each other, both stunned at the power they felt moving beneath their feet. Then without warning she bounded off at blinding speed. Seconds later she waved from over a hundred yards

away, then returned just as quickly. Jurnigan's adopted hound yipped in excitement, straining at her harness.

Dierdre nodded at him, then took off again, this time with the hound in tow. They ran in loops and zig-zag patterns, barking and laughing the whole time. When they returned the hound was panting, her tongue out, and her tail wagging. Dierdre spoke easily.

"It's even more fun than it looks," she said with a sheepish grin.

"Oh. My. God." Derrick beamed. "Please tell me you can teach me that."

They started moving again. Pennirell spoke quietly to Lapine.

"We have much to discuss."

At nightfall the Corvus dropped the blurring spell and wrapped herself in darkness. She slowed briefly with hull drag to top off the reservoirs. The entire ship was cloaked except for the crow's nests atop each mast. Sailors were stationed in each, both to navigate and to spot enemy vessels.

The grey fleet deployed every available ship, forcing the Corvus to weave a drunkard's path through them. Thus far their disguises were working, the greys did not show any other means to directly track them. They also inspected the young Maker while he slept, but found no other tracking devices on him. The stones he previously carried were dropped overboard back at the site of the battle with the Gatherer.

Cloaked alarm buoys posed the main threat now, requiring special methods to evade. Captain Rowe and ship's doctor Cassie were the two strongest practitioners

aboard. They sat in a small ward room under the forecastle in the ship's bow, both cross-legged on the floor with eyes closed. They each rested a hand on a rod of metal that extended through the hull into the water, one to port and the other to starboard. Enchantment energy dissipates quickly in the life-filled sea, but with focus and amplification from the metal antennae some signals can be heard. The spell strength of the cloak on an alarm bouy can be sensed at eighty yards, enough time to bank hard to one side and avoid contact.

Cassie sensed on on her side, to starboard, and pulled a rope signalling hard to port. Mr. Briggs executed the turn, missing the bouy by a full ten yards. However the bouy yanked hard to one side when the Corvus passed, ringing loudly. Captain Rowe leapt to his feet.

“Stay here. Cover both sides until I return.”

He ran to the stern and climbed to the helm.

“Ropes. They're tying the bouys together.”

“Knife spell, use reservoir three, full about.”

“Aye. One more thing. The release of tension in the rope may still cause them to ring, as the outside ropes pull 'em away.”

“Acknowledged, but it's the best we have.”

Briggs deployed hull drag then spun the ship around nearly in place. They sailed on a heading back through the same two bouys.

“An idea.”

“Is it quick?”

“Aye.”

“Proceed. Tell me afterwards.”

Mr. Briggs called for a full stop just before they reached the rope. Three swimmers jumped overboard. Two held opposing sides of the rope while the third cut the middle. Then the tension was released it pulled each holder twenty yards before relenting. Their drag through the water was enough to prevent the previously joined bouys from rining. They were back aboard a minute later.

“Hard to port, full speed south,” Rowe ordered. He turned to Briggs. “Nice work. That is our new protocol. Don’t just thread the needle when you can cut the thread.” He headed back to the bow to rejoin Cassie.

They cut two more ropes on their way to deeper water. After an hour past the last bouy they turned east and resumed their homeward heading.

Farther out to sea a dark ship began moving east. She ran a black hull and flew black sails as her camouflage, allowing her to avoid using enchantments that may give her away. Sixteen senior Makers sat in a circle around the main mast. Atop the crow’s nest three broken planks of wood sat across the lap of another senior Maker. The planks came from the small transport vessel the Corvus had run over inside the blockade earlier that day. They were the team of last resort, a desperate play to stop the intruders getting away with knowledge of their preparations. They were not yet ready to move en masse, thus the spy ship must be stopped at any cost.

Two Makers stood at the stern.

“Signal is faint. Moving east,” the lead Maker aboard stated.

“Londinium. Told you. We must move on the crown now,” the more junior one spoke.

“Patience. We do not know that yet.”

“Signal fading, she is fast.”

The lead Maker remained calm. The big ship was still coming up to speed.

“Signal steady, for now.”

The Gravata tailed the Corvus silently from a distance of five miles, well out of sight. After a half hour it became clear that the Corvus could maintain a higher top speed, and began to outpace her.

“Signal fading. Bearing east.”

The lead Maker growled.

“Enchant the hull.”

He knew this would disclose their presence, but he had no choice. Losing them was unacceptable. They employed a technique similar in theory to that of the Corvus, but quite different in practice. The Corvus used the energy of the waves to propel the water around her hull with minimal resistance, as a result could maintain it indefinitely. The Gravata used brute-force human power, requiring their Makers to expend energy to move the water around them more quickly.

Fifteen minutes later they broke off the enchantment, their Makers exhausted.

“We only matched pace. We did not gain on her,” the junior Maker reported.

The lead Maker slammed his fist into the helm.

“Re-engage the enchantment. No excuses. We must catch them.”

Cassie looked at Captain Rowe. They stood at the stern with Mr. Briggs, having disengaged from the amplifying rods since they believed they were past the alarm bouys in the open ocean. They had both felt the energy of the unamplified spell, despite the distance, cause for concern.

“Company. Get a sense if they are closing or not.”

Cassie went below decks to a station at the stern similar to the one at the bow. She sat and placed her hands on the rods, then closed her eyes. Five minutes later she returned to the helm.

“Signal getting slightly stronger. They are gaining on us, but slowly.”

“Thank you, Cassie. Mr. Briggs, deploy hull drag, then get another sheet on that main mast.”

The Corvus slowed briefly, sending a message of renewed hope to the pursuers. While they slowed, Captain Rowe and Cassie returned to the aft sensing station.

“I’m getting a lot of power, but some seems out of sync,” he said.

“Me too. I think they are tiring. This does not feel like the smooth output of our reservoirs, but rather of many individual frequencies trying to align.”

“Let’s leave them a gift, then.”

They hurried to the hold, and with the help of four crew loaded a fully charged ballast stone onto a wooden bouy. The two practitioners added a further enchantment, then they lowered it from the stern. The Corvus resumed full speed.

“Signal much stronger now. Closing.”

“They are lying in wait. They will be no match for us. Disengage the enchantment. Prepare for battle.”

Four Makers had collapsed from exhaustion during the extended spell. All had been pushed beyond the point of recovery, and were cast overboard.

“I will not tolerate weakness from any of you,” the leader told the surviving twelve. “We will capture her, and her crew alive for questioning.”

They closed on the enchanted bouy minutes later. Its signal matched that of the Corvus exactly, the stone having come from the same reservoir. It powered a blurring spell, meant to imply the presence of a large vessel.

The ballast stone released its energy explosively at ten yards. Every Maker actively sensing the signal received an overwhelming blast, blinding them temporarily to all other input. Two Makers, already weakened from the hull spell, died instantly. Six more fell unconscious. The lead Maker put his hands on his temples, in excruciating pain. He forced himself to look up. The damage enraged him to the point that he could not think.

“Sir, orders?” The junior Maker queried. He was largely unharmed, his own sensing abilities not having been developed enough to receive much of the blast.

The lead Maker forced his emotions aside. Only four Makers remained able. He gripped the helm so tightly that his knuckles turned white. He could no longer apply more direct force to ensure the outcome. Having to choose a tactic other than strength, fear or intimidation left him reeling. He had never failed before.

“Match course. Full sail. No enchantments. Track her as long as we are able.” His mouth tasted bitter as he gave the orders. He felt weak, but showed none of his inner conflict.

The Gravata lost the Coruvs an hour later, just before making the turn around Isle’s End, in the far southwest corner of the home Isle.

“Skirt every major port from here to Londinium. Finding her home is still of value.”

The Corvus docked just before dawn at Morganseas. Crown vessels lined the harbor, welcoming her home.

“Never been glad to seem them before, but it feels good now,” Briggs remarked.

“Quite so. It seems our friends found their waypoint.” Captain Rowe sighed, looking around at all the official recognition. “At least we are still the Genevieve to them.”

“Aye. Maybe one day the Corvus will sail again, once we are rid of this plague of grey sickness.”

“A hope we must keep alive. For now, disengage all reservoirs, including the one powering the wards on the cell. They know our signal, let’s not draw them here.”

[48]

The next morning the Dubuque manor buzzed with activity. Both scouting teams had returned, as well as the Corvus. All three also brought back one more than they had left with – the young Maker Sam returned aboard ship, the Danish scouting party had gained a hound, and the overland party from the Corvus' dory retained a taciturn fellow in a cloak of deepest green.

They spent the morning in the state room debriefing and comparing notes. By noon Hicks and Lapine left for Londinium, with the help of Peter and Taylor. Lord Dubuque expected the rest of them would be making the same journey in a day or two.

After lunch most took the chance to relax. Jurnigan's new friend romped around the training grounds with Mr. Woogins, while he tried to figure out her name. Dierdre was thoroughly amused by the sight of the imposing practitioner uttering sounds in a sweet voice, in order to see which one caught the dog's ear.

“I think it starts with ‘sh’,” he told Dierdre, then continued. “Sha, she, shu, sho.”

“Start over.”

“Sha.”

The hound stopped and cocked an ear, then resumed chasing Woogie.

“Try adding something to that.”

“Shab. Shac. Shad.”

“The second one.”

Derrick and Mira walked over from the shade tree they had been chatting under, and sat down on the ground next to Dierdre. Mira leaned her head on Derrick’s shoulder.

Dierdre and Jurnigan kept at it, finally stumbling onto something close.

“Shock tea?” He said quizzically.

“Shakti,” Derrick answered, then spelled it. “Back home, and in another language, it means the force underpinning all things.”

“Coincidence?” Jurnigan turned towards the yard.

“Shakti! C’mere girl!”

She ran over and sat in front of him.

“Good girl!” He scratched the fur around her neck.

“Clearly it’s destiny.” Derrick looked at Dierdre. “First we have you running around on sunshine and now we have a fine hound representing the primordial forces of the universe. What is so weird about that?” He laughed.

Mira leaned forward to face Dierdre.

“What was that like?”

“Like having light flow through you veins. And feeling connected to everything. I didn’t have a clear sense of where I ended and everything else began. Just moving at all was more joyous than I could possibly describe. I didn’t want to stop.”

“What were your thoughts like?”

“Focused. Clear. All the frequencies in my head were in harmony. There was the path, and me running down it. All other information was on hold, or tucked away for later.”

“How did you choose which path to follow?”

“I didn’t. At my core I just wanted to get away from her. The path just happened. It’s what I imagine it would feel like to be water flowing downhill. It just goes where it needs to.”

“Is any of that teachable?” Derrick asked hopefully.

“Maybe. You were already trying the technique to reach out from yourself, right?”

“Yes, with minimal success. Well, I was able to locate you from about fifty yards away back at that beach. So that’s something.”

“Did you try reaching as Leaf or Clay?” Mira asked.

“Does it matter?”

“Not when you can both equally.”

“Oh. There was a lot of bedrock under the sand at that beach, maybe that’s why it worked. Does that mean I can pull energy through stone?”

“It might. Try it.”

Lord Dubuque, Stamford, Hav and Pennirell reconvened in the state room with the green-cloaked visitor. They all wore arms since one condition of his help was that he disarms for no one.

“We will help remove the grey plague, but we will not trade our sovereignty as reward for joining sides with you.”

Lord Dubuque considered this for a moment. He sensed a lot of tension in the room. He looked at Pennirell, indicating he should say something.

“Before we discuss such matters, what is your name? By now you know all of ours. Do you speak for many on the green Isle?”

“I am Ardal.” He faced Pennirell. “Many clans now work together.”

Pennirell felt a great deal of hidden power in Ardal, but he could not recognize it.

“Are there many in your lands with skills such as yours?” He asked hopefully.

“I am common. Many are stronger. Some are not.”

Pennirell raised an approving eyebrow at Lord Dubuque.

“Very well. I see no quarrell with your terms about sovereignty. However, I must emphasize that my word is not final. We shall bring your conditions before the queen.”

Ardal nodded, then left.

“Not one for conversation, that one,” Hav observed.

Stamford laughed.

“Hicks warned us as much. He didn’t even get a name.”

“I need to talk with the others.” Pennirell excused himself.

He found them across the grounds laughing and playing with the dogs. He walked quickly over to them, his brow still furrowed from his encounter with Ardal.

“What’s up?” Mira picked up on his expression.

“Did any of you stand next to Ardal, our visitor from the green Isle, for any length of time?”

“I sensed that he is a practitioner,” Mira replied.

“Me too. But from far away. Why?” Jurnigan looked at Pennirell while his hands played tug-of-war with Shakti over a piece of rope.

“He is unlike any I have encountered. Not like us, nor the Makers. I daresay his energy felt like that of the waypoints themselves.”

“I thought they were all gone, those folks.”

“Maybe that is what we were meant to believe.” Mira stood up and stretched.

“Does it matter now?”

“It could affect how we choose to let them help. If he really represents a connection to that lineage then they may know more about the stones that called these two, and the coils.”

“Seems like a long shot, but there isn’t anything to lose by asking.”

Hav walked over to their group.

“Peter and Taylor have returned. We have an audience with the queen tomorrow morning. We shall leave an hour hence, and lodge tonight in the palace.”

Mr. Woogins sauntered over, then lay at Hav's feet, exhausted. Hav gave Jurnigan a sideways glance. Jurnigan shrugged.

"Got room in your stable for Shakti while I'm out?"

They left the waypoint in the tent under the oak at four o'clock that afternoon, and arrived in the field outside Londinium a short time later. They boarded waiting carriages. Once they were rolling Derrick looked at Dierdre and Mira.

"I've never been to a full scale working castle before. They're all museums back home, or else private residences."

"They know how to do dinner. It's all I've thought about since Hav announced it," Mira admitted.

"Even better than Mrs. Bram?" Dierdre looked skeptical.

"Whole different level."

"I hope they have good rolls." Derrick looked out the window.

"The talk and the etiquette can be a bit stuffy, but on the whole it's a fair trade for a five star sit-down."

"Do you have to make official speeches as guests, or anything else awkward?" Derrick looked a little wary.

"No. I just smile a lot, and wait to be asked to speak when it comes to the upper level folks."

They arrived at the palace gates just before five. Torches in glass housings lined the approach. The palace was magnificent, polished stone gleaming and royal banners

flying in yellow and green. They could not help feeling they had been whisked away into a fairy tale. Dierdre transformed her hand into an oaken fist and back, to remind her of the reality of the situation. This is not a holiday. Mira saw this, and offered some advice.

“Forget the big picture for a night. This may never occur again for us. We’re not the stars of the show here. Enjoy it. Reality can wait until tomorrow.”

Dierdre squeezed her hand and smiled.

“Thank you.”

They climbed out to a grand staircase with a carpet of deep green. Men and women in crown livery greeted them, and escorted them inside. They were each led to individual quarters, and found evening attire laid out on their beds.

At six the tolling of a deep bell signaled the start of the evening. They followed to a grand hall where dozens of people were talking in small groups. Servants buzzed around, hummingbirds darting in and out to refill a drink or remove a plate.

Dierdre felt regal in her borrowed gown. She had never worn anything this fancy before. Thankfully it skimmed the ground, so no one could see that she kept her flat leather shoes on. She hated heels, and left the guady loaner shoes in her room.

“Stay close,” Mira said. “If you walk aound here single and looking like that you’ll draw a crowd.”

Dierdre cringed at the thought, and grabbed Derrick’s other arm. They mingled for a few minutes then were shown to the dining hall. A long table dominated the room, with seating for at least fifty. Servants guided them to designated seats. Derrick and

Mira sat next to each other, with Dierdre across the table from them. To her left was an empty chair, which she eyed with some apprehension. She dreaded the thought of spending dinner with some pushy nobleman bent on trying to impress her. She was relieved when less than a minute later Ardal was ushered next to her. He sat down into a chair with no arms to permit him to wear his sword. She smiled at him then made light conversation with Derrick and Mira.

A hush fell over the room. Senior statesmen and women filed in, filling the far end of the table. They recognized Lord Dubuque's silver and teal immediately. Hav sat next to his father near the head of the table, while Stamford stood behind them, back against the wall, fully armed. Each realm followed this pattern, until only one chair remained.

Music came from somewhere unseen, and with much fanfare Queen Georgina glided in. After being seated she looked at the group, nodded once, then made a quick motion with her right hand. Dinner had begun.

Conversations resumed and plates began to appear.

"Glad that was brief," Dierdre said across the table.

Ardal laughed. Dierdre turned to face him.

"Not a fan of elaborate ceremonies either?"

"No. And yet my people insist on doing them whenever we gather. Must be some residual defect of breeding from long ago."

Dierdre laughed so hard she had to put her drink down. Ardal lowered his cloak, revealing a man in his thirties with shoulder length hair. Mira put her elbows on the table and leaned forward.

“How do you make those cloaks?” That looks like it could disappear.

“Ah, yes. I suspected you and your friends might notice.”

“Notice what?” Derrick asked sheepishly.

“I meant those two,” he jerked a thumb in Pennirell and Jurnigan’s direction. “I would not expect the called to know such things yet. You are still so young in your talents.”

“You see a lot. What else would you tell us?”

“That he is clay, and I estimate his strength as solid, which is quite good given the recency of the arrival. She must be leaf, but I deduce this by elimination, as I can sense nothing from her. This puzzles me. Does she have the requisite abilities?”

Mira snorted back a laugh, then nodded. Ardal turned to Dierdre.

“How do you hide your energy?”

“Uh, got me.” She looked at Mira for support. “Maybe I used it all up getting away from Sirinha,” she joked.

“You faced her? How are you alive?”

Dierdre looked at Mira.

“Are we supposed to talk yet?” She faced Ardal. “Are you on our side yet?”

He laughed.

“At this hour, there are the greys, and those not grey. I am the latter.”

Mira shrugged.

“Ok, but first, how do you know her?”

“She was once one of us. She was sentenced for crimes, but escaped. She is very dangerous.”

“No kidding. She held her own against five of us. She finally relented when I drained her energy into the sea, leaving her unconscious.”

Ardal stared at her, mouth partially open.

“Dude, stop with the overdone gravitas. I couldn’t take her as a reservoir, so I became a conduit. The sea has limitless capacity to absorb energy, at least as far as one person is concerned, so I dumped it there.”

Ardal scratched his head, then looked at Mira.

“The only problem is that we had to leave her there,” Dierdre continued. “We knew we could not hold her if she woke, so she’s still out there.”

“This should not be. You are not ready.”

“More doom and gloom. Can you be a little more specific? I could feel that I should not kill her that way. Is there more?”

“Yes. We must talk with your Pennirell.”

“Tomorrow. I’m going to enjoy myself tonight. Why don’t you tell us what sort of festivals you hold in your lands, Ardal?”

“Good idea,” Mira chimed in. “We know so little about your realm, other than your sporty green cloaks. Let’s have it.” She smiled.

Ardal looked around, then sighed. He realized there was little more to be accomplished with the others fully occupied.

“My favorite is midsummer’s eve. We play music through the night,” he began.

Pennirell had arranged to sit next to Lapine, intending to tap her immense knowledge of ancient topics.

“Tell me more about the passage describing walking upon the sun’s rays. Is there more that may apply to our current errand?”

She gave him a quick ‘are you sure you want to know’ glance, then put her elbows on the table, cradling her drink with the fingers of each hand. She looked across the table, her gaze distant.

“There are several possible interpretations. Most can be dismissed out of hand, such as conclusions implying an actual deity walking among us. A few others give rise for concern.” She looked back at Pennirell. “Before going further, I should mention that it is difficult to use such ancient language directly. It is think with metaphor and hyperbole. Until we are confronted with direct evidence, such as her bounding interlude, it is nigh impossible to know which is which.” She smiled, and shook her head. “Her run with Shakti was really something, wasn’t it?”

Pennirell joined her with a broad smile.

“I have never seen the likes of it. It was a font of joy I did not know possible.”

“Therein lies the difficult connection to the old texts. All the sections that seem to fit refer to a female with a near-boundless capacity to love. In every outcome she winds

up being sacrificed to save the rest. There is one exception, a myth in which she takes up the power gathered through love, and uses it for personal gain.”

“Let me guess. In that version she ends up becoming our next unimaginable foe.”

“Correct. Darker than Sirinha, and vastly more powerful.”

Pennirell sat back, contemplating this new input.

“At some point we must choose what conclusion to draw. If we take these texts as true for a moment, they could be considered as historical accounts. However a telling of what occurred does not necessarily define the limits of what is possible.”

“Yes! I share that conclusion, and that hope. Even so, it seems our Dierdre will be on knife-edge, with but one path to avoid oblivion. We must help her navigate it.”

Pennirell felt someone focusing on him. He turned to see Ardal looking his way. Pennirell smiled, and raised his glass a couple inches in an informal salute. Ardal returned the motion, then turned back to his conversation.

“He may prove useful in this matter.”

Jurnigan excused himself from the long table, then walked over to Stamford, standing beside him along the wall. Stamford ate from a hand-held plate.

“Don’t you get to sit down at all?”

“No. It is customary to stand guard over one’s charge during such proceedings. Keeps any thought of foul play in check.” Stamford gave him a conspiratorial grin. “Plus it keeps me from having to make polite talk all night. I think this is the better deal.”

“Mind if I join you?”

At nine o'clock the next morning they assembled in the royal state room. Lord Dubuque occupied the central chair facing the queen's table, which was elevated on a platform a foot above them. The rest of the group sat in a semi-circle behind him. The queen sat with commanders from the ground and fleet forces.

Lapine and Hicks restated their findings for the group, sticking to the physical facts and tallies they observed, then returned to their seats at the end of the queen's table. She thanked them then turned to Lord Dubuque.

“You say the threats do not end with sheer numbers, and that your associates may aid in understanding this matter. Please proceed.”

He stood, then in a practiced motion smoothed his jacket and offered a bow.

“Yes, your highness. Irrefutable evidence has come to our attention, indicating that there are other forces at work. I do not broach this topic lightly, for it goes contrary to laws laid down by my father. Yet here we are. These associates have proven their intentions several times over, and offer their aid.”

One of the ground force commanders coughed in a manner indicating doubt. Lord Dubuque paused, then turned around and gestured for Pennirell to take the floor. He stood, then walked to the space in front of the queen's table. He bowed his head, then faced the commander, gesturing for him to join him on the floor.

“Bring a sword,” he added, seeing that he did not wear any large arms.

The commander bristled at being addressed so directly. He walked to a guard, then returned with a sword in its scabbard.

“I am typical of those you will soon face. Draw, then attack.”

The commander drew the sword, then hesitated. Pennirell stood facing him, hands at his sides, empty. He glanced around, but saw only serious faces from the curious audience. He thrust at Pennirell.

Pennirell sent a bolt of energy down the blade as he had with Sirinha. The intense heat seared his hand. The commander threw the sword to the ground as fast as he could. When it hit the carpet it started a fire, which Pennirell gently encouraged to grow in height before stepping back. Two guards rushed in, rolling the carpet tightly to snuff out the fire. Pennirell turned towards the queen’s table.

“Imagine me as a boarder on a fleet vessel. All your sails would be consumed in flames by now like that,” he pointed to the smoldering carpet being whisked out of the room. “The greys will have one like me aboard every vessel.”

Jurnigan glanced at Ardal. He saw him nodding in agreement.

“Next you will face the Shadows, their rank and file soldiers. Their abilities will run the gamut. Your swordsmen should fare well against them, for the most part. Occasionally you will face one of their elite.”

He walked back to their table. Stamford handed him one of the grey blades taken from the beach. He drew the blade in the center of the room. The entire space filled with the same bone-chilling sound they heard from it previously. The queen and her commanders shifted uneasily in their seats. He sheathed it again.

“If you face one like this, do not face it alone. Its handler will not be defeated by common tactics. Ms Donahue, if you please.”

Rachael stepped forward. Stamford handed her sword to her.

“Please summon one you consider skilled with a blade,” Pennirell said to the queen’s table.

A commander called a name. A tall, lean man jogged in from the hallway outside. The commander gestured for him to follow along with Pennirell.

“Please spar, as quickly as you are safely able.”

The swordsman took a few practices strokes, moving so quickly that the air around his blade hissed. He faced Rachael. They bowed heads, then engaged. Silver flashes filled the space, accompanied by rapid-fire sounds of steel on steel. After a few parries Rachael called out.

“Stop!”

She stood still so that all could see her blade resting atop his collarbone, and her free hand blocking his sword hand at the wrist. A killing stroke. She stepped back, then offered to go again. They engaged more quickly this time, the swordsman going a little too fast, his frustration at being bested was getting the better of him.

Rachael guided and slowed his strokes as necessary to avoid injury, then chose her moment. She struck violently upwards at his sword and let out a fierce battle cry. When the echoes faded she stood with her blade pointing at his throat. He stood empty-handed. She looked up.

They all followed her gaze and saw his sword quavering in the ceiling. She waited a few seconds to ensure the message was clear, then reached up with her left hand and called the blade down. She caught it by the hilt, spun it, then handed it back to him in one fluid motion.

“Ms Donahue, please describe your encounter on the beach.”

“The Shadow was so far superior that he laughed while we fought. He was playing with me. I could have lasted perhaps another minute on my own, no more.”

Rachael bowed and sat back down.

“And then sometimes you will meet a bit more than that.”

Jurnigan stood, then walked forward to face the bewildered swordsman.

“At ease. Just hold on tight to your weapon. Everyone ready?” He looked around.

Metal clanged as all weapons hit the floor.

“Thus was my introduction to Mr. Jurnigan,” Lord Dubuque added dryly.

The guards tried to pick up their weapons but could not.

“May we conclude that the threat from their Makers is credible, and move on to how to deal with them?” Lord Dubuque surveyed the room.

The military commanders looked to be intensely uncomfortable, but said nothing. One of the guards kicked his sword, but it did not move. He looked over at Ardal, who was chuckling quietly to himself.

“Why isn’t his sword on the ground?” The guard pointed to Ardal. Jurnigan followed his gaze.

“Well done!” Jurnigan said with admiration. “I haven’t met many folks that can shake that one off.”

All eyes turned to Ardal. He stood.

“They have accurately portrayed the threats you will face. Our lands are already thus beseiged. We employ similar tactics as these practitioners.”

“How is it you are free of the the current effect?” Hav asked.

“We employ some other tactics as well.” Ardal sat back down.

“Mr. Ardal and the people of his realm already resist the greys, as a sovereign people acting alone. We would like to join forces to better deal with our common foe,” Lord Dubuque stated evenly.

“I am intrigued. Tell me more,” the queen looked to Lord Dubuque and Ardal.

“We are sovereign. We agree joining forces would be useful. We would remain sovereign after it is done. Those are our terms.”

“I understand your terms. Before we decide, can you tell us a little more about who we would be joining with? We know little about you and how you could help.”

“Very well. We are the Aiann. We reside on the mother Isle. In our lands live people of all kinds, what you call commoners and practitioners. We have strict codes on the use of energy, much like your laws. All must abide.”

“How do you deal with violations of these codes?”

“Depending on the crime, punishment can be anything from labor to death.”

“Who is the leader of your people?”

“The council. One from each area sits on the council.”

“Can you demonstrate some of your tactics, as the others have done?”

Ardal nodded, then looked around. He dropped suddenly to a knee and hit the ground with his palm. The floor and windows shook, and the air exploded with a bang. The floor where he stood was empty. In the same instant they heard the swordsman jump. Ardal stood calmly behind him. He walked calmly back to the center of the room.

Pennirell whispered to Jurnigan.

“Was that a waystone?”

“The energy felt right.”

The queen looked to her commanders and advisors. They all nodded.

“What is the name of the other? Can you tell her to reveal herself?” Dierdre asked Ardal.

He hid his surprise well. The queen leaned forward on her table, her expression making it clear a response was expected.

“Very well. Niamh, please join me.”

A woman materialized in the back left corner of the room, wearing a cloak like Ardal’s. She walked calmly to stand next to him.

“This is not a good way to build trust with a possible ally. Why this deception?” The queen demanded.

“Our past dealings with your people have put us on the defensive. Lives have been lost. We travel to your lands in pairs for safety. Our actions make clear our intentions, if we meant to cause harm we could have done so by now. Our offer stands.”

“Under normal circumstances I would reject it out of hand. However these are far from normal. I would consult privately. Please wait outside.”

Ardal and Niamh walked into the hallway. A guard closed the door behind them. The queen watched them exit, then faced Lord Dubuque.

“A most curious alliance. I do not care for their manners, but I fear we may need them. What are your thoughts?” She turned to look at each party.

“Given our diminished numbers of practitioners I agree. We need them to bolster our ranks,” Lapine spoke first.

“if we can put one on each vessel in the fleet it may prove consequential,” a commander noted.

“We need them,” Pennirell interjected. “Let us find a way to say ‘yes’ while saving face. They may also be of aid in our need to win back young Makers coerced into service.”

“Ah yes, our final matter.” The queen then looked to Lord Dubuque.

“I concur. Were we lacking input from our own exceptional guest,” he waved his hand towards Dierdre, “we would be none the wiser and would have already agreed. Perhaps now we can assert a term of our own.”

The queen nodded.

“What would you put on the table?”

“Access to their council. Publicly, as a means to build trust. Privately, I would desire to better know these unseen overlords.”

“Very well. Summon them.”

They strode back in and faced the queen.

“We agree to join in league, and to honor your sovereignty, with one condition of our own. To foster trust our leaders must have a forum in which to discuss matters of import with your leaders, the council.”

They looked at each other, then spoke in their own language. Niamh looked at the queen.

“Neutral ground.”

The queen nodded.

“Done.”

They took a short break, during which Pennirell and Jurnigan assembled the various components for the memory spell. Stamford and Mira escorted Maker Sam into the room. By now his strength had returned, and he wore the customary air of defiance. People began filing back in and taking seats. The door closed and the room fell silent.

Pennirell and Jurnigan stood next to Sam. The queen gestured for them to begin. Pennirell turned to Sam. He wore a wooden ring that had a sharp point on the palm side. Its conical point contained a small groove, within which was embedded some of the tincture they had prepared.

“Am I on trial?”

“No. More like a test. Think back to the Gatherer. Picture yourself on deck with the senior Maker just before your blood draw. Consider how you felt. I will simulate it with a small pinprick.”

Sam hesitated momentarily at the mention of the blood draw. Pennirell grabbed him firmly by both upper arms, then squeezed.

“Concentrate,” he urged Sam.

He barely noticed the tip breaking his skin. Once blood touched the tincture it shot into his system. He swayed, then put a hand on his knee. He looked up, his eyes focused somewhere in the distance. Jurnigan addressed him.

“Young man, what is your name?”

“Sam Abernathy.”

“Where are you from?”

“Basingstoke.”

“Who are your parents?”

“Milford and Dory.”

“Do you wish to see them again?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to be a Maker any longer?”

Silence. A battle raged inside Sam, his newly restored ability to choose wrestled with the rites performed on him by the greys. He clenched and unclenched his fists several times.

“They will find me. No, I do not. But I must. For my parents.”

“Your parents are fine. You may choose freely now.”

“No, I do not want to be a Maker.”

“Will you join us in protecting your parents and the land they live on?”

“I want to see them.”

“So do I. Until then, will you help us?”

“Maybe. I am very tired.”

Sam lay down and was asleep in seconds. Guards carried him to secure quarters.

“Partial success. Not bad for a first try,” Jurnigan offered.

“We got past the defiance, and down to the person, which is excellent. However, I was not expecting the threats to family. That may prove a difficult obstacle.”

Pennirell walked up to the queen’s table and handed her an arrow with a wooden tip matching his ring. A stop ring sat a half inch from the tip, to prevent the arrow from going in any further, thus remaining nonlethal.

“Delivery of the tincture will be by arrow shot. Once treated, we must remove them to our own ranks or vessel.”

“Would it not be simpler to just kill their Makers?” One commander asked.

“Any Maker converted to our side counts double, once for the threat removed, twice for the addition to our ranks. Further, we do kill the senior ones, as they are too far gone to be converted back.”

Ardal and Niamh spoke quietly.

“Do you have input to share?” The queen asked them.

“We will help do this. In our code we are sworn to heal those subjected to such energy against their will,” Niamh answered.

“Our mixture puts them to sleep immediately. We have found most success when questioning them after they wake in non-threatening circumstances,” Ardal added.

The queen needed no deliberation.

“These are barely more than children. Make it happen.” She turned to the practitioners and her commanders. “By this time tomorrow I want to see a plan for how you will get your regiments ready in a week’s time. We are concluded.”

After the queen left most of the remaining people milled around, chatting in small groups. Ardal and Niamh approached Pennirell, who was talking to Lapine and Jurnigan.

“We must discuss your Dierdre,” Ardal stated.

“She stay up too late last night?” Jurnigan shook his head in mock concern. “Kids.”

Lapine suppressed a laugh.

“She attains power too fast,” Niamh spoke up. “It is unstable in one so new in her talents. Akin to a heavy load on one’s shoulders – all is well when perfectly balanced, but a small disturbance can push it rapidly to a place beyond recall.”

Pennirell exchanged a glance with Lapine.

“Do you share only concerns, or do you have anything helpful to add?” He asked. “We would all be dead right now if she had done any less. I struggle to curtail any of her abilities.”

“We have a trial, a test, that widens the base, making the load more stable.”

“Is this the kind of test where you only hear about the winners, because all the losers die in the process?” Jurnigan eyed them suspiciously.

Niamh nodded.

“That is not the right next step. She is one of the called. Her life will under no circumstances be in danger by the hand of those she would help. If you can teach her skills to manage this power, then we may talk. Otherwise, you may not subject her to your trial.”

“We must confer.” The two of them stepped away.

Dierdre, Derrick and Mira walked over.

“Discussing my fate again?” Dierdre smiled. Pennirell looked concerned. “Don’t worry, no hocus pocus there. Ardal said as much last night. Is this just another round of hand-wringing or did anything useful come of it?”

“They’re sorting that out now.” Jurnigan pointed at Ardal and Niamh with a tilt of his head. “Said they had some life-or-death ordeal that may help. We gave that a miss.”

Ardal and Niamh rejoined the group.

“There are some things that we are permitted to teach outside the trial, but not all,” Niamh said.

“Make an exception,” Jurnigan pressed. “You think we’re going to put the coils in place by taking half measures?”

The two traded concerned looks.

“Didn’t get to that bit yet?” Derrick asked lightly. “Hey, don’t take our word for it, you could ask Timena yourselves.”

“We must talk to the council.”

“We,” Laping gestured, implying the larger circle. “We will go with you. No more veils of secrecy.”

“I’ll go. Can I get one of those cloaks?” Mira inquired.

Niamh sighed, then nodded.

“We are being made to look the fool by your comments, which is understandable given your situation.” She turned to Dierdre. “Be advised if you use the same tactic on Sirinha again without taking measures to protect yourself, she will kill you. I could do the same. This is neither boast nor threat. You must know that you are vulnerable when drawing healing energy, your very heart is wide open. We can show you how to guard it.”

Dierdre met Niamh’s eyes.

“I believe you.”

“Let us strive to be less secretive in future exchanges. You have finally given us a reason to believe you. Had we not made light of the situation would you have told us that detail?”

“We do not discuss these matters openly. Divulging the essence of such things with too broad an audience has cost lives in the past. You must understand this.”

“Decide, then, who among us shall be in your inner circle. Henceforth with that audience do not tarry, for we are short on time.”

They looked at those assembled around them.

“You six shall form that circle. Join hands with us.”

They held hands, then Niamh spoke. Energy flowed around the circle, visibly for Dierdre. She both felt and saw it. She watched as a branch of energy ran down the left arm of each, flaring brightly on the backs of their left hands. After they let go Dierdre held her hand up, inspecting the mark. She saw intricate patterns, interwoven with spirals and knots, hairs-breadth threads illuminated with the same glow as the forest. Niamh saw her observing it.

“This mark will identify you as trusted allies to others of our kind.”

Lapine felt tingling in her hand. This was the first time she directly sensed spell work. She smiled.

“I will also accompany you on your visit.”

“We leave at once.” Ardal looked at Mira and Lapine.

“Please inform my superiors,” Lapine requested of Pennirell.

“Join hands again, the four of us.”

They held hands, then disappeared.

“Felt the waystone that time,” Jurnigan said.

One of the military commanders strode into the hall and faced Pennirell and Jurnigan.

“Gentlemen, it is time we begin our preparations.” They walked out with him, leaving Deirdre and Derrick alone in the room.

“That felt like progress,” he said hopefully.

“Yeah. I was glad to get past all the tedious metaphors and down to something concrete.”

“Can you see the mark clearly? It’s a little fuzzy for me.”

“Crystal clear. It’s beautiful. I’m tempted to draw it but I can feel that is a bad idea.”

“Can we work on my energy draw? Seems we have some time.”

“Yes. Let’s see if we can get that up to the level of the other type of draw you possess.” She flicked her head to the spot where Mira had been standing, flashing a quick grin.

Derrick blushed.

“Guilty, as charged.”

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Hadley and Finn watched riders in scarlet and black come in from the north to the iron market. They wore the crest of Lord Phillips' realm on their tunics. They stopped near the center of the market, then walked towards them.

"Would you call their posture haughty, or arrogant?" Hadly asked quietly. Finn suppressed a laugh.

"Both."

The two leaders walked directly in front of them, then one unrolled an official looking scroll.

"By order of Lord Phillips, you are to surrender this market and surrounding lands at once, and return directly to your realm."

“We have been expecting you,” Hadley said coolly. “Lord Phillips should be getting one of these about now, takes precedence.” He handed them a letter.

The leader read it, surprise then anger crossing his face.

“This is forgery!”

“Really? Do you seriously think Lord Dubuque would risk her majesty’s wrath over this?” He waved at the isolated market and hardscrabble hills. “Why don’t you check with Lord Phillips? And if you find he is already en route to Londinium then you will know the summons is real.”

Lord Philips’ men looked at each other uneasily. This turn of events caught them off-guard.

“Tell you what,” Finn spoke up. “Why don’t you take that note back for verification, while the rest of your forces remain here? We are not at war. I’d fancy the chance to play some dice and relieve your men of some of their heavy coin.” He smiled.

The man holding the queen’s note considered this.

“If this is fakery there will be consequences.”

“Agreed. But none of our necks are on the line. This will get sorted out above my pay grade.”

“So be it. See to the encampment,” he said to the other, then strode off.

“I’m Finn, this is Hadley.”

“Hugh,” he shook his head. “This is most irregular.”

“Word of the year, that.”

After departing the palace Niamh and Ardal resumed their taciturn dispositions, and led them through a series of waypoints en route back to the green Isle. Mira recognized a few of them from their trip in the other direction several days earlier. She also detected their peculiar energy frequencies now that she was looking for it. She decided to test the sincerity of their openness.

“Do you folks know how the calling stones were made? Folks on the home Isle call them Nowhere Stones these days, since they are largely regarded as legend.”

“We have knowledge, but none alive are strong enough to make one,” Ardal replied.

“Will they run out one day? After enough calls have occurred to drain them fully?”

“A most curious question,” Niamh spoke. “A logical guess. They are not wells that can run dry. They are more like a lever atop a fulcrum. Sometimes they move to the left, sometimes right. But they do not ‘run out’ as you say.”

“Interesting. They are switches, not reservoirs. Do they require any maintenance at all?”

“None. Unless tampered with.”

“Is what Gwendolyn did counted as tampering?”

“No. She was the only party in that interaction that was permanently altered. The stone remains operational.”

“Whoa. Really? Then what do you mean by tampering?”

Niamh paused while they transited another waypoint.

“When someone changes a stone so that it triggers based on a different event.”

“How do you detect that has happened?”

“None may be altered in isolation. When one is changed it resonates out of tune with the others.”

They passed through two more waypoints.

“We have arrived.”

They stood inside a stone cavern more than one hundred feet across and thirty high. Its granite walls were covered in carvings and tapestries. Mira recognized one of the patterns carved into the stone as the one on the back of her hand. Lots of people moved around, coming and going from hallways on all sides of the chamber. Some wore the familiar green cloaks, but most wore unique patterns that did not appear to be uniforms. Shimmering light filled the entire space, giving the impression it had been reflected off a rippling pool of water. The cool light contained hints of teal and turquoise, giving the entire space an otherworldly feel.

Niamh turned to face a person that greeted them. They spoke in their language, then she turned back to Mira and Lapine.

“You will be shown to quarters while we await the council.”

“Is there anywhere that is off-limits? I don’t plan to sit in a solitary room the whole time while we wait.” Mira faced Niamh.

Niamh hesitated for a second, then answered.

“Yes. You will know. Do not violate. My position is difficult enough.” She turned to face Lapine. “Stay with her until your own abilities develop enough to sense the boundaries.” She bowed her head slightly then walked off.

A young man led them down a stone hallway that went further underground. After a few turns and several flights of stairs they came to a series of doors. Mira sensed a large amount of energy emanating from each. He stopped at one door, then gestured for it to open. Mira looked inside, then at the door. She remained in the hall.

“Please close it. I need to see that I can open it.”

He shut the door. Mira held up the back of her hand to the door, then willed it to open. It swung inward. She followed. The room held two cots, a table and chairs. Wood sat stacked by a hearth. The table had a water jug and a small basin.

“Basic, but secure,” Lapine observed.

“Yeah. Strong enchantments everywhere, but none evil. I think we’re in their citadel.”

“Let’s go look around.”

They worked their way back up towards the main chamber. As they walked Lapine described the wall carvings that she could recognize from old texts. The same light bathed each passage, yet there were no torches to be seen, nor smoke. At the entrance to the large hall a brilliant sculpture adorned the doorway arch and surrounding walls. It depicted a giant serpent battling something unseen, on the edge of a precipice. Lapine scratched her head.

“This is clearly significant, but I have never seen any reference to this.”

“The birth of the world,” an armed man spoke from behind. He wore colorful clothing beneath his green cloak. “Even after being materialized, it ever hangs above the void.”

They turned to face him. He looked at their left hands, then met their eyes.

“So it has begun. There has been much talk lately.”

“Did you find our ship tallies useful?” Mira asked.

“That was you? Yes, though the picture painted is more grave than we knew. Powerful work is necessary to conceal efforts of that scale.”

“Good thing we have as many boats. I think we’re hoping you can put someone on each to even the scales.”

His entire demeanor changed to one of keen interest.

“This was not known before. This is critically important.”

Mira held up the back of her left hand.

“That’s why we’re here. And to discuss some advanced training for one of our group.”

“We accompanied Ardal and Niamh here,” Lapine added. “They plan to update the council.”

“Then I must go.”

“Do you think he’s on the council?” Mira watched him walk away.

“Quite possibly. I suppose we’ll find out soon enough.” She turned towards a hallway behind them. “Let’s go this way. I smell food.”

The next three days at the palace exhausted Pennirell and Jurnigan. They had been training commanders and soldiers non-stop since their audience with the queen. Overall the progress was good. Within every group they were able to find one or two with natural abilities similar to Rachael. This was not unexpected, given the elite ranks of sword fighters on hand, there should be a concentration of those with practitioner abilities. Those with an ability to intuitively tap this ability would naturally rise to the top, the ones Jurnigan described as ‘smithy.’ More generally, this is a predisposition towards Clay, which includes metals or anything else found in the ground.

These fledgling practitioners would be retained for subsequent training groups, vastly speeding up the time required to overcome the inherent skepticism regarding the subject. By the end of the third day they had readied hundreds of leaders for both ground and fleet forces. The queen and her closest advisors watched with keen interest.

“I must admit to some inner conflict,” the queen confided with Lord Dubuque. “Despite watching them divulge their secrets to our forces, I find the whole business of energy work to be unsettling.”

“It is difficult to control that which we cannot see. This is the primary motivation for my father’s laws on the matter. I share your concerns, and his, however a new time is upon us. I watched with my own eyes the transformation in Hav’s and Rachael’s sword fighting after working with Jurnigan. The difference is as night is to day. We would be slaughtered without it. As a father, of course I wish every advantage for Hav, yet as a leader I am faced with how to govern this unseen realm. It often feels like we have opened a chest of serpents.”

“Well said. One of my own is among the ranks being trained.”

“The codes of the Aiann may be informative. Stamford and I have considered certain status and obligations for practitioners in my realm, though our ideas remain nascent. Given the Aiann’s head start, we may find a way to coexist with both energy practice and enforcement of its use.”

“Your ideas hold promise. Let us consider this a problem for the future, in that we only need resolve it if we are victorious.”

The Aiann council convened in a room adjacent to the grand stone hall into which Mira and Lapine had transited the day before. The council members filed in, each with his or her cloak worn with the hood up, obscuring their faces. Initially Lapine thought all this solemnity to be a bit overdone, but reconsidered after realizing it to be the same as court proceedings back at the palace. Mira fidgeted with her hands in the meanwhile, anxious to get started.

The council sat on one side of a long table that faced the room. Members of the audience sat in one of the three rows of benches facing the council table. In the space between the front bench and the table a large circle was carved into the stone floor. Mira noticed it thrumming with energy when she walked past it on her way to the second row. Ardal and Niamh sat in the front row with several others.

An armed man in a green cloak swung the massive door shut, then sang a single note and held it. The council joined in, each with a different note. The resulting harmony had an eerie beauty, shifting from friendly to ominous and back again. Lapine

felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She fought back tears when the voices changed to convey sadness. They stopped in unison, then lowered their hoods. Mira recognized the man from the carved doorway, sitting second from the end. The council contained nine presently, the number varied depending on the count of lands allied with them.

The woman sitting in the center spoke. She had black hair streaked with silver, and an energy that made Mira want to cringe. She sensed power similar to that of Sirinha, and sense of purpose that left no doubt that she could carry out any sentence that was due.

“We are met to discuss two matters: alliance, and the called. Please step forward.” She gestured to Ardal and Niamh.

They stood, then walked to the large circle in the center of the floor. Mira felt it pulse when then entered it. They described the proposed alliance, including the condition about meeting the queen’s leadership on neutral ground, and also shared their observations about Dierdre. The council leader showed no expression until they mentioned Sirinha’s name, at which point her eyes narrowed slightly and she clenched her jaw. Ardal and Niamh closed with Jurnigan’s remarks that they share their secrets with Dierdre outside the setting of the trial. Several of the council shook their heads at this point. They left the circle and sat down.

The room was silent for several minutes. Lapine nudged Mira and gave an inquiring look, but got only a shrug in reply. Shortly thereafter the guard opened the door and motioned for them to leave. Ardal and Niamh walked out. Mira started to

stand, then found herself pulled back down by Lapine's grasp. The council leader looked at the two of them.

"The council will discuss the matters at hand. Please wait outside."

Lapine stood, straightened her back and walked into the circle.

"We will participate in our own fate. We are not on trial awaiting sentencing. An alliance must go in both directions."

Mira was impressed by her conviction. She stood and joined her in the circle.

Two members of the council sat back and crossed their arms in disapproval. Their meaning was not lost on Lapine.

"You would be first among equals in this alliance, but it rings hollow. They greys outnumber you, both on land and at sea. They do not hold this advantage over our forces, conventional as they may be. I see no others offering a fleet of vessels in partnership here. Our humble timber and common people are just as necessary as your practitioners. We will speak as equals."

She stood firm and looked every council member in the eye. Those with their arms crossed shifted slightly in their seats. The leader's face broke into a partial smile.

"Your resolve heartens me, and presents a quandry. To address these matters fully we must discuss details that cannot leave this room. Each on council has sworn an oath and knows the consequences for its violation. You would ask us to include you in those ranks with little means to hold you accountable."

Mira felt the truth of her words pervade her whole being. The circle connected them in some way. She felt the need to speak, though she did not want to.

“You’re both right,” she heard herself say. “The queen herself may hold private council with none of us present. So also may you.” She paused. “But not about Dierdre. If you want to discuss privately whether or not to ally with us, that is your prerogative. But you do not own the called. They serve the entire world.” She felt a release of energy when she finished the last word.

The council leader showed surprise, then smiled warmly.

“I see that you speak from experience, and that you have chosen to remain here in service.”

Lapine turned to look at Mira, her entire face a question. Mira shrugged.

“It’s not the sort of thing one leads with, especially when everyone calls them the Nowhere Stones.”

Lapine shook her head in disbelief, then opened her mouth to ask a question, then stopped when she realized she did not know where to start.

“A little over twenty years ago,” Mira offered.

“Yes, we recall the event,” the council leader looked into the distance, then back at Mira. “What became of the other from that calling?”

Mira closed her eyes, her face covered in pain. She could feel that lying while standing in the circle was a bad idea.

“I will describe the outcome if I must, but I would prefer not to. It still hurts.”

“Fair enough. We would consult privately about whether or not to ally ourselves. We will call you back in regarding Dierdre.”

Mira followed Lapine into the main hall. Lapine turned to face her.

“I had no idea. I respect your reasons for keeping it private initially, but why continue to withhold this?”

“I wasn’t withholding. It never came up.”

“I suppose you are right. This does not change our course of action, yet somehow I am still very thrown off-balance by this discovery. Every detail seems vitally important.”

“Well, you’re probably right about that. Look, Lapine –“

“Call me Theresa. Let us move past formalities for a moment.”

Mira smiled.

“Theresa, you just learned that I was not born on this world. It’s not a problem to be a bit out of sorts.”

Lapine exhaled.

“Thank you.”

The guard opened the door and motioned them back.

“That was quick.” They returned to the circle.

“We have agreed to form an alliance. We will provide this in writing, with a seal that you will be able to verify,” she said to Mira, then turned to Lapine. “And very soon so will you. Now to the more difficult matter. When one of the called gains power too rapidly it creates great danger. We have generations of experience here, we do not say this lightly.”

“Can you be more specific about the danger, for my sake?” Lapine asked.

“A untrained mind can get knocked over by a sudden inrush of power, even with solid morals and intentions. Worse, an experienced practitioner can corrupt one’s direction. Once the compass heading is lost, it is natural to use the power for survival, by any means necessary. One loses their soul in the process,” Mira replied. Tears ran down her face. Several fell to the ground inside the circle. The entire room pulsed with each. The council members each lowered their head slightly.

“My condolences about your friend, the other called,” the leader said. “Her depiction is accurate, and is the impetus for the trial. Only those who demonstrate the proper compass heading, as you say, will prevail. This may seem cruel or uncaring, but witness the death and misery that they a single misguided person can cause, then you may change your mind.”

“She has literally saved six of us from death. She is the kindest person I have ever met,” Mira said, still flush with emotion.

“I believe you. No doubt you describe her current state of mind well. Seeds can be planted by those like Sirinha, however, that can corrupt even the best, given time. Further, your Dierdre is on the far end of the scale already, if Ardal is to be believed.”

Mira and Lapine exchanged a glance.

“Is there more? For all our sakes, please share.”

Lapine described the energy draw at the beach that defeated Sirinha, giving more details than Ardal shared. Then she hesitated, but inwardly knew the right thing was to speak the truth. She was not sure if this was clever work the circle was performing, or her own conscience urging her on. She decided it did not matter, and continued.

“She drew energy from the plants in the forest to sustain her flight from Sirinha. She called it ‘running on borrowed sunshine.’ She travelled eighty miles in but a handful of hours. I personally witnessed her demonstrate this type of movement. She bound through the air like a doe. I felt more joy watching it than I thought possible. She also said she found a deathcap, which she accurately described, despite never having read our old texts. I cannot see it myself, but I am inclined to believe her.”

The council members began murmuring, some spoke in their language. The man they recognized from the day before spoke up.

“She is already beyond the level of the standard trial,” he said to Mira and Lapine, and to quiet the side conversations. He nodded to the leader, ceding the floor back to her.

“This is unexpected news. I see no other course but to meet her.” The rest of the council nodded agreement.

“This can be our first agenda item for our initial neutral ground meeting,” Lapine suggested.

“Riall will accompany you back to your leaders to help arrange this,” she gestured to the same man. “The council meeting has ended.”

Lapine turned to walk out, then stopped.

“Who will be his second?”

The council leader smiled at the reference to Niamh’s earlier subterfuge.

“Riall needs no second.”

The pace of events accelerated rapidly after the council meeting. The three of them transited back to the queen's palace in Londinium to find military preparations in full swing. The fleet was only days away from being ready to sail. Ground forces were already moving. Riall was immediately pressed into service matching up the names of practitioners with ships and ground regiments. He was so busy that two days passed before he could discuss the neutral ground meeting.

The logical place to meet would be uncontested lands on the far western coast of the home Isle, halfway between their two realms. Substantial grey activity in that region removed the option. Riall and Lapine sorted through the rest of the options, and found themselves looking at an empty table. Mira suggested they meet aboard the Corvus, as the ship was officially part of no fleet. Riall agreed.

The queen brought three commanders and the six bearing the trusted seal given by Niamh. They transited to Morgansea and boarded directly. Captain Rowe was not keen to share the location of his home port, but they could not afford the sailing time to Londinium. Once aboard they sailed a short distance offshore and dropped anchor. Riall marked a circle on the foredeck with a piece of charcoal, then breathed a spell into it. The Aiann council members arrived by waystone into the circle one at a time. The leader came first, followed by two others. She addressed the queen.

"We are four today. The others are repelling a new offensive by the greys. Time is short."

“Quite so. Let us begin by being thankful that we may meet amicably, and in alliance. We are aligned on the deployment of forces. Today we seek resolution for concerns raised about the called. Are there any other matters to discuss?”

“We consider making your acquaintance to be of import. We do not engage as such regularly. We would also discuss strategies for future engagements with Sirinha, we have insight that may help. Lastly, we would fortify the cell holding Olaf. He is known to us, and is of sufficient power to present an ongoing risk.”

“Agreed.”

Dierdre stepped forward. The deck became silent. Derrick walked up and stood beside her, then spoke quietly.

“Solidarity. I doubt they’re worried about me, but I can’t just leave you hanging out to dry by yourself.”

Dierdre suppressed a smirk.

The Aiann council leader came closer, lowering her hood as she moved.

“Greetings, I am Kelia. It is nice to finally meet you, Dierdre and Derrick.”

Dierdre noticed light in the center of Kelia’s torso that branched out to all regions of her body. It burned more brightly than the light she had seen in the forest. She watched as a strand of this same energy extended out from Kelia’s hand and came towards her.

“How do we do this?” Shall I block that energy, or let it through?” She indicated the location of Kelia’s probe with a glance.

Kelia hid her surprise. She was reaching out with the most subtle of spells, and had not encountered anyone that could detect it.

“Both. Start with deflection, then openness.”

Dierdre concentrated, imagining herself a blank and featureless slab of obsidian. The energy reflected off her as cleanly as a polished mirror. Then she became open, utterly transparent. Kelia’s spell passed through her, detecting nothing. Finally she relaxed, at which point the energy could interact with her again.

Kelia took this in stride, in spite of the implications. As one of the most powerful practitioners in the world, she could sense the breadth and depth of another’s power.

Dierdre was unreadable.

“Can you show me how you drained energy away from Sirinha? Take but a little of mine, then hold the connection.”

Dierdre looked around for a way to put a hand into water, then realized she no longer needed to. She could send it directly there. She was about to begin, then paused.

“Do you want me to disburse the energy, or give it back afterwards? I could do it either as a pipe or well.”

“Consider it a borrowing, so a well.”

Dierdre drew some of Kelia’s energy, getting a glimpse of her vast power in the process. She paused, held the connection, then looked at Kelia.

“You will now feel several things. Do not relinquish control.”

Kelia reached through to assess vulnerabilities. She grasped the core of Dierdre’s being gently, but firmly. Her right hand mimicked the motion, becoming a loose fist.

Dierdre looked down at her sternum and briefly considered this new sensation. Then she flexed both her mind and body, trapping the energy. Kelia tried to pull it back, but could not budge her. Both of them reached into the deck to steady themselves, and the strength of Kelia's pull threatened to break the planking. She disengaged pulling, then tried to fully close her fist. Her action had no more effect than a child squeezing a stone. She switched from strength to subtlety, and deposited a small orb of energy inside Dierdre.

"Please return the draw, then disengage." She felt the energy return smoothly. She opened and closed her right hand a few times, impressed by how tightly it was trapped by Dierdre. "What can you tell me about my last actions?"

Dierdre looked into the distance, feeling around inside her.

"There is something there now that was not present before."

"Did you feel me deposit it?"

"Only once it dropped. I did not feel it enter."

"This is the sole vulnerability I found, which is promising, for we can teach you how to protect against it. I will now release the energy I deposited. You should feel warmth. Were my intentions malicious it could kill, or worse, corrupt."

Kelia closed her eyes. Dierdre gasped, then put her hands on the sides of her torso.

"It's gone now. Point taken. That leaves me wide open." Dierdre paused, then looked at Kelia. "Will you teach me to close it fully? Or would you retain a private means to destroy me if I become corrupted?"

“Any gap we leave behind could be exploited by the others. Further, the means of protecting against this can be circumvented, usually by causing physical pain or some other substantial change of focus. You will need to remain vigilant during conflict. As for containing you if misguided, there is one other means.” She looked around at those assembled.

“Please speak openly, as this affects us all,” Pennirell recommended.

“Very well. Dierdre’s power is uncommon. I believe her to be sufficient to be a Maker of Stones, a real Maker, one capable of creating a calling stone or a waypoint. To my knowledge there are none alive with this ability today. If she loses her path and joins ranks with the greys it could tip the balance.”

“Fine. What would need to happen to stop me?” Dierdre asked.

“You would enter into a binding contract with another, wherein this other holds the power of death over you. You must do this voluntarily.”

“Can it be undone when this is over?”

“I do not know of any means to revert the binding, it is tied to your blood.”

“You’ll have to do better than that. I came over here to help, not swear my soul to someone for eternity.”

“Let us table this for now,” the queen spoke. “We acknowledge the risk, we may consider more options as we proceed to Lord Dubuque’s manor for the other matter.”

The Corvus weighed anchor and began the short journey back to port. Kelia used this time to share more details about Sirinha.

“She did not begin as such, in fact our language does not share the word evil. It more accurately translates to misguided. Evil is a wholly human evaluation, power and energy make no such distinction. This is vitally important. To dismiss something as purely evil is to place oneself at risk of falling prey to the lesser shades it may present of itself. Raw energy is akin to water, it can sustain or destroy.”

“Sirinha fought bravely alongside us during the event that triggered Mira’s calling. She lost her family during that conflict, and retained anger and fear. She responded by using any and all means to kill the enemy, and lost herself in the process.”

“Can she not see that she has become what she once fought? That she now causes the same pain in others?” Lapine asked.

“The ability to clearly see oneself diminishes with each misguided use of power. Today she is no more capable of understanding the consequences of her actions than a river in flood. She is driven now by forces larger than herself. We have never seen one come back from that place.” Kelia paused, then went on.

“There is an apparent paradox in this. When one uses power selflessly, one’s well-being is improved. Conversely, when one uses energy selfishly, self is destroyed in the process. The lesson is that all great energy is dangerous, even healing energy. The flow follows the focus, any thought of self directs energy into, rather than through the practitioner, burning away part of their humanity with each invocation.”

“When one can face mortal danger and still choose based on principles rather than fear, we describe them with a word that most closely translates to integrity.” She smiled, then looked at Dierdre.

“Twice you have demonstrated this in your dealings with Sirinha, a most welcome decision.”

The Corvus docked at Morgansea. They transited to the tent under the oak, then rode to the manor, where a commotion greeted them. Four guards lay dead and the door to the prison building was blown off its hinges. Several others lay wounded. Derrick, Dierdre and Mira ran over to treat them. Jurnigan and Kelia led a group into the dungeons. Riall and Pennirell stayed back to guard the queen and Lord Dubuque.

Jurnigan’s expression hardened when he saw Olaf’s destroyed cell.

“He had help, I can feel another energy here,” he said.

“She has a weakness,” Kelia replied.

[50]

“Do you think they’ll come back swinging?” Finn asked Hadley.

A day had passed since the leader of Lord Phillips’ forces went back to verify the queen’s note. Hadley had just returned from a briefing at the manor.

“Not here. When the fleet moves on Caerleon they should be fully occupied.”

“I’ll put a coin down says you’re wrong. They want this waypoint.” Finn flashed a coin and grinned.

“They do want it, but we are betting they don’t have enough to cover both. We’ll be getting some crown troops here as backup.”

“Well then, that counts as news. Things are about to get busy. I’ll keep my dice handy.”

Hadley laughed, then looked around.

“It’s curious how a small patch of land like this ends up being important. Before all this I don’t think I’d ever stopped here, always rode straight through.”

“Aye. Although I’d tell you that before I joined up, when I was, ehm, freelancing that this place was central. Buy or sell anything here. None of us knew anything about

waypoints, but everyone knew the place was a touch different. Lots of legends, mostly just stories around the fire, but there are still places some folks won't go after dark."

"Probably a few more now."

A rider wearing crown colors galloped in on the main road, coming from the south. He tied off his horse and found the command tent. Guards ushered him inside.

"It has begun. Her majesty's fleet engaged grey vessels. Make ready fortifications. Two regiments are due tonight."

"Thank you. Earlier it was one regiment. What news of the change?"

"More forces were seen entering Lord Philips' realm from the north. Seems they have an interest here."

Hadley glanced at Finn. Finn pointed to the coin in his hand, then made a motion indicating Hadley should pay up.

"When this is over I'll pay you twice, back at the pub." He turned to the rider. "Are you courier or soldier? Are you staying here?"

"Yes, er, staying. Name's Ennis," he said nervously.

"Right. Welcome. I'm Hadley, this is Finn. Let's take a walk through the ranks. Finn, can you alert the merchants that they should be ready to fall back at a moment's notice?"

Finn nodded and ducked out of the tent. Ennis shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other while Hadley stood and put on his weapons belt.

"You're new, eh?"

“Yes, been in ranks a year now. Is it true what everyone’s saying, there’s people moving energy about, called practitioners?”

Hadley smiled and nodded.

“You’ll be meeting one before the day is out if I’m not mistaken.”

They walked through the rows of tents from Lord Dubuque’s regiment. Hadley gave orders for fortifications to be dug or erected. The soldiers quickly realized it was going to be a long night.

Next they went to the center of the market, to assemble a cage around the waypoint. The materials had been prepared in advance and stored out of sight. Just then a short, slightly portly man in grubby peasant clothing appeared in the waypoint. Drawn bows and swords greeted him. He waved a hand signal and they were withdrawn. He jogged over to Hadley.

“Forces moving down the road from the north. Two hours out. Makers and conventional forces. I saw at least two regiments and a big supply train.”

“Good work. Help with the waypoint cage. Ennis, with me. We need to accelerate our efforts.”

Ennis was still staring at the covert operative that had come via waypoint. His expression shifted from awe to panic when Hadley hooked his elbow and pulled him into the same spot. They transited back to the manor. They found everyone outside on the grounds, still evaluating Olaf’s escape. Hadley gave an update and requested assistance. Jurnigan and Rachael joined them immediately, with others on stand-by.

The four of them returned to the iron market waypoint, each looking up at the cage now standing there. Jurnigan looked at the joints, then gave it a good shake. The ground rumbled, but the cage held. He grunted something close to approval, then walked out when the door opened.

“We need to cut the road quickly.” Hadley pointed to a spot just north of the market. “That’s the only route horses can take.”

The road was centuries old, its packed gravel and rock now firmly in place. Digging a trench with picks and shovels alone would take more than a day. Jurnigan walked to the middle of the road, then stood still with his feet apart. The ground began to vibrate in waves, growing stronger with each pulse. After a minute he stopped, then kicked at the ground, which was now as loose as sand.

Two dozen shovels attacked it, and an hour later had dug a trench ten feet deep and twenty across, cutting the entire road. They piled the soil across the road on their side of the cut, forming a wall of the same height. Lord Dubuque’s people took up positions on the wall and in the forests on either side.

The troops from Lord Phillips that had encamped there the day before watched uneasily, unaware of developments. Their communications were restricted to horseback, and had not yet arrived with word that an attack force was on the way.

“This is a good measure for the road, but the rest of this place is not ideal for a defensive position.” Rachael stood next to Hadley at the command tent, looking out towards the road.

“Conflicts never occur in suitable locations, do they? Any ideas to improve our lot?”

“They’ll pour through the woods on either side. We need a trench and a wall to go all the way around.”

“If the report is correct they’ll be on us in an hour. Can’t dig a ditch with arrows flying. Do you have something else in mind?”

“We should at least cut a boundary, so that they may not cross in secret. Use the felled trees as makeshift fences.”

“See to it.”

They quickly cleared a swath twenty feet wide from the eastern side of the road to the foothills. The hills rose up less than a hundred yards from the edge of the road, forming a natural barrier. The western side would prove to be more difficult, there the land slopes gently down to the river more than two hundred yards away. They were halfway to the river when they arrived.

The commander rode in swiftly with a group of two dozen Shadows, intended as a strike force. They pulled up at the trench, surprised by this new development. The commander swore, then barked orders. They fell back, riding north to rejoin the main force.

“Well at least we did one thing unexpected,” Hadley spoke while looking with one eye through a glass. “Mr. Ennis, how long until the crown regiments arrive?”

“At least another two hours, I’m afraid.”

“We will need some help. Finn, please go and fetch us a few more folks from home.”

Finn jogged over to the waypoint. Guards opened the door to the iron lattice cage and he was gone. The door clanged shut once more. Jurnigan grimaced.

“I don’t like it either,” Rachael said to him. “Their use as military assets will have lasting consequences. But –” She waved a hand at the advancing column of troops. Jurnigan sighed agreement.

The assault began with the arrival of the foot soldiers. They began methodically probing the defenses and scouting the terrain on the western side of the road. The commander from Lord Phillips’ forces stood with a senior Maker just out of bowshot range, surveying with a glass. They quickly sorted out that the western boundary did not reach the river and began sending people into the woods on foot.

Hadley was already busy assembling a similar number to meet them. He addressed them just before they departed.

“Remember, this is not about saving the market. This is about our homes. We cannot let greys onto our lands, they will not stop. Help is coming. Hold fast until then.”

Grim faces acknowledged him, then ran west into the forest.

Hadley returned to the command tent, to find Rachael staring into the distance, hands open at her sides. He realized she was sensing something.

“I need to go with them.”

Hadley did not want to lose her, but knew enough by now to not argue. He replied with a look, and she sprinted off.

Rachael caught up to the group at the edge of the boundary cut. The leader signaled her over silently, then pointed. She saw movement in the trees. Archers drew their bows. Several Shadows emerged from behind the nearest trees with swords drawn. Rachael noted that their swords were silent. Either these are apprentices or they can silence their blades at will.

Several well-placed arrows dropped the first to advance. More Shadows appeared farther down the line, drawing the archers' attention. Rachael moved to follow, then stopped. She felt a remaining threat, but could not place it. She looked back at the felled Shadows, and was amazed to see them moving. They crawled low to the ground. The first two had already reached their lines. One ambushed an archer before she could respond.

Rachael met the second Shadow to stand, beheading him before he could manage to parry. She knelt to inspect the arrow wound, and saw a metal plate beneath his cloak, encased in leather to dampen sounds.

"Swords! To me! They wear armor"

Four sword fighters joined her in repelling the wave of Shadows that feigned death by arrow strike. She sprinted down the line to the archers.

"Aim for the head or the belt. They wear chest plates."

By the time they had stabilized the line they had lost three archers. The greys held back once their first thrust stalled, regrouping for the next push. Dusk would soon arrive, making the archers' jobs more difficult. Rachael sensed the mounting danger, and could tell the scales were perilously close to tipping in favor of the greys. She sent a runner back to get help, hopeful more had arrived from the manor.

She heard more bows twang nearby, signalling the start of the next round. The archers were busier now, needing more shots to hit the smaller, unarmored sections of enemy soldiers. She joined the group captain to update him about the runner. Just then she felt an unwelcome energy from the grey ranks, sending a chill down her spine. Her mind flashed back to the beach where she faced the ghoulish blade. She held her own blade in front of her and focused on it, forcing all other thoughts aside. Her fear was soon replaced with calm resolution. The captain noticed her behavior.

"Are you ok? Injured?"

"There's an elite fighter over there. I can feel it. You will know when I engage it. Stop at nothing to fell him. Archers must fire, even if you risk hitting me."

"Are you sure?"

"If he gets through he will kill everyone here. If your men have them, start with the stone tipped arrows before using steel."

Several Shadows moved on their current position, prompting a response. Rachael felt her adversary move farther down the line, away from the current diversion. She took two fighters and moved to intercept, and signalled to some archers to cover them.

She stopped opposite a tight stand of trees. No enemy were visible, but she could feel them in there. She thought back to the first time she sensed Sirinha on the trail south of the thieves' clearing, and realized she could do the same now. She became still, then focused. She pinpointed their location, and instructed the archers where to fire.

Two screams of pain bellowed from the stand of trees. Blurry movement raced towards them, indicating spellwork at play. The archers kept firing in rotation, leaving no gaps. By the time the attackers reached them they had been reduced to two, a junior Maker and the elite sword fighter. Stone-tipped arrows brought down the Maker, then Rachael stepped forward to face the Shadow. Having no further need for secrecy he let his blade howl, causing everyone but her to flinch.

She met his attack with such speed and force that the others in her group gasped. This Shadow was as skilled as the one on the beach, but did not laugh. He did not intend to toy with her, he sought to kill with every stroke. She maneuvered to give the others a shot. The two sword fighters were closest, and engaged him from the side. He stepped back to create a gap from Rachael, then sent both men's swords flying in two strokes. She moved in before he could kill them, alternating between high and low attacks to force him to use time-consuming parries.

Three arrows flew. One hit him in the thigh, to no effect. Rachael felt something within her snap. There is no one else to help you now. Her last fears finally left her, giving her a clarity of focus beyond anything she had known. His movements appeared slower by the tiniest fraction, enough that she could hold her own. She moved in a direction requiring him to use the injured leg. She hoped that despite his ability to hide

the pain that the muscle would respond more slowly. He saw through her tactic immediately. He growled and ripped the arrow out, moving with no hindrance. She maneuvered again to give the archers a shot, but he closed too quickly. The archers hesitated. He thrust, his sword heading directly towards her heart. She could not parry in time with her own blade, but was able to deflect with energy. The moved the tip enough to miss her heart, sending it through her left shoulder. In her heightened state she did not panic nor recoil with pain. Instead she saw an opportunity. She stepped into his blade, trapping it for a fraction of a second, enough time to thrust her own blade upwards through his throat.

He fell instantly. She pulled his sword out of her shoulder, then dropped to her knees, overwhelmed by the inrush of pain. Tears streamed down her face. She had done it.

She awoke to see Mira kneeling over her. She moved her left arm and found it willing. She sat up and her hands did a reflexive weapons check.

“All good,” Mira said.

“Well done, Ms Donahue. The line is holding now.” The captain was impressed.

A boom echoed from the direction of the main road. Rachael stood, then stopped.

“That’s right,” Mira said after she stopped. “We need to stay here, in case that is just another distraction.”

Jurnigan stood with Hadley behind the wall that spanned the road. A section of the top a yard wide was missing. Two men were injured by the blast, sent by the senior Maker. He had advanced to within ten yards of the trench behind a wall of shields, where he loosed the bolt of energy upon the wall.

“Not bad,” Jurnigan remarked. “Technique is pretty basic, but decent power. We need to get past his clever shield armada, or else he’ll take down this wall. Get your big bow.”

Hadley sprinted back to the command tent. Jurnigan knelt and opened a case containing many small leather pouches and vials of various substances that he had prepared for use on the battlefield. He selected one as Hadley was returning with his oversized bow and quiver.

“Wood head, hollow.” Jurnigan pointed to the proper arrow head. He proceeded to fill it with the powdery mixture, then breathed a spell into it before plugging it shut. “Aim for the base of the lead shield.”

Hadley scrambled near the top of the wall, keeping low to stay below enemy arrows. He took cover behind a shield and notched the heavy arrow, then fired. It hit the ground just under the apex shield. Flames erupted upwards in a bright orange ball, engulfing the group. Every shield hit the ground as their holders became incapacitated. Six arrows struck the Maker, dropping him on the spot.

Commander Bridges watched through his glass as the assault on the wall was thwarted. He led Lord Phillips' forces, now without his grey counterpart. He called over a fast rider.

"Send word. Both the Maker and the vanquishing blade have fallen. Time to up the ante."

The rider galloped north.

During the first week of the alliance the fleet secured some key victories in the south. Londinium and the Thames were cleared of grey forces, with most surrendering, and the southern coast followed suit. Fierce battles raged at Caerleon and the Severn Channel, but the grey vessels there were overwhelmed by sheer numbers. The Aiann practitioners immediately made their mark, neutralizing the prior advantage held by the greys.

Throughout the engagements they retained the practice of subduing junior Makers, and succeeded in capturing thirty. Two-thirds were receptive to help after receiving the deconditioning treatment. While encouraging, alliance forces did not expect to continue this high rate of success once they encountered more experienced grey ranks.

Two of those recovered came from areas that had suffered much at the hands of the greys, and because staunch allies, both asking to immediately join the fight. Carlton and Marion were both in their early twenties, and had seen their families destroyed before being forcibly conscripted for their abilities. They stood on the deck of the

Corvus with Captain Rowe, Hicks, Ardal and Niamh. Marion rubbed the back of her neck, still sore where the stone-under-the-skin had been. They were sailing north with six other ships in the Sea Between, the waters between the home Isle and the green Isle, intending to round the northern coast of the latter and strike a surprise blow to the grey fleet in Sligo.

The greys had intended to prepare for another two months before deploying the vessels docked there. Over half the ships and their crews were not yet ready to sail. The mission at hand sought to destroy or steal as many of the idle vessels as possible, thus the seven ships were loaded to the rafters with people and supplies.

Marion and Carlton had both earned their Maker ranks in Sligo, and knew the layouts of both the town and the harbor, as well as the locations of the key defenses. The blockade focused most of its strength towards the south, the expected direction of attack. Their own vessels plied the waters of the north with sufficient frequency that they were confident they could not be surprised from that direction. Finally, and perhaps most critically, they both knew the grey signals.

Hand and flag signals comprised a pivotal element of the grey maritime practices. Before they could build a fleet of their own they had to conscript vessels from any source, resulting in a hodgepodge collection of ships with no consistent hull profile. To work around the inability to determine friend from foe visually they created a secret language of signals.

“Off to the left. Sail closer to that headland.” Carlton pointed off the port rail.

They had rounded the northern tip of the green Isle and were beginning a westward heading.

“There’s a spotter in that castle, using a glass. Every ship that passes must send the code else they will be boarded.” He wore his black Maker’s uniform and stood on the foredeck with the flags. He sent the code followed by the sign for seven, indicating the number of ships. They proceeded in this manner all the way to Sligo harbor.

On approach to the northern perimeter of the blockade they had a black-suited member of the crew stand atop the foredeck of each vessel. They passed within eyeshot of two grey ships, neither one showing much interest as they sailed between them. They timed their arrival with dusk, so that it would be fully dark when they reached the docks. Marion directed them once inside the inner harbor, since she had worked directly in the ship yards. They moored on a pier with other supply ships, directly adjacent to three piers of freshly completed ships. This far inside the lines the supply docks carried little security. Many of the porters working there came from local villages and were not part of the grey military.

The seven ships tied off lightly, ready to depart on a moment’s notice. They disembarked in teams, each meant to crew a vessel, and wearing disguises to match the grey uniforms for Makers and Shadows. About halfway down the dock they encountered the foreman.

“Right, what’s all this? Crews not expected until next week.” He held a board with a small list on it.

Ardal approached, holding a list of his own. He walked over and stood by the foreman's side to compare orders. When he began to read Ardal's list, Ardal gave his arm a squeeze. The foreman's eyes glazed over, and his stance became unsteady.

"Here, let's go inspect the cargo." Ardal put an arm around him and guided him back aboard the Corvus, where he was placed in a cell to sleep off the effects. Another crew member took his list and outfit, then assumed his role on the dock.

By now a dozen crews had boarded ships on the nearby piers. Each had forged orders saying they were to transfer the ship to the harbor by the Citadel on the Danish peninsula. Fifteen minutes later thirty ships were underway, moving across the harbor. The crews acted normally, and the Makers aboard gave the proper signals, thus there was no reaction yet.

Six of the seven original ships weighed anchor and followed the now three dozen stolen vessels. The Corvus had also left the supply dock, but lingered behind. Once clear of the docks she invoked the ship-wide spell that enveloped her in darkness. On this moonless night she cast no silhouette, allowing her to move freely around the piers. The crew deployed small wooden devices under each pier, then followed the other ships out.

The crew member who was impersonating the foreman left with the Corvus, leaving a small gap in coverage on the supply dock. A junior Maker came by, doing routine nightly rounds, when he noticed.

“Is he off drinking again?” He swore and headed off to the village pub. When he did not find him there he resigned himself to informing his superiors. The supply docks were at the far northern edge of the harbor, a long walk from the command center.

By the time he arrived almost an hour had passed since the Corvus had departed. He stopped outside the door, doubting himself.

“Who’s going to care if the supply dock foreman has gone out for a bit?”

“What’s that you say?” A senior Maker suddenly appeared next to him by the door.

“It, it’s probably nothing,” he stammered. “I can’t find the foreman over on the supply dock.”

“You have done the right thing. Without procedures we would be no more than an unruly mob, easily overcome by an organized foe. Step inside.”

They had just closed the door behind them when the first of the devices left by the Corvus went off. They all employed burn-through timers like the one Peter deployed at the iron market. Once active, the devices released a very persistent form of fire, enhanced by spell work.

The senior Maker stopped in his tracks, reached out with his senses, then broke into a run, pulling the junior Maker along. They ran up several flights of stairs to an observation deck. Two more devices had activated, now fully three piers were ablaze. The senior Maker sounded the general alarm. Crews on land scrambled into action, running towards the waterfront. The signal was sent by lamp and reflector to each of the nearest blockade vessels, which was then relayed around the entire blockade in

minutes. A curious message came back from the northern ships. *Thirty six vessels departed en route to Citadel, please advise.*

The senior Maker felt the pit of his stomach drop. This cannot be coincidence. He sent back the following: *Order immediate return. Board if non-compliant.* He turned to the junior Maker.

“Go to the northern headland. Deploy all ships to intercept, and be on one of them, they will need all hands.”

The junior Maker gulped, then nodded. He cursed his luck once outside.

“I should’ve kept quiet. They would have found out at the same time anyway, and then I wouldn’t be off to a sea battle in the north, at night.” He stamped off towards the nearest waypoint.

“They are telling us to return immediately.” Carlton looked off the starboard rail through a glass at the signal tower. They were an hour north of Sligo at this time.

“We’ll get resistance in an hour or two,” Mr. Briggs predicted.

“How many ships can they muster on the northern coast on short notice?” Captain Rowe asked.

“A dozen, fifteen at most,” Carlton guessed. He looked to Marion for confirmation.

“That’s right. The coast is lightly staffed since there is so much traffic there that is already armed and on their side. Although things are a bit quieter now, we may get lucky.”

“Mr. Hicks, I recommend we send the bulk of the stolen ships farther out to sea to avoid conflict. Their crews are light. We have enough personnel to ready five or six of them, the rest should steer clear. This will give us a dozen to clear the way.”

“Agreed. Please send word. We shall join them again afterwards, and avoid the main routes hereafter. We have played out our ruse, now we must hope that most remain undetected.”

They split into two groups and continued north. A dozen ships remained within sight of the signal towers, while the rest sailed northwest into deeper water. Messages from the towers became more insistent, demanding they turn back. *Following orders to the Citadel* was all the towers got in reply from the passing ships.

Ten grey ships left port on the far northern coast, sailing west. This was farther away than they would have liked, but was the only location with enough vessels and crews. Only a couple hours of night remained when they finally met their targets. Julian, the junior Maker from Sligo, stood on deck with the captain and the ship’s assigned Maker. Julian had earned his rank less than a year earlier, and had not seen any combat. He shifted his weight from foot to foot.

“Save your energy, you will need it,” the captain spoke as the ships came into view.

“How do you plan to deal with so many?”

“We take out the leaders, throw them into disarray. We only need to slow them down, help is already on the way.”

They executed a sweeping arc to match headings with the alliance ships. The grey captain counted seven in the pre-dawn light.

“We must deal with them quickly then find the others. First Shadow – send the order to engage but do not destroy hull nor mast. We are to recover the vessels.”

The two sides met in a clash of steel and spells. The grey crews were well trained, but not expecting to meet resistance in spell work, as the Aiann alliance was unknown to them. Their Makers set fire to the sails of three ships, only to see them go out in seconds. Two of their own had Makers unconscious, sails engulfed in flames. The captain observed the changing fortunes, yet still exuded control to his crew.

“First Shadow – change tactics. Double up on their ships, swords and arrows!”

The remaining grey ships attempted to fight each alliance vessel two-to-one and take advantage of their superior numbers.

“He is a good captain, we should try to capture him,” Hicks said to Captain Rowe and Ardal.

The Corvus pulled alongside the grey captain’s ship and dropped her blurring spell, taking them entirely by surprise. Four other alliance ships did the same.

“Julian! That’s Julian over there! I know him!” Marion screamed at Captain Rowe. He nodded. Each crew had standing orders to subdue junior Makers nonlethally whenever possible, so he issued no commands.

Ardal took down their senior Maker with a bolt of energy that threw him several feet into the air. The grey sails went up next, sending the Shadows on board into some

confusion. Julian looked for a way to be useful but found no opportunity. The whole scenario was so overwhelming, all the more so since he had not slept the night before. He stood on the bow near the rail, trying to think of a spell that might help. His next thought was of a sharp pain in his abdomen, which quickly subsided. He looked down to see an arrow lying on deck with a curious tip, then fell overboard, unconscious.

“Julian!” Marion yelled as he fell. She tore off her cloak and weapons belt then dove overboard herself. She swam over to him and pulled his head above the surface. He spat water in her face as his body fought for air, then started breathing.

The grey ship fell minutes later, but the captain refused to give up. Hicks shot him in the forehead with a stone-tipped arrow, enabling his capture.

“Your skills with the bow are still improving, I see,” Captain Rowe noted.
“However, he seems a bit old to convert back.”

“Call it a hunch. Maybe he knows something useful.”

Another alliance ship signalled for the Corvus to come alongside. They transferred Marion and Julian, still unconscious.

“Mr. Briggs, signal full ahead,” Captain Rowe ordered then turned to Marion.
“That was either foolhardy, or brave. There was no guarantee would could come get you.”

“We were engaged to be married, before the greys. We kept it a secret as Makers.”

“I see. Let us hope the recovery process works as well for him as it did for you and Carlton.”

“I want to be there when he wakes.”

“I must present the choice first, then only after he answers you may reveal yourself,” Ardal said evenly. Seeing her concern, he went on. “It takes but a minute. Follow me and remain nearby, just out of sight.”

Marion beamed with excitement.

An enormous ship with black sails left the port by the great Orme, on the west coast of the home Isle, bearing northwest. She was flanked by a dozen smaller ships, all flying the grey flag.

Peter Harcourt and Taylor Martin walked the streets of the Danish capitol, Kobenhaven, dressed as locals. The city itself appeared to still be ruled by the Danes, at least outwardly. The recent uptick in conflicts back on the home Isle did not make an impact on the citizens here. Scant word of it was to be heard anywhere in the city center, in stark contrast to the port. The wharves buzzed with activity and gossip. They wandered through the waterside markets to listen.

“Cleared out two days ago in a big hurry, that one. Glad to see him go. Foul temper,” one shopkeeper said to another across their tables. Peter and Taylor paused to look at their merchandise, pretending not to overhear.

“Two ships gone, all north. Must be something happening,” the other shopkeeper said, wiping her hands on her apron. “Those are fresh, last of the summer,” she said to Taylor, who was inspecting some fruit. The leaves were already turning orange on the peninsula, fall would soon begin in earnest.

“Thank you, we’ll take them. Can you recommend a place to stay? We are passing through for a few days.”

“Plenty of space now,” the first shopkeeper said. “Now that those pushy fellows shoved off. They spent plenty, but I don’t much care for their company.”

“Great news, we’re in luck. We were worried everything would be booked, as it was on our last visit here earlier in the summer.”

“I’ll say. Town was a proper madhouse last month. Fights everywhere, mostly sailors mixing it with those folks in the funny cloaks. Now it’s just back to sailors and the regular sorts of trouble what we know how to deal with.”

“Oh, what was different about the trouble before, other than having more of it?”

“Magistrates kept finding in favor of them folks. Locals couldn’t stand their ground. Acted like they run the place, and seemed to be connected. It’s already gone badly for a few magistrates since they left, but you didn’t hear that from me.”

“We’ll be sure to behave ourselves,” Peter said from behind Taylor.

They left the market and headed back out of town towards the waypoint.

“That’s a good sign that the locals are resasserting themselves after the greys left. Perhaps their infiltration was limited to the waterfront,” Taylor speculated.

“I’m not quite as optimisitic. I’d wager that some of their Lords or Barons are in the grey’s pockets, and are biding their time.”

They transited over to the western side of the peninsula, walking the last couple hours rather than risk using the final waypoint for fear it was being guarded. Twice they had to leave the path to avoid groups of people cutting firewood, each under the supervision of a Shadow. After the second encounter they stayed in the woods,

abandoning the pretense of being locals, finally arriving at the edge of the forest a bit before dusk.

“The fleet’s half gone,” Taylor spoke while looking through her glass.

“Ok, one fear confirmed – they have mustered. Next – where are they going, north or south around the home Isle?”

“South is more direct, but they know that is our strength.”

“We need to alert lookouts in the channel and the firth.”

“That covers the far north and south, but what if they sail straight to our east coast and land soldiers there?”

“I’ve no idea. We need to get back.”

Taylor nodded agreement, looking briefly at the ground as she did so.

“Dog prints. And handlers. They are patrolling out here too. We haven’t much time, if they make rounds tonight they’ll catch our scent for sure.”

“What’s our best route out?” Peter asked.

“There is another waypoint south of here.”

“Once they sort out the direction we took they can send people ahead to guard either waypoint. Which one has more cover on the approach?”

“The woods to the east. South is marshland. Hang on, I don’t think they know about the southern one. Remember what Pennirell said about nobody has knowledge of all of them.”

“Those woods are crawling with greys anyway, let’s give south a shot.”

They heard dogs some ways to the north, confirming their fears. They ran low along the western edge of the forest, putting distance between themselves and the hounds. Fifteen minutes later they a commotion from their prior location, yelps and voices carried on the wind.

“That was fast. They must be patrolling constantly now, we have less than a mile head start. At least the wind is at our backs for now. How far to that waypoint?”

“Two or three miles.”

The forest gave way to marshland, slowing their progress. The path ended, relegating them to trial and error, often having to double back when their way was blocked by water. The hounds had no issues following their scent, and gained on them quickly.

“We’ll never make it like this. We must do something differently.” Taylor stopped, gasping for breath.

“We’ll have to cross the marsh itself then, rather than skirt it.”

They continued running south until they were again blocked by water. Here the marsh opened up, the water forming an inland bay. Several small islands stood in the distance. Taylor pointed to the center one, the largest, then they waded into the cold, brackish water. They were halfway across when the dogs reached the shore where they departed. The water was choppy, which made swimming difficult, but also made spotting two swimmers laying low in the water much harder.

“We need to get to the waypoint before dark,” she whispered.

They heard their pursuers double back and continue around the marsh. They resumed swimming, keeping their arms under the water to avoid splashing. Five long minutes later they neared the island.

“I don’t think I can swim around the back, I need to get out here,” Taylor said.

“They’ll see us.”

“Over there. Those grasses go to the water’s edge.”

They swam to a stand of waist high marsh grasses, cut through in several places by wildlife. They crawled out onto one of these paths, trying to avoid stirring the grass any more than the wind. Once ashore a few yards they stood low and slogged through the soft mud, eventually reaching dry land. They followed the island as far south as they could, then faced another swim.

“If we go east we can make the beach and go faster.”

“Hold up. Look, a wrecked dory.”

Three quarters of an old rowboat lay hiding in the grasses. It barely floated, but was better than unaided swimming. They lay flat on the planks, bodies mostly out of the water, and paddled with their arms. They covered the mile of water rapidly, emerging on the back side of some beach dunes. They crossed the dunes and ran flat out down the beach.

“Here!” Taylor spoke in a low, urgent tone, then ducked left.

They approached a clearing and stopped.

“It’s just there,” she said.

“Wait, if we use it they will learn about it,” Peter observed.

Taylor thought for a second, then motioned for him to follow. They walked directly across the waypoint and kept going until they reached the marsh again. They retraced their footsteps backwards to the waypoint, then vanished.

Two hours later they arrived at the queen's palace, still shivering and muddy from their escape.

"We are at full-scale conflict now," the queen concluded after hearing their report.

"It is upon us," Lord Dubuque agreed, looking into the distance.

"We have ground regiments in action across the width of the home Isle, and the fleet everywhere in the south." She turned to Pennirell. "Any news from the Sligo operation?"

"Not yet. We should know something by the end of the day."

Riall stood staring at a map, processing this new input. He pointed to a harbor on the eastern shore of the home Isle.

"I would land forces here. In this bay you call the Wash. Distance overland is short to all battle sites."

Stamford joined him by the map.

"A sensible recommendation. They could offload ground forces then engage our fleet in the south or form a supply line for sustained conflict."

"Can we stop them?" The queen asked.

“If we guess right and that is their destination, we can slow them, and remove some ships. We could deploy torch buoys as in Sligo. But we cannot fully stop them from landing.”

“Commander, how much of our fleet can we bring to bear?”

“We retain the bulk of our fleet at the ready, your highness.”

“Make preparations.”

Sirinha stood in a circle of light in the center of a large room. On the wall facing her a gallery had been cut into the stone, eight feet above the floor. Four hooded people sat there, visible from the waist up. Their faces were completely obscured by shadow.

“The High Council finds your report wanting for credibility. If she has that much power why did she spare you, twice? Are you covering up some other failure with these tall fictions?”

The speaker’s face bounced off the stone surface in front of him, his nose bloodied.

“I lack neither power, nor judgment. I tire of uninformed conclusions. Join me in the field if you wish to assess my observations.”

One of the other council members laughed quietly.

“If what you say is accurate, what do you propose?”

“Reach down farther. You will know when you contact it.” Kelia sat with Dierdre above an ancient waypoint, inaccessible to most due to its depth.

“I feel like I’m miles down already, oh, there it is. Now what?”

“Connect it to a point closer to the surface so that we may use it.”

“Is that a good idea? Is it that deep for some other reason, like everyone was stronger back then, and it’ll rip you to pieces if you shouldn’t be using it?”

Kelia laughed.

“You have such a vivid imagination. No, they were not all stronger back then. As it was then, so it is now. Occasionally one such as yourself comes along, and many enduring things may be accomplished during this time. The calling stones are one example, the waypoints another.”

“Whoa. You mean I could do something that people a thousand years from now might still use?” Dierdre’s face was full of wonder and excitement.

“Exactly. Right now it would be to our advantage to connect to this deeper network, opening paths the greys cannot follow.”

“Not ever, or just not until they discover it?”

“Let us hope the former, at least for the duration of this conflict, if we are lucky. Waypoints may be guarded against unwanted access, like the code on the back of your hand. However codes can be broken. Ideally you could imprint the waypoint with something the lack, something that cannot be faked.”

“Like compassion, or love?”

Kelia nodded.

“But it’s not black or white with all of them, otherwise we wouldn’t be able to save the junior Makers.”

“Correct, but it would lock out their most powerful, those the farthest gone. Possibly forever.”

“That would be useful. Once we’re in how do we know where to go? You need to have been to the other end once before you can transit.”

“That is true for most of us. Those with access to enough energy can see the network and traverse any segment. I can do this for the common waypoints. You will guide us through the deeper network.”

Realization dawned on Dierdre. She thought back to the sight of all the energy in the forest, and the images she later saw of the waypoint network, like a giant web spread underground. She reached down once more to the ancient waypoint, fully connecting to it. She envisioned attaching a node closer to the surface, then stopped. She spoke, her eyes distant.

“It won’t work. Bringing it closer. Wrong frequency for that depth. I could feel it. I don’t think you need more energy to reach it. You need different energy.”

“Go on.”

“The common network is like the rhythm of waves on the surface of a lake, whereas the deeper one is like magma. A deeper, slower resonance. Oh, I just realized I can share it with you. Give me your hand.”

Dierdre held Kelia’s hand and sent her the basso profundo notes. Kelia reached down for this new signal, eyes closed.

“I would have never found that on my own. The old texts reference this difference, but their metaphors are too vague. I would have attributed this resonance to background noise.”

“Can we still lock the door on this, now that I’m not adding anything new to it?”

“I do not know. Nobody has ever been able to modify one once in place, but here my knowledge runs out.”

“Then let’s leave it as it is. I feel like I shouldn’t mess about with power of that scale unless I know exactly what I’m doing.”

“Let us keep the frequency to those we trust then. Transfer by hand, this will be enough security for now. Further, I do not believe junior practitioners will be able to access it. I used considerable energy to find it.”

Kelia paused.

“Time for your next test. Connect to the network again, and hold it. Then keep out my energy blossom.”

Dierdre closed her eyes, brow furrowed in concentration.

“I don’t like this. They’re too calm. I think they’re bringing in some heavy hitters. We need to get some more firepower on our side,” Mira said, watching the greys over the wall by the iron market.

“Firepower?” Jurnigan looked at her quizzically.

“Oh, right. Word from back home.”

“I get the point. We don’t want to overreact though, put all our folks in the wrong spot.”

“That’s just it. If this was the wrong spot they’d keep skirmishing, keep us thinking we need more people here. This lying low act is meant to fool us into sending them elsewhere.”

“Can you feel anything going on over there?”

“No. Well, quiet tension from the foot soldiers. And I’d swear their honcho is feeling smug right now.”

“That is odd, especially now that two crown regiments have joined us, each with an Aiann.”

“Nevermind, here it comes. Carriage, inbound.”

Jurnigan looked through the glass.

“You’re good. Give you one guess for the hair color.”

“Auburn catastrophe.”

“Nailed it.”

“Did they bring the brute too?”

“Based on how that carriage is leaning I’d say yes. And... there he is. Call the Aiann.”

“After I send someone for backup. You saw what she did to us last time, by herself. Add Brutus to the mix and we got major trouble.”

Jurnigan grimaced, but knew she was right.

“Send Finn back.”

Mira sprinted off. Two minutes later she returned with both Aiann practitioners. The four of them scrambled to form a plan when they felt the first impact. They turned to face the wall, which now had a curve to it. The center was pushed back five feet by Olaf's first salvo.

The two Aiann stood side by side and pushed it back, then ascended the wall. Olaf shook his head at them, then unleashed a torrent of energy. They deflected it down into the wall itself, melting some of the rock inside. The wall settled and hardened. Olaf began to send another, and before it materialized one of them flew backwards off the wall, landing in a heap. Sirinha had hit him while he was focused on Olaf. His next blast was too much for the sole remaining practitioner, sending him over the wall too.

Troops started amassing behind Olaf, sensing a momentum change. He stood in the middle of the road at the edge of the cut, daring any to oppose him. Sirinha stalked around behind him like a lion just let out of her cage.

Mira and Jurnigan moved to stabilize the wall, both invoking Clay and pulling rock to solidify it.

"Could we use that to entomb him as well?" Mira asked.

"No, he'd break out of anything we can invoke. He is as powerful as us, maybe more so."

"What if Mica helped?"

"Do you know how to summon her? That was always Julius' part."

"Yes, he taught me."

"Go."

Mira ran off to the cook's tent to fetch a large bowl. Jurnigan needed to buy time. He knew he would not last long on top of the wall dueling both of them, so he took a team around the western edge into the forest. He cast a blurring spell around them and crossed the swath of clearcut to the grey side, then began causing mayhem. He lit dozens of fires and started knocking over trees by causing the earth beneath them to become as loose as sand. Tree after tree fell towards the road, marking the advance of something large and unseen. Olaf and Sirinha stopped assaulting the wall and came to the edge of the road to look. They both had to jump to the side to avoid a tree landing on them, now worried by this new adversary.

When Jurnigan emerged from the forest they laughed. Sirinha motioned for Olaf to take care of him while she dealt with the rest of his party. Olaf drew his sword and parried Jurnigan's attack, then slipped as he found himself standing in sand. He countered by sending a shock wave through the earth, forcing Jurnigan to disengage. Meanwhile Sirinha was dismantling the swordfighters and archers. Jurnigan pulled out his wooden dagger with his free hand, evoking another laugh from Olaf. During the next exchange he dragged it across Olaf's wrist, sending a large dose of the sleeping mixture into his veins. Olaf swayed momentarily, but then countered it with a spell of his own. He moved to advance on Jurnigan, but found his feet encased in stone. He invoked Clay himself, intending to shatter the binding, but found it would not move. Jurnigan saw Mira peering over the wall, giving him a thumb's up. He closed the gap and swung to finish Olaf.

“Enough!”

Jurnigan's sword arm froze in place, unable to move. Sirinha stood in a small clearing, bodies on the ground around her, holding out a hand that worked the spell on Jurnigan. Mira tried to break her grip but could not.

"It's time for the charade to end. Release Olaf and I will let you live," she said to Mira. "You will die either way," she snarled at Jurnigan.

"Typical." Jurnigan shook his head.

"What?"

"Bullies are all the same. Mouth bigger than your ability. Always bragging about stuff you can't do. You –" He felt her grip tighten. He relaxed, summoned energy, then visualized giving her a warm, loving hug, then sent it at her.

Sirinha convulsed for a split second. Jurnigan rolled and came up thrusting at her sternum. She reacted with inches to spare, stopping him with another spell. Inwardly Jurnigan gulped, that was his last ace card.

"Clever. But not enough. Finally–"

White light flooded the area, followed by a thunderous noise, then smoke. Olaf was no more. Jurnigan found himself on the ground at the edge of the road. He looked up at the wall and saw Riall standing there, both arms outstretched, eyes focused on the middle of the road.

Sirinha stood her ground, but Jurnigan saw her muscles quivering, she was at her limit. He sent her another blast of compassion, creating another moment of chaos in her mind. She broke off with Riall and tumbled backwards, then ran laterally into the woods.

Jurnigan looked around for survivors from his group, but saw none. He encircled himself in a blurring spell and retreated back across the line.

“You have quite a nerve, talking to her like that in the face of death. You did not know when help would arrive,” Riall said to him with a smile, then quickly became serious. “I would speak with you both about involving a natural force in this conflict. It is not done.”

“Shouldn’t we be going after her first?” Mira asked.

“Not directly into enemy lines. Further, when she is in full flight we will find nothing of her until the next engagement.” He turned to Jurnigan. “Where did you learn the compassion tactic?”

“Kelia taught me.”

“You owe her your life for that one. Now, before anything else, what price did you pay to gain the favor of the elemental force? These bargains are ruinous more often than not.”

“Stories. We read stories to her,” Mira calmly stated.

“Please do not play games, this is of great import.”

“It’s true,” Jurnigan added. “Pennirell befriended her years ago. Asked her what she enjoys. She said she loves our stories and legends, so we sit and read to her.”

Mica rose next to Mira, then noticed Riall.

“An ancient.” She turned to Mira. “May we read about them today?”

“Gotta run.” Mira walked off, with Mica gliding along beside her. They entered the command tent, then closed the flap.

Riall stood motionless, trying to process what he had just seen.

“She didn’t hurt anyone, either,” Jurnigan spoke, still looking at the closed tent flap. “She just locked some soil in place. Julius gave us strict orders never to ask her to kill.”

“Wise. We cannot know how such forces would react. I must discuss this with the Council.”

“Feel free. You can even read to her some time, if you like. We all have.”

Riall stared at him blankly, searching for the words.

“Irregular?” Jurnigan offered.

“That is not the half of it.”

Skirmishes among the ground troops broke out along the length of the line once the heavyweight energy battle was over. Commanders from the regiments stepped forward to manage this aspect of the fighting. The two Aiann practitioners were in the doctor’s tent, one still unconscious. The one hit by Sirinha’s blast was in dire shape, barely clinging to life. Riall stood next to them, working out the best course of action. Mira joined him, having just finished with Mica.

“Can you draw energy as Dierdre does? Your gifts as one of the called remain with you always.”

“Yes, but not at her scale. I’m on a level like most around here.”

“I believe that will be enough, if we work together.”

They knelt, each placing both hands on the torso of the unconscious Aiann. Riall led the process, giving verbal instructions every so often. An hour later they walked out of the tent, exhausted.

“Nice work on those burns. I guess your time here has been trying, for you to have learned such things.”

“It’s had its ups too. My life back home was all lows, so this has been an upgrade on the whole.”

Riall’s expression became warm. He smiled and put a hand on her shoulder.

“We are glad for your presence.”

Mira looked him in the eye and smiled in return, to her own surprise. Discussions of emotions like this typically sent her into a state of withdrawal, behind walls of unprocessed feelings. This moment felt like stepping into the sunlight after years in the shadows. She decided not to fight it. She indulged in this newfound calmness a moment longer, then her curiosity got the better of her.

“What did Mica mean when she called an ancient?”

“Our traditions and manners of working with energy are unbroken through the generations, at least as far as we know. We believe the great hall where we received you dates back to the time of the oldest texts.”

“Ok. Your lineage is ancient, not you personally.”

Riall laughed.

“Still taking nothing for granted, I see.”

Mira smiled, then became serious.

“Is that why she is so powerful, because she comes from your lineage?”

“That is only part of it. We taught her how to harness it, but her skills are immense and would have surfaced no matter where she was born, wherever that may have been.”

“You don’t know?”

“She was left at our door, as you say. This is common when parents realize their child has powers they cannot restrain. We get a great many of our best practitioners this way.”

“Are they all from the green Isle? Or are some brought from farther away?”

“Most come by land, but arrival by ship is not unheard of.”

A tectonic plate shifted in Mira’s mind. She felt it thunk into place, but could not find any words to describe it. Riall read her expression.

“Does this trouble you?”

“No, it,” she paused. “I feel like this is the most important thing I have heard, but I can’t say why.”

“Perhaps there is more to you than you know.”

“Approaching the Isle between, sir.” Mr. Briggs spoke while peering through his glass.

Their passage around the remainder of the green Isle’s northern coast went without incident, allowing them to regroup into a single convoy. Fleet vessels were en route northward from Caerleon, due to rendezvous within the hour.

“Contact sighting! Unknown allegiance! Approaching from the southeast,” a man called down from the crow’s nest.

“Mr. Briggs, send all hands to stations.” Captain Rowe turned to the Aiann. “Can you detect anything yet?”

“Low-grade energy from this distance,” Niamh replied. “Likely practitioners over there.”

“Our fleet is not due yet, so we must assume Makers. Mr. Briggs, change course to southwest, perhaps some of the lighter ships can skirt this foe entirely. Ready all fully crewed ships for battle.”

The Gravata closed the distance swiftly and wasted no time making her intentions known. She did not veer to match course, choosing instead to plow straight through the flotilla. Her vast size and armored bow gave her the upper hand in any direct encounter. Alliance ships banked hard to get out of her path. The other grey vessels flanking the Gravata intercepted and engaged, intending to slow the fleet while the behemoth ship turned to rejoin them. Three alliance ships lay burning after her first pass, all stolen vessels with skeleton crews. The other ships scrambled to pick up survivors and steer as far away as possible.

Intense fighting broke out between the alliance and grey ships that had pulled alongside, all crewed with experienced Makers and Shadows. Six of the alliance ships had been fitted with energy wells like the Corvus, giving them the upper hand. The remaining alliance vessels had to rely on their practitioners and conventional tactics.

The Gravata completed her ruinous pass and had now turned around in pursuit.

“How long until she catches us?” Captain Rowe yelled.

“Ten, fifteen minutes,” Mr. Briggs replied.

“We need to finish off these others before she gets here. Mr. Hicks, take the helm and steer us closer.”

“Aye, sir.”

Captain Rowe ran to the port crossbow and attached a special rope. He uttered a spell then took aim, waiting until he was certain not to miss. He fired at twenty yards. The crossbow bolt hit the side of the lead grey ship just above the waterline, then unleashed a flood of energy from one of the reservoirs. The bolt melted as it broke through the hull, then exploded in a giant fireball, blowing a hole six feet wide and starting a raging fire. The grey ship foundered with the sudden influx of water and lost all speed. The other alliance ships followed suit, reducing the enemy to five ships plus the Gravata.

“Slow down to recharge, I want all reservoirs full when she gets here.”

The Corvus slowed to one-third speed as the hull drew energy from forward momentum and sent it into the spent reservoir. Rowe was happy to see the others doing the same without needing to be told. The next step would require some coordination, however. He stood on the bow and raised the signal flags.

“Excellent. They are no match for us. Most were damaged in our first pass alone,” the captain of the Gravata spoke as he watched the seven primary fighting ships

of the alliance slow and move erratically. “Ready the Makers on both rails. We will cut straight through their feeble group and crush them.”

A dozen Makers each to port and starboard readied catapults full of a smoking mixture. Shadows assisted them with distance and trajectory, while the Makers concentrated on the igneous spells.

Black sails loomed as she approached, more than twice the size of any other vessel. Nervous hands gripped the deck-mounted crossbows aboard the alliance ships. The great ship closed to fifty yards. Six ships awaited her, three on each side. Suddenly they leapt forward to match pace, having released their hull drag spells.

“Fire!” Captain Rowe yelled.

A signaller on the bow dropped a flag. All six ships released their crossbows. Each group of three hit the same target on each side of the Gravata, and released their reservoirs. They blew a ten foot hole clear through the bow, causing her to lurch forward.

The sudden shift in the deck angle confused the targeting of the catapults, forcing most of the two dozen payloads to miss their marks. Captain Rowe saw one heading directly for the Corvus. He invoked a vortex spell, tapping another reservoir in the process. The winds from the spell buffeted the inbound armament, sending into the water behind her stern. Two others managed to do the same, but the rest were not as lucky.

Three ships took direct hits. The yard sized payloads burst into flames that engulfed decks and sails in seconds. Crews barely had time to jump overboard with their lives. Four alliance ships remained fully capable. They now focused on the remaining grey vessels, finishing them off in rapid succession.

The Gravata, however, was not done. Internal bulkheads prevented the water from flooding the entire hull. She turned slowly for another pass. Makers and Shadows could be seen on deck readying the next volley.

“We need to finish that thing off,” Mr. Hicks said.

“We may not survive another round of those catapults if they have their aim,” Mr. Briggs said. “But we can certainly outrun her in that condition.”

“Could we deploy fire buoys and stay outside catapult range?”

“Their Makers would put them out immediately. With so many on board it would cause no damage.”

“Unless it breaks something first,” Captain Rowe said, then ran to the bow to signal the others.

The Gravata lumbered towards their position. Three alliance ships sailed ahead of her, staying out of catapult range. Their crews could be seen readying rear-facing crossbows on deck.

“Fools. They should have run. Ready the catapults, we will end this.”

The hustle of activity on the alliance vessel decks held the attention of the grey spotters, allowing them to slip three objects into the water unnoticed, each floating level

with the water's surface. They furthered the distraction by altering their distance constantly, giving the appearance of trying to line up a shot.

"Not long now. Our catapults are already capable of this distance. They are almost ready," another senior Maker reported.

A huge vibration shook the Gravata, as though she had run aground. Deck timbers creaked and groaned, then she began a slow forward lean.

"Report!"

A Shadow sprinted from the bow to the stern, then ran up the ladder to the helm.

"The front is gone."

"Don't just stand there. Put out the fires and shore up the bulkheads!"

"Sir, there is no bow. We are open from keel to bowsprit, or where it used to be. We will need your help."

The lead Maker showed concern for the first time, and ran to the bow. A semblance of the deck and railing remained, but below that was empty air. Water rushed into all decks, the upper levels of which were not fitted with bulkheads.

"How..." he trailed off.

Grey ships carry no lifeboats, as a deterrent to desertion.

They stood at the stern and watched the Gravata as they sailed away, its bulk already halfway submerged.

"And here I was thinking their iron bow was an advancement to be copied," Hicks confessed.

The trio of buoys each contained a reservoir block, set to release all at once. When they contacted the Gravata's iron bow, their combined energy melted the bow plates and incinerated the structural wood underneath in a flash, inflicting the necessary damage before the fires began. By the time they had extinguished the flames there was no bow to salvage. The Gravata was gone an hour later.

The alliance fleet lost six ships in the conflict just west of the Isle between. The survivors docked at Caerleon later that evening. Hicks, Ardal and Niamh departed immediately for the palace.

The next morning alliance leadership convened in the queen's state room. Riall and Kelia represented the Aiann Council, choosing to remain directly involved. Each group delivered reports, giving the first glimpse of the big picture, which began to show promise. The Sligo operation increased their fleet by thirty ships. Operatives on the ground reported over one hundred ships and all piers were destroyed by the fires, a crippling blow. The surviving grey ships abandoned the port and sailed north. Ground forces had stabilized the lines across the home Isle, and many had begun to push forward. The alliance fleet now controlled the sea around the green Isle, and the southern half of the home Isle.

All eyes now focused on the grey fleet en route from the Citadel. Hicks rose to discuss a plan for dealing with them when the ground shook. Half the group was outside before the windows stopped rattling, ready to defend against this new threat. Smoke rose in the distance, a short ways down the Thames.

“The docks. Send a team,” one of the commanders said.

They approached with caution, expecting to find the enemy present. When they rounded the last corner they stopped in their tracks. No one spoke. Three long warehouses were razed, reduced to a smoking depression in the ground. Windows in all nearby buildings lay shattered.

“What could do this?” Hicks asked the group at large.

“It is an energy I have not felt before,” Riall replied.

“How many were in those buildings?” Mira asked.

Hicks and Lapine shook their heads.

“Send for Kelia and the called,” Riall requested of them.

A mounted soldier departed for the palace.

Mira walked across the ruins, hands open, palms facing the ground. The others began doing the same. After a few minutes she stopped.

“What do you feel?” Pennirell asked.

“Big, slow vibrations still echoing around. And something else. Dissonance. An energy that does not belong.”

They kept walking. Ten minutes later a carriage stopped on the road at the location of the old loading dock, where two short months earlier a buyer had driven off a cartload of marked ore, delivered by the Corvus. Dierdre stepped out, followed by Kelia and several others. They walked out onto the ruins and joined the others.

“The ground is warm,” Dierdre noted.

“Over here. The dissonance gets stronger this way.” Mira walked towards the center of where the three buildings once stood.

Dierdre followed, visibly uncomfortable. She stopped suddenly on one spot, then walked a short distance in each direction.

“This is where it started.”

She placed her hands on the ground, then recoiled as though scalded. Kelia walked over and put one hand down, her expression becoming blank after a few seconds. She motioned Mira and Dierdre to do the same. She instructed them to lower to one knee, facing each other in a small circle. They each placed one hand on the ground and the other on the shoulder of the person to their left. Kelia spoke in a foreign language, but the words bypassed the normal circuits and went directly into comprehension. She was combining their power to trace the energy as far back towards its source as they could.

Dierdre felt like she was descending into the pits of hell. Darkness and raw power was everywhere. A metallic taste filled her mouth, and she smelled something sharp, like ozone-rich air after a lightning strike. She desperately wanted to disengage and go somewhere far away, but then she felt Kelia’s calm pressure guiding them forward. She thought of home, then realized this is Kelia’s only home. We have to fix this. She embraced the energy, fighting back the urge to be sick. A path of scorched rock led away into the distance. She led them along the route farther and farther, until their own energy became goassamer thin. She pushed on, past the edge of the home Isle, farther still – then it snapped.

Dierdre blinked a few times, then looked around at the others. Mira had not fared much better. She had the pallid look of seasickness. Only Kelia looked hale, but she was troubled.

“I felt the vastness of the distance,” Kelia said. “But failed to discern the direction.”

Without looking, Dierdre lifted her left arm and pointed behind her, moving it back and forth a few times before settling on a heading. Hicks picked up a piece of debris and scratched a line.

“Call a survey team,” he said to one of the commanders as he pulled out a compass. “East by northeast.”

“The Citadel,” Derrick said from behind. “Have them verify it, but I’ll bet the Citadel lies on that line.”

“How does that help? None can cast a spell that far, nor level an area more than one hundred yards square in one go.” Hicks looked puzzled.

“Not who. What.” Lapine stepped forward. “And they shall feel this wrath from any point upon the world.”

Still confused, Hicks motioned for her to continue.

“It is from the Treatise of the Void,” she said.

“The same text that describes the coils,” Pennirell added somberly.

Realization dawned on Hicks and the rest of those assembled.

“Then nowhere is safe, if they can launch spells such as that to any point on the globe,” Hicks spoke with rising alarm.

“That would explain why all those captured exhibited such confidence that they would prevail,” Derrick added, stepping forward into the circle where the three had knelt. “However, something else is in play here.” He walked around with his hands open. He felt a new part of his abilities awaken, but did not know how to use it yet.

“I need to stay here until I sort this out. Can you have the troops put a tent over this spot and keep a perimeter free from onlookers?” He asked Hicks.

“Until we know more it would be wise to relocate the queen and others out of the palace to an undisclosed location,” Pennirell added.

Hicks nodded to them both and walked off.

“I was wondering if news from all fronts had filtered back to the grey command yet. I think this is our answer,” Pennirell confided to Lapine. “We may have even forced their hand.”

“We may only hope that in their haste they have missed something, somewhere. What else can you discern from this?” She waved a hand towards the destruction.

“My abilities are at their limits. I believe this is why they are here,” he inclined his head towards Derrick. “The called are always uncommon in their mix of talents, and scarcely is one superfluous.”

“I hope you are right.”

Derrick sat on the ground inside the center tent, eyes closed. Mira, Dierdre and Kelia spoke outside.

“He’s already different,” Mira said. “His presence feels a lot like you, really vast” she said to Dierdre, unable to hide her concern.

“If Dierdre’s experience is any indication, he will not lose himself in the process, and still remain the man you know,” Kelia said warmly, putting a hand on Mira’s shoulder.

A tear ran down Mira’s cheek. Dierdre walked over and gave her a tight hug, the kind she would get from mom when she was feeling down. Mira let go of her tough demeanor long enough to hug her back.

“Thanks.”

A cloaked man walked up the massive stone staircase to a landing in front of the Citadel's main gate. He waved his hand over a spherical stone atop a pedestal. It pulsed once.

"Yhooou mayhh ehhter," came from the hooded form of the guardian. Its eerie voice filled the air with a fog of all sounds except the words themselves, leaving recipients with an echo of the meaning in their heads, but no memory of having heard the words themselves.

The Shadow shivered slightly as he passed, then proceeded down a long hallway. He entered a large octagonal room with a door on each wall and a stone table in the middle. He approached the table and placed his hand in the center. A door opened to his right. He swalled, then walked through.

He appeared in the High Council chamber. He glanced behind him at the blank wall, knowing the door was already closed, then around at the room. The High Council sat in their usual gallery, and the floor on either side held long tables filled with commanders and senior Makers. He spotted someone with auburn hair, and surmised that must be Sirinha, whom he only knew by reputation. Her left arm was bandaged, as though burned.

“Step forward, Shadow. Report.”

“The target was fully destroyed. I saw this myself. Minutes later the enemy came to observe. I saw concern and fear upon their faces.”

Sirinha smiled.

“Very good,” one of the High Council said. “We seem to have made our point. How many... wait, what else did you observe that frightened you?”

The Shadow swallowed hard. Fear is a sign of weakness. He had hoped they would not detect this.

“My lords, those that came to investigate did something I have not experienced before. I was merely startled, it will not happen again.”

“What did they do?”

“They reached into the world. A wave hit me. I fell unconscious. I awoke several minutes later, with none the wiser. My position was not compromised.”

“I told you she was powerful,” Sirinha said smugly.

“No matter. None can withstand us now. Shadow, you may go.”

The door appeared behind him. He walked though before her words could echo, relieved there was no punishment.

Derrick’s form rose from the ground inside the tent. Once free of the surface he released Clay and returned to his usual self. He held a small, glassy shard in his hand.

“I found the source of the dissonance,” he said to the group. He handed Kelia the rock.

“It feels like a beacon stone.”

“A really big one. I detected enough of that to make a boulder three feet wide, all of it still highly charged.”

“Oh thank the stars,” Kelia said while looking at Lapine, who replied with a knowing nod.

“This confirms the very vague hints in the text that suggest they cannot send this energy anywhere just by thinking about the destination. They must put one of these massive beacons there to guide it.”

“This gives us a hope of defending against it, or at least blocking certain targets. I must inform Riall. Extra measures must be taken at our great hall. May I take this fragment?”

“Sure. I’ll collect a bunch so everybody knows what to watch for.”

Pennirell smiled. He never tired of seeing someone’s abilities blossom. He savored the feeling a moment longer, then exhaled a heavy sigh. Lapine shot him a curious look.

“I hate to follow such good news with bad, but there is only one place where we may fully put a stop to this.”

They met in a secluded manor outside Londinium. No waypoints stood upon the grounds, and clear line-of-sight existing in all directions. Practitioners lined the perimeter of the property, each having learned the feel of the beacon’s energy. Inside the manor Hicks stood staring at Lapine’s sketches of the Citadel, shaking his head.

“If half of what you have drawn is accurate, there is no way in. If all of it is accurate, there is no approach.”

“We don’t even know what needs breaking once we get there,” Jurnigan grumbled.

“You will know. If you see it.” All eyes turned to Kelia. “The coils are not intended for human interaction. Forces that shaped this world sealed them beneath layers of existence, so that we may live as we do up here. Whoever peeled back enough reality to expose raw coils is massively powerful, yet they will pale next to the coils themselves. Raw energy of that scale will be unmistakable, as will the area surrounding them. Many things will appear that should not. You may encounter creatures you do not recognize. That which is true and straight may bend. And there will be light. Light so intense it cannot be observed directly.” She looked at Pennirell. “One of your kind got close.”

“Gwendolyn.”

“Recognition will not be our challenge. Returning them will.”

“Is that where the Nightshade comes in?” Hav asked.

Kelia gave Pennirell an inquisitive look. He explained their visit to Gwendolyn, and her instructions to forge the darkness itself. She and Riall stared at him in disbelief.

“Her instructions worked? Her knowledge was partial at best, fractured. Following her lead would as likely get you killed as produce anything useful.”

“It is fitting that you chose that word. Colloquially she is known as The Lady of the Fractured Mind. However, she came together for this, giving the three of us quite detailed steps for over two hours.”

“I am surprised you were able to guide her to sanity for more than a minute. How did you?”

“I did not such thing, in fact my actions angered her. She did it on her own, for them.” He glanced at Dierdre and Derrick.

Relief washed over Kelia’s face.

“I hold a hope now. May we see it?”

“Indeed. We placed it in the care of Haversham the younger once the conflict began in earnest.”

Hav stepped forward into the center of the room, checking all around to verify no one was near, then drew the Nightshade. He executed several strikes and parries in a single fluid motion, then resheathed it. The air vibrated when it moved, but made none of the usual swishing sounds that accompany steel blades.

“We are still debating if any other should be permitted to wield it. Do you have an opinion?”

“Safeguards are wise, but never put all bets on a single person during conflict,” Riall said while stepping forward. “May I?”

Hav looked to Pennirell instinctively. Pennirell nodded.

“Do not touch the blade,” Hav cautioned.

Riall hesitated, then turned to Pennirell.

“A blade forged directly from darkness itself. You are serious. This is not just a clever dark sword. You really did it?”

“We, not I,” Pennirell gestured to Mira and Jurnigan. “Inspect the dagger. Do not let the blade touch anything you wish to remain whole.”

Riall accepted the dagger from Hav and drew it. He stepped away from Hav then moved gracefully with it, finishing with a tight circular motion that sent a pulse through the entire room. He walked over to a stack of wood next to the fireplace and selected a log. The dagger blurred the air momentarily, then six wooden disks bounced and rolled in various directions.

“By the stars, somehow they have done it.” He resheathed the dagger then handed it back to Hav.

Kelia looked at Lapine, then turned to the group.

“A word of caution is in order here. This Nightshade will no doubt prove useful, perhaps even consequential, but we must not lose sight of what it is. It does not belong in this layer of existence. Its essence lives down where the coils themselves reside. You have brought forth a most unnatural item. The energy held fast in that blade could level a dozen warehouses if released at once. It must be destroyed after having served its purpose.”

“If we prevail, I shall consider it a privelege to remove it from our realm of existence,” Pennirell proclaimed.

“Aw c’mon Julius, don’t let a guy down. Hav deserves a souvenir,” Jurnigan quipped. Once the laughter died down, he went on. “What does it break? Does it cut the coils themselves?”

“Their bindings,” Riall answered. “As the coils do not belong here either, they will be bound by other energies that cannot be severed by conventional means.”

“What happens to the person doing the cutting?”

“If unaided, they will not survive. With the right help, they stand a chance.”

Lord Dubuque’s eyes narrowed.

“Then I suggest we discuss what that help looks like.”

The next day Pennirell, Dierdre, Derrick and Mira sat around the long central table in his study. They were joined by the recovered Makers Sam, Carlton, Marion and Julian. Pennirell smiled when he saw Marion and Julian wearing simple matching rings, professing their engagement. Lapine sat at the end of the table with drawing supplies, and Jurnigan rested upon the stairs with Shakti.

“Each of you has been to the Citadel, and has been subjected to rites that are illegal here. It will be unpleasant, but we must revisit these memories to learn more about the citadel itself.”

Sam shuddered, then glanced at Shakti. Jurnigan picked up on this, and walked her over to Sam. Same swiveled on the bench to face her, then scruffed her fur, smiling.

“Hang onto her, she may help keep you grounded,” Jurnigan said, then returned to the stair. He maintained his usual friendly demeanor, but his choice to sit in the

room's only exit made his role clear. He carried four doses of the memory spell on his belt, in case any or all of them reverted to Maker status during the process. Blood spells run deep. They had chosen Pennirell's study as the location due to its non-threatening nature, but still needed to take precautions.

"I'm ready to do my part," Carlton said, then looked at the others. They agreed.

Pennirell swirled his hands over a bowl in the center of the table. A cloudy mist rose slowly, then he stepped back. The former Makers leaned forward and breathed deeply. Their eyes became distant and they became very still, save for Sam whose hands still instinctively ruffled Shakti's coat. Jurnigan began speaking in Danish and other languages, creating a backdrop of activity going on around them. Mira spoke a spell in a low voice, to help them enter the proper state of consciousness. She broke off after a couple minutes then nodded to Derrick. None of them had met Derrick yet, so he played the part of a Senior Maker.

"Makers, it is time for the first of your trials. The Citadel is under attack. You are standing at the main gate. Each of you must secure a different quadrant. When I touch you, describe your actions and locations precisely, other Makers' lives depend on it."

He touched Sam on the shoulder.

"Begin."

For three hours they furiously took notes as the former Makers spoke. Derrick had them trade roles to cross-verify routes, then ordered them to report to the High Council. All gave consistent answers, but the picture they painted was disturbing.

“They keep referencing the plateau, but the landscape there has no such feature,” Lapine whispered to Pennirell. He wrote a short note and passed it to Derrick.

“Go outside, onto the plateau. What do you see?”

“The Keep has no doors. I shall go onto the roof by the parapets. I see Makers attaching a beacon stone to a steppe falcon,” Carlton replied.

“Describe the terrain, what ground would an enemy need to traverse here?”

“The plateau is windswept, devoid of tall trees. Mountains lie in the distance. The wind is cold, even in summer.”

“Tell us more about the Keep.”

“I feel the vibrations of the Keep everywhere, even on the level below ground. I do not like it here.”

“Return to the main gate. Describe your path.”

Once on the main floor, request a door Maker to open the way back. I step through, and return to the Hall of Eight Walls, thence to the Bastion gate.”

They concluded shortly thereafter. Jurnigan woke each from the spell using the same process they had during their initial recovery, with a hand on the memory tincture just in case. All came back to themselves without incident. Sam sat on the floor and hugged Shakti, shaken by the experience.

“I don’t ever want to go back there,” he said.

“And if we are successful you never will,” Pennirell reassured him.

“We cannot go back,” Carlton spoke firmly. “I remember it now, they can still recall us with a word.”

“How?” Derrick asked. “Nothing in our bodies last a whole lifetime, everything gets replaced by new material every few years.” He feared the answer may be some sort of deep-seated brainwashing.

“They said something about being a Maker to the marrow. Does that help?”

“Oh. If the stuck something in your bone marrow it would persist. But that also means it is a physical thing, which can be removed. Show me.”

Carlton stood up, then swung his right leg onto the table and pulled his pant leg up to the knee. He pointed to a scar on his shin. Derrick held his hands on either side of his leg and closed his eyes.

“There it is. Wow, nice recall there Carlton. I can take this out. Is there anything else I should know? Will release energy like the stone-under-the-skin if it loses contact with blood?”

“I do not know. Stones used for tracking are much larger, with more energy in them. I do not think this is that large.”

“If you take it out he could be a double agent,” Dierdre said. “He could return to them, claiming he escaped from us, and like they still have control over him. Then help us get in.”

“That’s taking a big chance. If they looked they would see that my stone and marrow shard had been removed. I’m pretty sure I would not survive that.”

“He is correct,” Pennirell said. “He also knows enough about us to be damaging.” He turned to Dierdre. “But that was a positively devious idea, I would not have suspected your mind moved in those ways.” He smiled.

“It doesn’t,” she confessed. “The idea came from some spy books back home.

“We should keep the option as a last resort,” Jurnigan said in a serious tone. “We may not be able to force our way from the Bastion to the Keep.”

“If it comes to it, I’ll go,” Carlton said with as much courage as he could muster.

“Thank you, let us hope-“ Pennirell began.

“You forgot about the guardian,” Sam intervened, somewhat reluctantly. The memory of it alone caused him pain. “You had us start inside the main gate. It guards the gate itself. Nobody knows what it is, but it is not from here.”

Julian grimaced.

“I remember it now too. It reeks of carrion. And it is massive, despite its stature. Its cloak occupies a space about the size of him,” he pointed to Jurnigan, “but when it moves the ground shakes. Even the foundation stones of the Bastion rattle.”

Pennirell and Lapine exchanged a concerned look.

Derrick and the former Makers returned to Lord Dubuque’s manor, where Derrick retained a room as an operating theatre. The rest remained to compile their findings.

“I didn’t see the split location thing coming,” Mira admitted.

“I concur. I was fully convinced that awful edifice on the coast was the source of all malice. It certainly felt like it.” Lapine looked around the room at nothing in particular, while an idea formed. “Hold on, if the coils reside in the Keep then the compass heading from the warehouse blast should point there.”

“I think when we hear from the survey team there will be more east than north in the heading,” Pennirell surmised.

“That would also explain how we were tracked way out on that plateau when we went to see Timena,” Dierdre realized. “We accidentally got close.”

“Do you think we could go straight out there and skip the Bastion entirely?” Jurnigan proposed.

“I doubt it. While I know those lands, any tower on the steppe would be difficult to approach in secret. More crucially, we must make them think we are unaware of the Keep until the very moment we move on it. For this reason alone we must engage the Bastion,” Pennirell said with a resigned tone.

“When I visualize us attacking that monstrosity I see only bodies. How do we engage it convincingly, but not ruinously?” Lapine worried.

“That is a task for us all. Let us return with these findings to the others.”

Sirinha stalked the halls of the Bastion, still livid about losing Olaf, and from another rebuke from the High Council. She had tried to caution them to take extra measures to safeguard the operation now that the Aiann Council was directly involved, but her words fell on deaf ears. They chastised her for attempting to elevate another group to their level, and reminded her they were the only Council she should be concerned about. Lastly, she resented not being on the High Council herself by now. She knew she was stronger than the Fourth, if not any of the first three. But she knew that even if she challenged the Fourth and won, the others would not accept her yet. She

was too hot-headed, they said. Better in the field. She knew the first three were vastly more powerful than she, leaving her no course of action other than to follow orders.

Her wanderings took her out the main gate. She stopped by the guardian. She tried again to size it up, to assess its power as a foe, to test her skills. Laughter appeared in her mind, and she saw its cloak moving slightly.

She stomped down the main stairs and made her way to the docks. Salt air calmed her in ways she did not comprehend, which itself would anger her further if she thought too much about it. Any time something worked on her that she did not control it felt like being bested. She stared at the sea water in the bay, trying to empty her mind.

“You are not without allies here,” a voice spoke from behind, its accent thick.

She hid her surprise about not noticing his approach, and turned to face him. She recognized a very senior Maker from the eastern steppes.

“The Council moves too slowly. We risk losing our advantage. You move decisively.”

“Thank you, Vidilov. What you call decisive the Council calls rash. Even so, there is little opportunity to alter our course now that full scale conflict has begun.”

“Let us talk.”

The alliance fleet split into three forces, one to deal with the inbound grey armada, one to lay siege to the Bastion on the Danish peninsula, and the third to remain in the southern part of the home Isle to handle inevitable surprises. While they did not yet have a plan for breaching the Citadel, it was necessary to get underway so that they

are on hand when the plan materialized. Updates would travel via certain predetermined waypoints. Ground teams discussed the best means to learn more about the Keep, having learned all they could from the former Makers. Direct observation presented serious challenges, given that the waypoint network out there will be both watched and guarded. Dierdre and Derrick's first trip to the plateau employed tactics that could not be used by all, and were not two-way. Kelia proposed using the ancient pathways that she and Dierdre had recently connected to.

"It's quite different from the waypoint network," Dierdre explained. "I'm not sure people made it. I get the impression it is something emergent. When I get glimpses of the bigger picture it looks like a terrain map of a rainwater catchment basin, except instead of water flow it shows energy potential. The energy routes are as rivers, and the far points occur at confluences, eddies and all sorts of other places."

"Have you tried travelling along any of these 'far emergent pathways' as yet?" Lapine asked.

"Just one. It is so vast. We could take a hundred people at once. But it takes a fair bit to connect, many will not be able to do it."

"These far pathways go over to the big Isle?" Pennirell asked hopefully.

"As far as I can tell they underlie the entire globe."

"Right. Off we go," Hicks made a shooing motion with his hands.

"Was it really just three months ago that we were here?" Derrick looked around the desolate landscape. "It seems like a lifetime ago."

Dierdre nodded, walking around with her hands open, wary. Kelia followed, joined by Pennirell, Lapine, Hicks and Hav. The scouting party was kept to a minimum, with each person bringing a particular skillset. Pennirell requested Hav's presence because from this point forward they may encounter anything, whether from this world or not. Hicks was along to evaluate conventional siege tactics, and Lapine for her knowledge of ancient matters. They gathered in a small wash, cut by spring snow melts, now dry in the early fall. The air carried a chill.

"It's that way, a few miles." Dierdre pointed north. Derrick felt it too.

They followed the wash northeast until it joined a larger stream bed that ran north-south. They turned north and began watching for sentries, traps and other types of alarms. Three miles passed in silence. Eventually the stream bed faded, forcing them into the open. Pennirell crouched in the waist high grasses covering this section of the plateau, then pulled out his glass.

"There it is."

"I feel a pull from it," Derrick observed. "It feels like being pulled downhill."

"The coils must create an energy well, the same way massive objects create gravity wells. They distort the space around them." Dierdre looked up. "It seems to be affecting more than us."

The clouds pooled above the Keep, drawn by the same force. A giant, swirling eddy manifested there, a visible disturbance in the seasonal winds that blew in from the north.

“Such phenomena may later prove useful,” Hicks spoke up. “As long as cloud cover exists, that is quite a marker. Let us pause here for a moment while I record some observations. Troop movements until this point can be done at scale, and in secret. The same cannot be said for the remainder of the distance.” He wrote notes as he spoke.

A chilling howl pierced the air, originating from the direction of the Keep. Everyone dropped a few inches instinctively, even though they were already hidden by the grass.

“That was no hound,” Hav spoke. “Nor wolf. I know both well.”

“Something dark just took wing from the Keep. I suggest we hide,” Hicks said while peering through his glass.

“Where, there is no – ” Lapine started.

“Over here. Tight group. I’ve got this,” Derrick directed with a calmness that surprised everyone, including himself.

He invoked Clay then pushed away a large volume of the sandy soil, creating a depression. The group climbed in and hunched down. Derrick formed a rocky shelf above them in the same composition as the surrounding landscape. He then went quiet to hide his energy presence. He left a small opening for someone to peer out and provide updates. Hicks was closest, so the job fell to him.

“Looks like a steppe falcon, but too large. It circles in a repeating pattern. I see no evidence it is aware of us.”

The creature flew for an hour then returned to the top of the Keep. Hicks gave the all-clear, then Derrick returned to himself.

“You’ve changed,” Dierdre said. “Usually I can tell it’s you, since I can feel the presence of the spellwork nearby. This time when you went still I had nothing. You were just stone. It was both a little creepy, and a bit awesome.”

Derrick looked at his arms and hands.

“Yes. It started back at the warehouse blast, and is still occurring. Which perhaps leads to our next step. I can move through this soil pretty easily, as a way to get closer while the rest of you remain here.”

“And if another one of those beasts takes to the air?” Lapine asked nervously.

“I can cover you as Derrick did,” Kelia replied. “Albeit with some residual energy signature. I cannot become as still as he, nor can anyone else I know for that matter.”

“It will suffice, thank you Kelai. Derrick, go,” Pennirell urged.

Derrick descended silently into the ground, aboard an unseen elevator. He moved north, feeling part of himself move ahead, sliding over subterranean rock, then the rest of him followed. He had moved in this manner before, but never this smoothly. He no longer felt separate from all the material around him, his edges merged with the soil. Friction and noise vanished, replaced by an effortless glide as though flowing through water. He found himself smiling, then laughing when he contemplated defining a smile when one lacks a face. Going deeper, he found the energy pathways that had brought them here. Dierdre had described them as something visible, a web of interconnected, luminous routes. Derrick perceived them as more tangible. Rushing

streams of energy potential moved to and fro on all sides. He reached down to one, and tugged. To his surprise it moved, then returned to its original course when released.

He paused to check his distance. His senses said halfway there. He popped up to the surface to verify his estimate, and to check for threats. He rose above the surface just enough to see above the scrubby brush. He detected spellwork in the ground, similar to what they encountered in the woods south of the old thieves' clearing. He realized he could move through it undetected, but for regular troops to pass it would have to be disabled. He sunk back down and resumed his approach. A noise grew in the distance with each passing yard. If the far pathways are a network of streams, this new sound is a thundering waterfall. At two hundred yards from the Keep it grew to such an intensity he was unsure he could get any closer. He traced an arc down and under the Keep, maintaining a constant distance. At a point directly beneath the Keep the energy diminished. He pressed upwards, eventually reaching the foundation stones. Again he felt spellwork, this time more subtle, worked into a fine mesh around the building. He reached up and pulled some of the spell into himself, acting for a moment as though he was just another foundation stone. An intricate lattice of energy filaments reveal itself in his mind, then he understood. He chose not to enter, for the moment it is more important they not know the alliance is aware of the Keep. He released the foundation spell, then descended straight down to the depth of the far pathways. Several major paths converged there, forming a nexus. Energy radiated upwards from it. He suspected this energy cancelled out that of the Keep, creating the calm region that

permitted his approach. He found no evidence of people ever having created persistent access points to these pathways.

He turned to leave, then felt something. The sensation of the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end overcame him, despite lacking both elements in his current form. A deep rumble shook the earth for miles around, then grew in strength. He moved farther down, just below the far nexus. A pulsing pressure assaulted him from all sides, even from below. He feared his haven by the nexus may not be enough to shield him, but it was too late to move, the pressure gradient went up sharply in all directions away from the nexus. With each passing second it increased, compressing him to the size of a pea. Pain filled his senses. At the moment he thought he could take no more, a thunderclap struck, then it was gone. The nexus felt as before. He seized the moment of calm and shot back to the others.

When he surfaced he found them staring open-mouthed at the Keep, as a pall of smoke drifted away from its roof.

“Did that thing just go off?”

Pennirell turned toward Derrick, his expression conveying the answer. Derrick waited a moment for the shock to settle down, then reported his observations.

“You were directly under when it fired?” Dierdre asked, incredulous. “Whoa.”

“You moved a far pathway?” Kelia inquired at the same time.

“We need to get back,” Pennirell cautioned. “We may finish sorting out his findings there.”

Two hours later they entered the hall at the secluded location outside Londinium. Meadowbrook Manor became the de facto command center after the warehouse blast. Reports were still coming in about the second firing of the coils when they arrived.

“Took out a major section of the port at Caerleon,” a fleet commander spoke. “We believe a small craft slipped in through a gap in our defenses during the night, then deposited the beacon stone.”

The queen listened impassively, the only outward sign of her anger was a pulsing vein in her temple. Hicks noticed this, then elbowed Lapine.

“How many lost?” the queen asked.

“Twelve ships, your grace, all docked. Most crews were on leave. One dock destroyed too.”

“Is the Thames protected?”

“Yes. Ships with practitioners block the entrance. However we cannot guard all waterways as securely. We will increase our blockade at Caerleon, given its strategic import, but many locations will remain vulnerable.”

The queen stood, then moved to speak, then stopped. She knew better than to act when this upset. She found she could not sit listen to another report.

“I shall return in thirty minutes.” She walked out of the hall.

Lapine and Hicks exchanged a glance, then both shook their heads in answer to the unspoken question of who should go talk to her. Lord Dubuque walked over, having seen their exchange.

“I would no go either. When Georgina is like this, words do not help. Only time. Pray tell you have better news.”

Lapine exhaled.

“We might. Derrick made it to the foundation stones of the Keep, and was underneath during the discharge. An opportunity may lie therein.” She paused to drink some tea. “Young Haversham shines in the field,” she continued. “Really comes into his own. I get the sense that he tolerates rooms like these, if only to ensure his role out there. When the coils released their ruinous energy I took stock of the group. Not only did Haversham show no fear, he looked ready to assault the Keep single-handedly at that very moment.”

Lord Dubuque smiled.

“Thank you, Theresa. Greta would not be surprised in the least,” he laughed. “She has often said Hav has never shown restraint since the day she gave birth to him. He was early even for that event, keen to rush headlong into whatever lay ahead.” He sighed, his expression shifting to worry.

“He is surrounded by good people,” she reassured him. “A curious mix, to be sure, but good.”

Kelia shook her head. She stood with Pennirell and Riall.

“Now Derrick’s abilities are expanding to match Dierdre’s, and not only am I not alarmed, I’m relieved. His changes seem an entirely appropriate response to the scale of

the threat. Still, so much new power, so fast. We will have to train him against insertion spells, as we have done with Dierdre.”

“This conflict will change all our societies permanently,” Riall considered. “They greys have taken every forbidden tactic and employed them simultaneously.”

“Perhaps that is the lesson,” Pennirell replied. “If people can, they will. We should no longer be surprised what may come from those who toil out of all sight. Henceforth we must endeavor to find ways to monitor for actions we considered unspeakable, or even did not think possible.”

“We cannot watch everywhere. Ah, but those are problems for later. We still do not know our next step.”

A commotion at the entrance drew everyone’s attention. A courier rushed in, still breathless from a fast ride from the palace. Hicks and Stamford greeted him. Hicks handed him a glass of water. He gulped it down, then spoke.

“A most unusual group came to the palace demanding to consult with her majesty. Two wore cloaks and would not share their names, nor anything else, other than to say they are from some order. The third was a terrifying woman in a green gown, who only identified herself as Gwendolyn. I did not let on that the queen is not in the palace, then excused myself and came straight here.

“Ever the one for dramatic entrances, Gwendolyn.” Pennirell stepped forward. “She may have critical knowledge to share. I suggest we meet, but not here. In her current state I doubt she has full control of what she shares, and with whom.”

Lord Dubuque walked over, then looked to Stamford and Hicks.

“Very well. We should send a minimal party to receive her. Who do you recommend, excluding the queen?”

“That may be a problem. She knows who the queen is. The meeting will likely prove fruitless without her.”

“Absolutely not. By all accounts Gwendolyn is very dangerous, even to you. We cannot risk her majesty –”

“I will see her.” The queen returned to the hall. “She is even more stubborn than I. Always has been. Mr. Hicks, please make ready a carriage. Let us meet in the stable at location number four.” She turned on her heel and strode back out.

The wooden floor creaking was the only sound in the entire hall.

“Well then, I guess that settles it,” Hicks interjected lightly. “Right. Who else is going?”

The alliance ‘away’ fleet arrived at the Bay of the Citadel later the same day. A dozen ships sailed directly into the mouth of the harbor, creating a blockade. Grey ships engaged immediately, and in sufficient numbers to drive them back a half mile before stalling. More alliance ships kept arriving until the greys could only manage a stand-off. The greys then disengaged and retreated a short distance back, creating a gap between the two fleets.

The situation persisted the rest of the day, with both sides adding more ships. After nightfall skirmishes broke out among small, fast craft that dared to cross the line.

As dawn approached the greys fell farther back. Two of their fast ships darted into the gap, deposited a large bouy each, then returned.

Ardal nodded to Captain Rowe.

“Aye. That’s one of them,” he said as he looked at the closer buoy.

“Send her in.”

A ship crept forward from the alliance line, making directly for the buoy. As it drew near the sails lowered, slowing it to a near standstill, to better investigate the device. Minutes passed. Then the air for miles around began to crackle, then vibrate. A bright flash of light scorched the air, then struck the buoy. A tower of water erupted thirty feet into the air. Steam billowed from the point of impact, obscuring everything for a few minutes. When the air cleared the gap was devoid of all ships. No wreckage of the former vessel remained, not even a single plank of wood could be seen. The greys deployed more buoys after this show of force.

The alliance ships pulled back another quarter mile.

“Well done, Ardal,” the captain said. “I particularly like that you used a ship made by their hands.”

“The Shadow Puppet was a fine ship,” Ardal deadpanned. “Crewed by the finest grainery sacks you will find anywhere.”

Captain Rowe laughed.

“Begin phase two.”

Two low, black rowboats sped into the gap towards the second buoy, not visible in the pre-dawn light. They came alongside, then pulled the beacon stone from the buoy, then replaced it with another stone of similar size. They concealed the stone beneath three grain sack crew, then raised a sail & adjusted the rudder. The rowers jumped to the other boat, then slipped back behind alliance lines.

The wind carried the stone-laden boat directly towards the grey armada. As it neared their lines the air grew thick with arrows. It took many hits but kept approaching. At the same time two large alliance ships approached the buoy openly, intending to disarm it. Soon the air crackled again, followed by the same searing light. The bolt struck the rowboat, which had by now drifted into the mass of ships blocking the harbor mouth. The sea exploded, taking eight grey vessels entirely, and damaging another fourteen.

“Mr. Briggs, report.”

“Seven minutes passed from start of our ships engagement with the buoy until the coils fired.”

“Let us hope that is the best case, this close to their stronghold.”

The two turned to watch the grey vessels scramble to reform the line and tend the wounded. A third dark rowboat silently returned to alliance lines.

“And let us hope that maneuver puts some doubt into their minds,” Mr. Briggs added.

[53]

Sirinha walked the dark streets of the poorest quarter of the city surrounding the Citadel, her black hood on against the October rain. She moved with near silence through the few groups she encountered, aided by a subtle blurring spell to ensure no one recognized her. She passed several rowdy taverns, then turned down an alley just past the last one. Three story building rose on either side of her, hastily constructed. Halfway down the length of the alley two men sat on crates. A sweet smell emerged from the pipe one of them smoked. They stood as she drew closer, both with hands on their weapons. She spoke a sequence of numbers, then the one on the left opened a door.

Inside she saw a group sitting around a table in a private room in the back of the last tavern. She recognized Vidilov but none of the others. She sat without lowering her hood, her senses on high alert.

“Easy,” Vidilov said. “We are all friends here.”

He motioned for the doors to be closed, then invoked a spell around the table to prevent eavesdropping.

“Much has come to pass since our last gathering, yet two factors have remained constant – their reliance on our lands and skill to realize the coils, and their refusal to include us in their high council. Now their carelessness has let those middling fools from the order discover us, and worse, they have involved the Aiann. The council considers this matter of no import, that we are unassailable now. We cannot let them continue to lead us as they do.”

Vidilov paused to look around the table, then continued.

“The time has come to remake the council. Two must be removed, and three added, all of whom are present.”

Sirinha looked around as discreetly as she could. She guessed Vidilov was one, and she the second, but who is the other? She suddenly became worried this group is not powerful enough to finish the task. She focused more energy on her passive listening spell, trying to size up the room without drawing attention.

“Don’t bother,” a hoarse voice muttered on her left. “You’re the junior one of the lot.”

Sirinha flushed with anger, then fear. She had been using her most subtle spell, yet he detected it as mere child’s play. She was no longer sure of either of the other two now. She felt her skills were superior to Vidilov, but had he been holding back? Or was he just the ring leader? A new fear replaced this worry as realization dawned on her that she was likely not in a position to leave if she disagreed. Previously her plan had been to exit by force if necessary. She was no longer confident she could fight her way out of here, implying that she may already be committed to this course of action.

“We are long past the point of concern for our petty differences within this room. We must speak openly,” Vidilov gestured for everyone to lower their hoods.

Sirinha counted six other people at the table. Vidilov and two others had already removed their cloaks. The other three did the same, then she followed. The man to her left that had sensed her spell wore the scars of severe burns on his face and hands. Shoulder length black hair covered most of his face. To her right a man thicker than Olaf emerged from beneath a hood that must be enchanted, as it disguised his true size until now. To his right a silver-haired woman sat motionless. She was at once imposing and hard to detect. Sirinha got the impression she could disappear in the blink of an eye.

“Thank you. I believe some have not met everyone. Thank you for joining us, Sirinha,” he opened his palm in her direction. “Master Maker Stevias,” he introduced the scarred man to her left. “Torvo.” The behemoth nodded once. “And the very high priestess Liana.” The silver-haired woman looked directly into Sirinha’s eyes. Sirinha maintained her stony expression, hiding her discomfort from Liana’s gaze. She had the sinking feeling that Liana could incapacitate her with a look.

“I am Vidilov, and these are my associates Niri and Marco.” He motioned to the two people on his left, a woman and a man. “Our course of action is clear. The council have rejected open challenges, even though our code allows for them. They play favorites with those unqualified to lead. Thus we will move in the shadows.”

The queen entered the stables at a location some distance west of Londinium. She walked past a few stalls, then stopped. A curious mare poked her head over her gate. The queen smiled, then reached out to gently stroke her neck and mane. Lapine joined her.

“I would trade a great many things to ride off and let others solve this crisis,” the queen said quietly.

“I would be right there with you.”

“Perhaps we could make time for a ride now and again, regardless,” she said loudly enough for others to hear.

“A good idea, cousin. A day in the fields always put the color back into your skin,” Gwendolyn said from the stable entrance.

The queen turned to face her, then sighed and let down her guard.

“I have missed our rides much of late.”

“As have I,” Gwendolyn said as she approached.

The queen’s expression became hopeful. She put a hand to her mouth, then spoke gently.

“Are you back? From, ... from” she waved a hand, preferring to leave the rest unsaid.

“For a time, it seems. I had resigned myself to finish my days in isolation. The events in my past left me altered to the point that I could find no peace anywhere. However, it seems the world itself is now sufficiently altered that I once again fit. Something has rearranged the many shards of my shattered mirror back into its original

shape. I am by no means whole, but I can see a semblance of myself in it now, among the cracks.”

The queen stepped closer and hugged her.

“Welcome back. We all wear our cracks and scars now.”

Gwendolyn embraced her, then stepped back to observe the rest of the group. Her eyes stopped on Dierdre and Derrick.

“Oh my. What has happened to you two?” She turned to Pennirell. “Did you forge it?”

“We have. We are in your debt.”

“Have you used it yet? Pray tell not on the coils already?” Concern washed over her face.

“No. We have only just confirmed their location”

“Oh thank the stars.” Her shoulders dropped in relief. “Some weeks after you left, another group of memories fell into place. Only then I realized how you must employ it. No doubt by now you have discovered you can disrupt spellwork with it.”

Pennirell looked at Hav and shrugged, then shook his head in reply to Gwendolyn.

“We have all but forbade its use, in our efforts to keep its existence secret.”

“Very well. Is it here?” She looked around at everyone’s weapons.

Pennirell stepped aside, making room for Hav to come forward.

“I shall cast fire at you. Use the darkness to stop it. Strike the hilt on the ground, then raise in a defensive posture.”

Hav's eyes grew wide at the thought. He had seen Pennirell use fire before. He drew the blade in the blink of an eye, then stood at the ready. Gwendolyn raised her hand at him and began speaking. The air popped and hissed. Hav slammed the hilt into a flagstone then stood. The blade vibrated with an unsettling hum, just out of range of hearing. Flames leapt from her hand directly at him. When they reached the quivering Nightshade they fell into disarray, as a wave upon a breakwater, energy going in all directions. Once cohesion was lost the force dissipated with little effect. A few sparks fell to the ground, quickly extinguished by foot.

"Do not attempt to put it away. It still moves. Take the dagger. Run it along the length, back edge to back edge."

The vibrations began diminishing as soon as the dagger contacted the base of the sword, going silent by the time he slid it to the tip. He resheathed both.

"Before you unseat the coils, strike the hilt on their foundation. This will attune the blade to that which you seek to destroy."

She exhaled, then looked at the queen.

"Now it is done. May we break for a while? My journey was long."

The queen turned to those assembled.

"Let us invite her to join us at our preferred location, for whatever time she has. If her disposition changes we may use that as our signal to relocate."

"You reside in secret. They are fully operational then? I was hoping those echoes I felt out on the island were tests."

"Quite so. Two targets have been destroyed."

“Your majesty, shall we blindfold her en route?” Hicks suggested.

The queen laughed.

“No. She will recognize the place at once, from many a mid-summer’s eve.”

Gwendolyn grinned from ear to ear, momentarily looking the part of a mischievous teenager. She put a hand over her heart.

“Oh, Meadowbrook.”

Three couriers arrived early the next morning. The first reported the grey fleet had landed some forces on the east coast near The Wash, but fewer than expected. Many were subdued, but almost half succeeded in escaping to the northwest to join existing regiments. Renewed pushes occurred along several of the central and eastern lines.

The second shared that spies in the Port of the Great Orme saw large landing parties with substantial ground troop movement to the south and east. Expect a renewed offensive at the iron market. The fleet is already moving to intercept their vessels before they can return, but the troops are already on the ground and will pose an ongoing threat.

The third courier had restlessly awaited his turn, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Now that the floor was his he could hardly enunciate, all the words fought to come out at once.

“Op-operationskippingstoneisunderway!”

“Say again, please,” Hicks requested.

“Operation Skipping Stone is underway. We have one. Ready for the throw.” He paused to look around the room. “I hope that means something to you. I memorized it as best I could.”

Derrick was already moving. Peter and Taylor stood to join him. Another team formed around Jurnigan, heading for the iron market. Mira, Riall, and Rachael joined him. Pennirell and Niamh walked over to Derrick’s group. Both groups paused, looked back at those in the room, then departed.

Taylor led the Skipping Stone team to the marsh waypoint on the Danish peninsula, where she and Peter had recently eluded capture. They elected for a known route to get close, then sort out the last few miles once on site. They arrived with weapons drawn, but that proved unnecessary. The waypoint was not guarded, indicating that the grey pursuers had not found it. They moved to the dunes by the beach, then made their way south to the rendezvous point. They found three nervous hunkered down by their overturned rowboat, hidden among the tall grasses.

“Glad to see you, - ” one of them began, then stopped when another elbowed him.

“Right. Pass code?”

“Skipping stone,” Taylor replied.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

“We’re sailors, not spies. I for one am ready to get water beneath me feet again.”

“Better you than me,” Peter countered. “I’ll stick to terra firma. Is that it?” He pointed to a large sack with a roundish bulge.

The sailors nodded, already turning their rowboat over. “Good luck,” one said over his shoulder. They carried the boat quickly over the dunes to the water, and were away.

Derrick walked over to the sack and gave it a shove with his foot.

“That thing must weigh three hundred pounds.”

He invoked Clay, then hefted the sack. He closed his eyes and reached out.

“There is a far pathway just inland from the marsh, east of here.”

“A route exists a short distance south. Otherwise we would need a boat to cross here,” Taylor informed him.

They made their way to the footpath she described, then stopped to observe it from behind some dunes. Footprints from Shadows with hounds were plainly visible.

“We’ll need to move fast, before the next patrol shows up,” Peter urged.

“And we won’t have much time once they do,” Taylor added.

“Wait. First we do scent masking.” Niamh drew a circle in the sand and spoke a spell into it. The surface of the sand went smooth, then rippled. She stepped into it, sinking up to her ankles. When she stepped out the sand coated her boots. The others did the same.

“Stay within arm’s reach of each other while we move.” She then invoked a small whirlwind that blew their scent upwards into the higher breezes.

They traversed the path through the marsh, then came to the edge of a large field that had been recently harvested, offering no coverage.

“I need to get to the edge of the village on the far side of that field,” Derrick pointed with an elbow.

Pennirell added a strong blurring spell around Niamh’s wind, then they entered the field. They kept their footfalls to the furrows already trod by many feet. They crept along through several fields, then came to a small farmhouse. A dog woke and briefly barked at the curious wind, then lost interest. They snuck around the back of the farmhouse, then hid among some hay bales.

“This will do. Please keep this area clear for my return.” Derrick removed the sack covering the beacon stone, reached down to the far pathway below, then disappeared.

He made his way north, now confident he could identify the Bastion from underneath, based on his experience at the Keep. He found it atop a similar nexus, and departed the pathway but remained underground. He moved with the large stone, temporarily merging with its material to better flow through the terrain. If they trip this thing now I’m toast, he thought to himself. He slid quickly under the center of the Bastion and rose. He found the way quickly blocked by an earthen spell. Given the Bastion’s role as the visible center of grey power, it made sense to make a show of protecting it against all manner of attack. He stopped before triggering the alarm spells, then traversed laterally until it faded. He found the spell to be the shape of an inverted dome, centered on the Bastion. He traced its curve until it reached the surface, just at one corner of the edifice.

This will have to do. He left the stone beneath the foundation blocks in the southeastern corner then returned via the far nexus. He rose back out of the ground by the hay bales to find the group gone. Voices came from near by. He slid back into the ground, keeping close enough to view the surroundings. Two farmers walked over, followed by the curious dog from earlier. They started moving hay bales, one of which landed atop Derrick. After waiting a couple minutes he rose as Clay up into the bale to peer out.

The dog cocked his head to the side and lifted an ear. He sniffed Derrick's hay bale, then barked furiously. The farmer came back with a pitchfork, then laughed when he saw the dog barking at hay. He tossed the pitchfork at the hay bale, then knelt to pet the dog. A sharp, metallic clink sounded from the pitchfork, which had bounced off the bale.

Derrick winced, then slid down into the soil once more, unsure of where to move next. A thought occurred to him to listen for energy rather than sights and sounds. Old habits die hard, he thought. He reached out and found a signal coming from a short distance away. He followed it, then cautiously rose, emerging into a barn. Peter and Taylor were holding back laughter.

"I thought that dog was going to lift a leg and water the bale with you in it," Peter said in a whisper.

"Then tink, out bounces the pitchfork. What will that poor farmer think?" Taylor giggled.

“Well I’m glad I could provide some entertainment for you slackers. At least make yourselves useful, who brought rations? I’m starving.”

“Slackers?” Taylor looked at Peter. He shrugged.

Derrick shook his head.

“Tossers? Do you have that one?”

Taylor threw a clump of hay at him.

“It’s done, by the way. Under a corner, as close as I could get without sounding an alarm.”

Pennirell smiled, then exhaled.

“I am glad to be rid of that. Let’s give word for the next stage to begin.”

The area surrounding the old iron market was barely recognizable. The trench cutting the road now extended to the hills in the east, and down to the river in the west. Fortifications arose everywhere, made of wood and stone. Forces amassed on either side, each now more than six regiments strong. Scouting parties clashed in the dense woods west of the river, but large scale action had subsided. Alliance commanders were busy speculating what the greys were planning, but as yet had no concrete information on movements. Spies were having a harder time moving undetected with so many new greys about. The arrival of siege machinery on the road laid that conversation to rest.

“No beacon stones detected yet,” one of the Aiann practitioners report from the wall.

“None yet, but expect it. From anywhere, even the waypoint.”

“Do you think they’d try the waypoint?” Mira asked. “Given how long they need to get word back to the coils, they must know we’d just transit it out.”

“Yes, that is the obvious play. I fear they have something in mind to slow our response.”

“Catapult.” Finn spoke from the back of the command tent. “Throw five or six over the wall at once, take us more than seven minutes to clear them out.”

The command tent fell silent.

“We need to come up with a response to that, fast. Call in the rest of the commanders.” Rachael looked concerned.

“We need to break up more of the road,” Jurnigan added. “They can roll up an armored siege wagon with a stone in it, park it twenty yards over on their side of the cut, and the blast will still level the wall.”

“Make that two plans we need.”

A half dozen ground commanders and as many practitioners filed into the tent. Rachael briefed them on the new threats.

“They will use the road to distract us,” one of the commanders said. “They know the road is visible and well defended. Were I planning their effort I would put machinery upon wheels and bring it into view. Covertly I would assemble a large catapult in the woods west of the road, then breach with mounted troops after the blast from the coils. They may have even begun cutting a new road. We have been unable to scout that area of late.”

“I can get in,” Mira offered.

Rachael gave her a questioning look.

“As Clay. I can still do that.”

Rachael was still confused.

“As one of the called. From last time. When I chose to stay I stopped telling folks how I got here. This group mostly knows now, and I’ve stopped trying to keep it a secret.”

“Saved us once, back for more. Glutton for punishment, I’d say.” Finn wore a sly grin.

“Not sure I’d argue with that.” She walked to the tent flap that served as a door, then stopped. “Oh, and get Derrick out here if you want to mess up that road in a hurry.”

“Is that the only reason you would request his presence?” Rachael laughed.

Mira flashed a devious smile, made a rude sign with her fingers, then ducked out before Rachael could reply. She walked over to the wall spanning the road, then turned left and headed west to the forest edge. She invoked Clay, then sank down into the earth.

Been a while, she thought. She passed beneath the clear cut, then continued north under the enemy lines for two hundred yards. She surfaced enough to look around, then repeated the process while varying her heading east and west. Some distance west she saw evidence of a clear cut a little farther north, possibly a new road. The area was actively being worked by crews with picks and shovels. She went back under for a closer look. Not ten yards later she felt an energy that stopped her in her

tracks. The bottom fell out of her stomach. Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no. She did her best to bottle up her emotions, then turned about face and raced back across the line. When she surfaced she could not hold it back any longer. She fell to her knees, sobbing so hard that her breath came in ragged heaves.

Rachael stood by the command tent when she felt her. She ran to the edge of the woods and saw Mira on the ground.

“What is it? What happened?”

“It’s him. He’s not dead. Oh god this is bad. This is why they’re so strong and they figured out those bloody coils.”

“Who? What are you saying?”

“Steve. He was called when I was. He went huge like Dierdre but he turned. Corrupted. He was going to kill me, but I surprised him. Bludgeoned and burned him. I checked the body. No pulse. But that’s his energy in the ground over there. And he, I, we...” she started crying again.

“Let’s get you somewhere private for a bit.”

Rachael led her to an empty medical tent and closed the flap. Mira curled up on a cot without protest, her body racked with grief and fear.

“I’ll be back shortly.”

“Th-there’s a road. Two-fifty yards north, fifty west.”

“Thanks, hang in there.”

Derrick and Riall arrived later that afternoon. They had left Meadowbrook immediately after Derrick had returned from ‘throwing’ the skipping stone. They found Mira curled up in the fetal position on the cot, sleeping restlessly. Derrick went to her side and gently woke her. Terrified eyes looked back at him. She hugged him then resumed crying.

“Can I do anything to help?”

She shook her head on his shoulder.

“What else do we need to know? I have never seen you like this.”

Mira sat up, then dropped her shoulders in resignation. She had buried this so far down, hoping to never revisit the experiences from over twenty years ago.

“Steve and I both decided to stay, after finishing the matter of our calling. We took work as healers in a village near Morgansea. As two outsiders in a foreign land we grew to rely on each other. We became close, then moved in together. I never had any role models in relationships, I had no idea what I was doing. I fell hard. Wanted to start a family, do all the things I never got to when I was growing up. We got engaged. Then he changed. I couldn’t see it then, but he started taking the power for himself, little by little. He became withdrawn, angry. Eventually I no longer felt safe around him. His powers grew like Dierdre, and now you. I knew I could never defeat him if it came to that, so I began planning my escape. Then he found out I was carrying our child and he lost it. He was so mad at me for hiding it from him. He said if I ever tried to take his child away he’d kill me. In his rage he let slip thoughts of his intentions, he was not going to let me survive childbirth. He had been manipulating me all along, taking

advantage of my naivete. I panicked. He was so mad I thought he might kill me right there. I stood up, hoping to run when he came at me. I grabbed the iron from the fireplace, it was all I could reach to defend myself. I surprised him with my quickness and landed a solid blow to his skull, stunning him. I cast fire at him and continued striking. He fought fiercely despite the injuries from the iron. He died. I checked the body and found no pulse. Only then did I notice my own injuries. Two hours later I lost the child. I barely made it to Pennirell's. He saved my life. I started working for him. I haven't been super keen on relationships ever since. Until now."

She hesitated, afraid to voice the next thought.

"But then I grew in strength like him, and here we go again," Derrick finished for her.

She nodded. He hugged her.

"I'm so sorry for what you've had to endure."

Riall listened quietly, then waited for a moment for a good time to speak.

"There are accounts of practitioners that can briefly leave their bodies, appearing to be dead. This ability is very rare, I have never met one who could do this. It would seem Steve can."

Derrick felt rage boiling up inside. He was not prone to outbursts of temper, but he feared he could not keep the lid on this. His expression hardened and he looked at Mira.

"Go mess up that damn road."

Derrick cleared his mind as best he could, then sank into the earth. He navigated to the section of the road just across the cut, then let loose. Massive waves of energy shook the ground, knocking everyone nearby off their feet. Huge chunks of earth erupted upwards, flying in all directions. He plowed north, utterly destroying the road and everything on it for half a mile. Several large siege engines were reduced to splinters and scrap metal. Horses and troops lay in heaps on the ground. The prior location of the road was no longer recognizable. In its place were deep holes and mounds of rocks ten feet high. Traversal on foot would be difficult, movement by carriage was out of the question.

Drained, Derrick returned to the medical tent, only to find it empty.

“Second time today I resurface and everyone’s gong,” he said to himself. He walked outside and saw them peering over the wall. He joined them. Mira gave him a small, sheepish grin.

“I wanted to watch. Knowing you felt that strongly sort of translates into a signal that you care. Or at least that is how I want to see it. Is that weird?”

He grabbed her hand.

“I do care. Weird is relative. For this place I’d say that is an entirely reasonable viewpoint.”

They looked over the cut at the tumultuous landscape that used to be a road. Grey forces scrambled to dig out the wounded and salvage whatever equipment they could. Riall peered over the wall next to them.

“Nice work. One down. Come, we must devise a plan for the catapults.”

Hicks stood atop the bow of the Pemberton, holding a pair of signal flags. He had rejoined the fleet for the last phase of Operation Skipping Stone. He turned and relayed the signal to the Corvus. Proceed to phase three.

The two ships moved in the fading light towards a large buoy in the zone between the two fleets. They swept in quickly, then removed the large stone it held, and replaced it with another. Grey captains witnessed the exchange and called in the stone's number.

Minutes later the air began to hum and vibrate, but not as intensely as before. Hicks turned towards the Bastion. A blinding light flashed, followed several seconds later by the sound of rolling thunder. A huge plume of smoke rose from the Bastion. He lifted his glass to survey the damage. A large section of the southeastern flank was missing.

"We have well and truly kicked the hornet's nest now," he said aloud.

Within minutes the tense standoff between the two fleets shattered. Grey ships attacked all down the line. The battle for the Citadel had begun. Hicks signalled a courier craft to notify command. Thirty minutes later ground forces began arriving by far pathways, one hundred at a time. Two hours of furious transits by a dozen practitioners landed ten thousand troops. The first arrivals were already assaulting the outskirts of the town outside the Bastion walls. They spread out quickly to provide only disbursed targets not vulnerable to elimination by a single coil strike.

“Fools! They let them steal a numbered stone and put it beneath our noses!”

Vidilov fumed. “We move now.”

He stormed towards the Bastion with his two associates, stopping to collect Stevias, Liana and Torvo along the way. Sirinha met them at the steps to the main gate, her face a mask of confidence. She feared this timing was too soon and the plan was not complete, but she showed none of this.

Vidilov swept over to the guardian, then placed his hand over the stone.

“No ohhnnee mahye heeenter” hissed into his head.

“We are here to fix this mess. Stand aside.”

The beast did not move. Vidilov was unprepared for this. He had no idea how one might defeat the guardian or if it was even possible. Stevias came forward. He placed his hand on the stone then spoke.

“This regards the very reason for your agreement with us. We will enter.” The stone glowed.

The guardian stepped aside.

Several pieces fell into place in Sirinha’s mind. Stevias works on the coils, explaining his clearance. He also knows the nature of the guardian. She also realized in that moment she does not trust him, which is exceptional. She trusts no one, but when this particular instinct is triggered, it means he is actively dangerous even to those helping him. Chaotic and unpredictable, he poses a continual threat to everyone but himself. She buried her thoughts and followed them inside.

The Bastion halls echoed with commands and confused shouts in equal measure. They followed their way past builders hurrying to shore up floors and walls, eventually making it to the hall of eight walls. Vidilov stood next to the central table and began a low chant. A door opened on the south wall. They drew weapons and stepped through.

They arrived on the floor of the council chamber.

“Halt! None are permitted –” the fourth council member began. Sirinha cast a spell that threw him from the gallery onto the floor eight feet below. Her sword flashed as he fell. By the time he hit the ground she had already resheathed it.

“Challenge.” She said calmly to the remaining three council members.

“Now is not the time for this,” the second council chair bellowed, his face flush with anger. He raised a fist then went completely still, unable to move. Liana appeared behind him with a knife to his throat.

“Challenge.”

He slumped forward on the table, then disappeared. She sat in his chair. Sirinha jumped to the gallery and took the fourth chair.

A fifth stone chair appeared in the center, with Stevias behind it. He stepped around it, then sat.

“Challenges accepted,” he said. “Welcome to the high council.”

Outnumbered, the surviving two council members nodded their assent.

“Now we must clean up this mess you have made,” Stevias hissed, his voice pure venom. “I will summon Shades to deal with the new invaders.”

“Really?” The first council chair Arina challenged. “You can barely control the one by the door. The last time you tried with multiple it cost three dozen lives.”

“Silence!” Stevias roared.

He seized the first council and immobilized her. She concentrated, then broke free enough to speak freely.

“I will not be so easily subdued,” she spat.

“That is why you are still alive,” Liana said coldly.

“When those beasts break free they will kill cities, entire Isles even. Whom will you rule when the land is devoid of people? They should never have been admitted to our world in the first place.”

Stevias fumed in silence. Sirinha felt his power shifting in huge, erratic pulses. She got the distinct impression he is howling mad, and might lash out at any moment. He spoke through clenched teeth.

“You let them put a sodding stone under our own, then fired upon it in complete ignorance. Your approach failed. I will summon twelve Shades. They will repel the naïve attackers then be brought to heel.”

Arina looked across the chairs at Sirinha.

“You do not know what they are, do you? ‘Shade’ does not convey even a tithe of their true horror. They are specters that crossed a threshold that should not have been breached. Phantoms on the edge of reality, devouring all they encounter, leeches upon our very souls. Know this, before you choose.”

“Enough! I have spoken.”

“You are not the entire council, though it is clear that is your intention. I do not support this reckless course.”

“Nor do I,” the third chair Dariusz spoke.

“Do as you see fit,” Liana said casually.

Two chairs in favor, two against. Sirinha felt the pressure. She did not want grant entry to more of those hideous creatures, but she dare not oppose her new cadre. She steeled herself, then spoke confidently.

“Status quo is failing. We must accept some level of risk. Proceed.”

Stevias opened the door to the lowest level of the keep. He invoked a shield spell, then entered. The other council members followed. Sirinha restrained a gasp. Words cannot fully prepare you for your first sight of the coils. Though diminutive in this realm, perhaps a foot across, they represent energy that spans not just the world, but other realities. Looking directly at the coils is akin to looking through a keyhole at an entire galaxy, but without the buffering offered by distance – it would be the sight billions of stars at full resolution simultaneously. Our minds are not equipped to handled such vastness all at once. If you could contemplate the entirety of ten lifetimes in a single second you would still not approach the magnitude of one focused look at the coils.

Most people react by disconnecting, processing the input as mererly bright light spanning the spectrum. However, some choose to tempt fate, driven by their desire to learn that which others cannot. They override their innate breaker switches and remain

open to the input, if only for a few seconds. Their prize is Promethian knowledge, but it comes at a heavy price. Even the most powerful are finite, and will bear deep scars from the experience, no matter how cleverly executed.

Gwendolyn is one of two people to have survived the ordeal. The other stood in front of Sirinha, opening a gate to another reality. While he focused on the task at hand, she was able to sense the deep rifts in his mind, gaining a glimpse into the true magnitude of what he had done.

Stevias let one of the massive, fluid beings in, pausing to imprint his energy on it. He admitted two others, the strain on him growing with each. Liana watched carefully. After the third she touched his shoulder. He looked at her, his eyes both distant and manic. She gave the smallest of nods, then stepped back. He growled, then closed the gate. Vidilov opened a door to the Bastion.

“Go,” Stevias hissed. “Speak to the other of your kind there. He will direct you whom to kill.”

Three matte black shapes darted through the door, the ground rumbling as they moved. Sirinha quietly exhaled, only just realizing she had been holding her breath in their presence.

“You hide your fear poorly, pawn. Remember your place,” Stevias rasped at her as he walked by.

She would have been angry were she not so overwhelmed by the experience. Pawn, she thought to herself, then walked out.

The Shades erupted from the Bastion main gate then turned south. The alliance troops were no more than leaves before a flood. They swept away all in their path, leaving none alive.

A courier ran to the rear guard, located near the far pathway landing, so out of breath he could hardly speak.

“S-sir. Something unnatural assails us. We can do nothing. We need your help.”

Pennirell was already moving. Kelia and Dierdre ran to his side. He turned and yelled.

“Haversham! Now is your time!”

The four of them ran to the front lines, now much closer than before. They felt the presence of the Shades before they saw them, both via their energy and the vibrations of their monstrous steps.

Dierdre fought the urge to look away, having never seen the raw carnage of battle before. She looked at the nearest Shade as it fed upon a victim, and stabbed it with energy. It stopped and turned, then charged towards her with terrifying speed. She drew power with such intensity that the wind blew towards her from all directions. She tapped into the energy of life all around her, from the far pathways below, and from the ocean a mile away. She cast it all into a massive shield spell directly in the Shade’s path. The beast hit it at full speed. The impact felt to Dierdre like a freight train slamming into a granite mountainside. The ground heaved under the force of the blow. The shield held. Before the ghoulish entity could react, she dropped it on him, forming a giant restraint. Kelia joined her.

Two dark motions appeared on the edge of her vision. Quickly now, hold on. Hav closed the distance and swung twice with the Nightshade then rolled away. The Shade fell into three sections that dissolved into hissing pools of oily liquid.

The other two Shades loosed shrieks in unison that shattered windows. They closed on the practitioners in a coordinated attack. Dierdre straightened her back, then concentrated on sensing their energy. She felt them communicating in a pulsing rhythm. She refocused the shield energy to match their pattern then let fly. Both Shades howled in pain as the massive energy of the spell shot directly into their minds. Hav closed on the right Shade and managed one strike before having to evade its counter. The beast lay in two halves, its essence draining into the earth. The third clawed at what looked like its head, then looked at Dierdre.

It sent a counter spell that shattered her concentration and knocked her over. It followed so fast that Pennirell feared she would not get back to her feet before it was upon her. He stepped into its path, sword drawn. He drew power and felt Kelia join him. Then he felt all his energy dissipate. His heart sank. Let my death buy her time, he thought.

The Shade howled again, only ten feet away. It stumbled then slid, disoriented, digging a furrow yards wide. A vibrating black sword removed its head, then continued in a fluid motion until it moved no more.

Hav had struck the hilt of the Nightshade on a stone, disrupting the spellwork of all nearby, and throwing the raw energy of the Shade into disarray. Kelia grabbed

Pennirell's water flask and ran over to the burrow where the third shade had fallen. She dumped the flask's contents then collected some of the thick ooze that remained.

"I believe we can defeat them in other ways," she said. "I fear we may encounter them in such numbers that one blade will not suffice."

"I hope you are right," Pennirell said, then turned to Dierdre and Hav. "Nice work, you two."

"Never in all my training did I expect to meet such a foe." Hav shook his head.

"That was a new low," Dierdre said with narrowed eyes. "They don't care who they kill. I must admit I am tempted to use any means to stop them. Kelia, can you help me let go of this reaction?"

Kelia quickly grabbed her by the elbow and led her away. Pennirell and Hav looked to see if there were any wounded to assist. They reconvened at the assembly point near the far nexus. The surviving troops had all fallen back until they had an answer for the Shades.

"Did you find any survivors?" Dierdre asked hopefully.

Pennirell shook his head. Hav spat.

"They were not just dead. They were sunken husks, devoured from within."

Kelia held up the flask.

"I need to get this to Gwendolyn." She entered the far pathway and departed.

Ground commanders and soldiers stood anxiously by, looking to Pennirell for answers. Dierdre saw him struggling for the right thing to say, and stepped in.

“I felt their essence,” she addressed them. “They are powerful, but not immortal. We will find a way to give you weapons and defenses against them. All of you.”

“I cannot feel them any more,” Stevias whispered urgently to Liana.

“Was three too many? Did they break free of the oath you bound to them?”

“No. They are just gone. Did they learn how to return without our leave?” A hint of fear crept into his voice.

“If that is the case our reign will be short indeed. If they can come and go at will we are but cattle for their slaughter. Are you certain they are gone? We should go to the Bastion and get closer.”

Stevias nodded, eyes closed, fingers on his temples.

Sirinha watched the exchange from across the room, unsure of what shift just took place. Her instincts told her to leave.

“I can be of more use back at the Bastion,” she said and walked towards Vidilov.

Liana took advantage of the opening.

“Let us all return, to better survey the results.”

Vidilov opened a door and they returned to the hall of eight walls. A cacophany of voices greeted them. Commanders and Makers moved around in disarray.

“Report,” Liana said to one of the senior Makers.

“Unknown, sir. Hostilities have ceased for the moment, but we know not why. The guardian is agitated. None dare pass.”

They moved rapidly to the main gate. Liana gave Stevias a glance, then urged him forward. The great beast shifted its weight back and forth in apparent frustration, and spoke in low, angry tones.

“Master Guardian, do you have something to report? What is the cause of your current behavior?” Stevias spoke firmly.

“Deahhd. Ahll deahd. Youuh did thiss. Yhou wihll not controhhhl me thuss.”

“You will uphold your bound oath.”

“Paymehnt iss no longer enough”

“We do not renegotiate terms once an oath is taken.”

“Mhyy oath iss done. Retuhrn me. I wihll come back and devour yhouu firsst.”

Stevias pulled hard on the energy binding created by the oath. The beast stopped in its tracks. Sirinha had the distinct impression it was clenching its fists, or whatever passed for them. She overrode her urge to take several steps back. The guardian had thrown down the gauntlet by issuing an open challenge to Stevias. She watched closely, awaiting his reply.

“I find you in breach of oath. The punishment is death.”

The beast leapt at him, but it was too late. The oath closed on him like a noose, its power drawn from the coils. Seconds later it was gone. Sirinha was unsure if it perished or was simply returned to its realm.

Grey forces from the field ascended the stairs now that the guardian no longer blocked the landing. A commander stepped forward.

“Sirs. Forward regiments witnessed the assault. The Shades lay waste to all in their path, then disappeared, one by one. None were close enough to see where they went but Makers report the presence of large energy clashing.”

“How large?” Sirinha asked, no longer concerned with how her questions may appear to Stevias or Liana.

“With respect, sir, bigger than anything they have ever felt, save for the coils themselves.”

“It’s her,” she said. “I do not trust our former guardian. I will take a team into the field to verify its claims.”

“Very well. Torvo will assist you,” Liana offered.

He walked over to Sirinha, who was already selecting troops to accompany her. The focus of the crown moved to center on Sirinha. Liana took advantage of the moment to grasp Stevias firmly by the elbow and guide him back inside.

“We shall await your report in the council gallery,” she called out over her shoulder.

Sirinha led Torve and the group of a dozen, made of Makers and Shadows, south through the besieged streets of Citadel town. Cautious eyes peeked out windows as they passed, growing less frequent with each street. The southwestern edge of town was unrecognizable. The pub where she met in secret some days earlier lay in ruins, still smouldering. Bodies from both sides littered the streets. At the outskirts of town one of the Shadows pointed to the last known location of one of the Shades.

Sirinha formed them into a tight group then performed a spell. The lead Maker recognized this as a well-made cloaking spell, then nodded confidently to the rest of the group. They moved silently out of town into the southern fields. Sirinha no longer asked for indicators, she could feel the residual energy radiating from the ground. She led swiftly, following her instincts, glad to be in her element once more.

She motioned for the group to stop. Long grooves scarred the ground. The energy at the southern terminus of the largest furrow was still warm. She knelt with her arms out, palms facing the ground, then pointed to a darkly stained patch of earth. She looked around for any trace of other troops, but they had fallen back. She placed a hand on the ground and listened for a minute, then spoke aloud.

“Torvo, tell me your insights here.”

He performed the same process, then shook his head.

“Not human. Not animal. Probably one of them.”

She scooped some of the blackened soil with her knife and deposited it in a small pouch.

“I feel energy from a guardian creature here,” she pointed. “I feel even larger echoes of what killed it. One I recognize, the other does not belong.”

The most senior Maker put his palms on the ground, then indicated for the others to link to him and do the same. Their combined effort filled in some of the gaps. The spent energy of the Shade stood out like a string out of tune, easily distinguishable. The practitioners’ signal was clear as well, organic and human. The third signal however,

was more elusive, defying classification. It sang a dissonant harmony to the Shade's otherworldly chorus.

The sheer alienness of this new threat sent a chill down her spine. What force could stop a Shade? An entity of their own, or a weapon?

"Report." She looked at Torvo and the lead Maker.

Torvo wrestled for the right words.

"One of them, for sure. The new thing is just black, though. I saw nothing further."

"There is little else to see in the void," the lead Maker added. "For that is what the third signal represents."

Sirinha suppressed a shudder. She knew at once his words were correct. Once he gave it a name recognition flooded into her mind. She found herself nodding, staring into the burnt patch of soil.

"We have learned what we came for. I think it safe to assume the other two met a similar fate, else they would still be at work, visibly causing mayhem."

"The guardian at the gate knew," the lead Maker spoke. "I believe they communicated via some means unknown to us. It knew the others had perished, hence its agitation. This confirms its words."

Torvo nodded agreement.

Sirinha surveyed the landscape.

"The Shades have bought us some time. We must seize this opportunity before they can regroup." She pointed south towards the alliance, then started moving.

Kelia ran into the hall at Meadowbrook, nearly knocking Stamford over.

“Gwendolyn,” she said, panting.

Stamford pointed to a courier, who promptly sprinted off. He turned back to Kelia.

“At least a thousand dead. Perhaps more.”

Gwendolyn and the queen hurried into the hall.

“They brought beings from elsewhere, from without. Three of them slaughtered a tenth of our forces, and would have killed all, save for Dierdre and Hav. Steel was useless. Only Dierdre was strong enough to slow them. Hav felled them with the Nightshade. I brought the remains of one.” She held out the flask.

Gwendolyn took it, then turned on her heel and stormed over to a large table. She swept it clear except for a clean plate. She put the flask on the plate then called a spell to isolate it. She reached inside the spell with her hands, then emptied the contents onto the plate.

She gasped.

“Oh good heavens. They let them in. Fools.” She turned to Kelia. “You got them all?”

“We believe so. The killing stopped when we felled the three. Further, their actions were coordinated, they were aware of each other.”

“They cannot be defeated by any conventional means I know. Given time we may be able to create more weapons like the Nightshade, but there is no guarantee we can repeat that process, much less do it quickly.” She sat back to think.

“I encountered them when I ventured near the realm of the coils,” she went on. “Not all seek to devour others. I was able to learn from one, before my mind became overwhelmed by the experience. I recall that they do not see as we do. They see energies in a more raw state, and can only detect changes. When I would become still she often lose me, and ask me to move around. Curious, I picked up a plant and became still once more. I asked her what she saw. She said I had become a plant, and asked how I performed the transformation. She seemed impressed. I put the plant down and reappeared.”

“A living plant, you say?” Kelia was intrigued. “I think we can work with that.”

“Would a Bloodcap be of any use?” Lapine proffered.

“Oh, of course. Nothing alive may survive its spore. But it is no use to speculate without the means to follow through.”

Lapine smiled at Kelia.

“You said we would know its purpose when we encountered it.”

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“That’s the best we can do?” Hadley asked the group in the crowded command tent. “The plan looks to me like a very blunt tool.”

“Sometimes all you need is a club,” Jurnigan retorted.

Hadley sighed.

“There will be so much damage, fires to put out.”

“Better a fire in the woods than here in camp,” Finn drolled.

Rachael nodded agreement.

“Good work commanders, see to it.”

The plan for countering large beacon stones thrown over the wall en masse was simply to move them by brute force far enough south, then flee the area. Horses with sleds would be stationed every hundred yards along the length of the wall. Any stones thrown over would be rolled onto the sled then raced south a quarter mile. They tested with equivalent weight sacks, and any able horse could make the distance in under a minute. Most critical assets were moved over a mile down the main road, out of range.

The situation still troubled Hadley. He paced around the tent.

“It’s still only half a plan, Eric,” he said to the ground commander. “It covers our side of the wall. However if they roll stones into the cut on their side then what? We simply let them breach the wall?”

“They cannot have an unlimited supply of those stones,” Eric noted. “By forcing them to focus here we may exhaust their supply and minimize damage elsewhere.”

“We lose all tactical advantage when they put several large holes in the wall.”

“Not all,” Riall stepped forward.

Sirinha led the small team south. She knew they could not strike a decisive blow, but they could instill fear. Further, she wanted to demonstrate her skill in the field to Torvo, since he has the trust of Liana. She was still stinging from being called a pawn by Stevias, and concluded that no useful relations could be forged with the likes of him. Instead she decided to focus on Liana, who at least seems to have some grasp of reason. She also holds some sort of influence over Stevias, restraining him from time to time, which may prove useful in the future.

She brought them to a stop just north of an encampment.

“Maker. First Shadow. Estimate their numbers. Once we engage them there will be no time for that. Never assume we are unassailable. These forces will advance again.”

“I see evidence of several thousand troops,” the lead Shadow reported.

“I concur, however I do not see sufficient horses and carts to form a supply line. They must have landed from ships.”

Sirinha considered these observations.

“Their numbers are large for fleet deployment, but I believe you must be correct. The waypoints around here are guarded, and I see no evidence of a long forced march. The supplies I see are too heavy to transport on backs for any distance.”

“Agreed. They also lack siege machinery. They were awaiting the breaching of the Bastion. Only the ships are close enough to get them here fast enough.”

“Excellent point. We shall trap them here, by attacking their fleet and removing their path of retreat. Now then, before we return let us cause some harm.”

She formed them again into a tight group, then concealed their approach. They stormed through several camps on the northeastern corner of the alliance position. They overwhelmed three camp sections in minutes, then were gone. She led them east through the woods to a waypoint under their control, then escaped back to a location inside the Bastion walls.

The raid caused a stir in the alliance. Forces prepared for battle, not knowing if they would face greys or another onslaught of Shades.

Once back inside the Bastion Sirinha took charge.

“First Shadow, summon a fleet commander. We must move immediately on our new intelligence. Maker, a ground commander.”

She turned to Torvo.

“Can you inform Liana? If she would speak on the matter kindly ask her to come alone, or with you. I do not seek Stevias’ council on matters of the field, just as I do not advise him on the coils.”

Torvo nodded once, then turned and walked away. One corner of his mouth arched up in a barely detectable smile.

“They are testing us. This brief calm will soon be over. We must make ready for renewed assaults,” a ground commander said. “We must take the fight to them.”

Pennirell listened, staring north at the Citadel town. Hav walked over and put a hand on his shoulder.

“This is sooner than I had hoped. Our countermeasures for the creatures are reactionary at best.”

“Faster reactions,” Hav added, then glanced at the recent arrival of a half dozen horses.

“It will have to suffice. If Kelia returns with new tactics inform us at once.”

Two thousand troops began a cautious move north. They spread wide, spanning miles from the sea in the west into the forests of the east. They met the advancing greys at the southern end of Citadel town.

Fierce fighting broke out all through the town. Close quarters combat filled every street. Pennirell, Hav and Dierdre rode on horseback a mile behind the lines, nervously awaiting word of any new creature arrivals.

A second force of two thousand left the alliance camps, heading east into the woods. They moved en masse north through the forest, then formed a wedge once in the clear. They moved directly for the breached corner of the Bastion. They fought for every

yard gained. Little by little they inched forward, and within a few hours had gained entry, and began fighting within the Bastion's stone halls.

"They are in!" Hav shouted while peering through a glass.

Pennirell still wore a pained expression.

"Do not be so glum. This is our first entry into their stronghold."

"We delay too long here. While the threat of the creatures remains, we must guard the troops. The Keep remains free to keep firing." He shook his head. "If we are victorious here, it will simply become the next target."

"Is it time for that level of risk?" Dierdre asked. "We would be gambling a lot of lives by leaving now."

The very thought shocked Hav. Pennirell read his expression.

"Haversham, if they fire the coils on us over there," he indicated the Citadel town, "just as many would die as from the creatures. If they believe they have lost the upper hand do not doubt they would fire upon their own."

"Their level of depravity presents impossible trade-offs."

"They face the same choices at the iron market, sir." A mounted courier spoke from behind.

The fighting raged on throughout the day, with both sides suffering heavy losses. The fleet engagement was similar, with the greys having launched a major offensive earlier in the day. Just after nightfall a mounted courier arrived from the main cap, and rode alongside their group.

"Sirs, Kelia has returned, with instructions. She requested to meet at once."

“They have established a foothold in the southeastern quadrant of the Bastion. Inner defenses are holding. None are close to the central hold. The hall of eight walls is secure. Infantry from the southernmost lines report mounted cavalry movement.”

“What? Did they steal from our stables?” Sirinha asked, incredulous.

“No sir, all steeds have been accounted for.”

“Yet you say none have landed from ships, nor come via road. How do you explain this?”

“I do not proffer explanations, sir, just observations.” He shifted his weight uneasily, but held firm his gaze into the council gallery.

“You are failing, Sirinha,” Stevias chided.

“Shut up. You know nothing of fieldcraft. Or do you care to accompany me into harm’s way to verify these claims?” She challenged.

“Do not waste my time. I will send more Shades.”

“Into mixed combat? They will devour our own as well,” third chair Dariusz questioned.

“What do I care? They will resolve it.”

“I have family in those regiments!” Dariusz slammed his fist on the table. “You will not feed them to those beasts!”

Stevias flicked his hand dismissively.

“Shadow I will accompany you back,” Sirinha declared. “Liana, may I request Torvo join my team again?”

Liana glanced at Torvo. He was already standing and moving towards the door. Sirinha leapt over the gallery front wall and landed cat-like on the floor. The three of them stepped through the doorway back to the Bastion.

The scene that greeted them in the hall of eight walls was far removed from the chaos of their last visit. Calm resolution and clear orders sounded through the halls now. This is a threat they have been trained for. Sirinha strode through the ranks to the lead commanders and selected a team of elite fighters and Makers. She led them to the innermost courtyard to the waypoint. They drew weapons, then departed.

They arrived some distance south of the alliance encampment. Sirinha surveyed the area and found no sign of enemy presence.

“They remain unaware of this waypoint. We may return this way.” They moved north through brush along the western side of the road. Several times along the route she had them inspect the road surface for any signs of recent passage, especially horse tracks. They found none. As they neared the southern end of the alliance position she directed them to the water’s edge. They observed movements while concealed among the dunes. No ship landings occurred. They crept closer.

At five hundred yards Sirinha detected earthen spell work. She brought them to a halt. Horses were plainly visible through the glass. None had played a part in the first engagement, yet here they are. She sat down behind a dune.

“Ideas? How are they resupplying? How did horses get past us?”

“Land ships at night,” the lead Shadow offered.

“There may be a waypoint inside their perimeter. A supply line of rations may be formed that way.”

She considered this.

“Any chance they stole horses from surrounding farm lands?”

“Doubtful,” another Shadow spoke. “My family trains war horses. It takes months to make ready a plow horse. They are spooked easily and bolt at any sign of trouble.”

“There are also no tracks crossing our perimeter on the roads east of their camp. There are few paths through the marsh, and all are watched, both by trackers and hounds.”

She glanced at Torvo for input.

He looked at her, then at the beach.

“It feels wrong. There has been no moon the past two nights. Landing horse boats in total darkness becomes problematic. Perhaps they have a way to fit a horse through a waypoint.”

“If one lay upon the ground with legs folded?” a Shadow asked.

“We could only get foals through,” the other Shadow replied. “After six months it just stops working, I think they become too large.”

“We must attack them here,” Sirinha concluded. “Remove whatever means of resupply they employ, whether by ship or unknown waypoint tactics. We return at once to detach a full regiment.”

Torvo smiled.

A commander greeted them upon return to the Bastion.

“The council requests an immediate report,” she said to Sirinha.

Sirinha shook her head, then looked at Torvo.

“Let’s make this quick.”

Upon arrival to the council chamber she chose to remain on the floor rather than take her chair. She quickly briefed them, not bothering to hide her impatience.

“We must move now,” she urged.

Arina and Dariusz nodded agreement.

“Pointless. You execute one puny action after the next, going nowhere. Your method will drag on for years. I will take decisive action,” Stevias said, his tone condescending.

“Is that all you know? Kill everything in sight, be they friend or foe?” Dariusz barked back.

“They cease to be friends if they block our path.”

Sirinha decided to openly defy him.

“I will not agree to sentence loyal troops to death like this.” She stared him in the eyes. “Further, if shades begin devouring our own who will you have supply your rations here in this distant Keep? Do you plan to grow your own food?”

“We are done here,” Arina spoke with a tone of finality. “Three council members do not authorize your actions, Stevias.”

He stood and stormed out of the council gallery, his face red with rage.

“Show some results by tomorrow,” Liana added quietly. The calmness of her voice was in stark contrast to the white hot intensity of her gaze. Sirinha understood the stakes – there are no second chances.

Sirinha returned directly to the Bastion with Torvo. During the council briefing the commanders had already assembled the personnel. Once again she led to the waypoint, this time with a regiment filing down the stairs behind her. They began transiting in groups of four. Twenty minutes later they reassembled at the waypoint south of the alliance, then moved out.

At the southern end of of the alliance camps they fanned out and approached in stealth. When they reached the earthen spell work she had all the Makers join in disarming it, their combined energy was more than enough to disappate its power silently. Alliance sentries noticed its departure but sensed no disturbance. One of them left his post to fetch practitioners to recharge it, thinking the nearby ocean was the culprit for its drain.

The attack caught the alliance off-guard. Their commanders were focused on the looming threat of the shades and back to back offensives, which kept their focus trained to the north. Sirinha’s regiment surged forward, pushing the alliance ranks back almost a half mile in a handful of minutes.

A cry arose from ahead that gave her pause. There are far more troops here than they estimated. She will not be able to hold her gains for long. As the alliance ranks mobilized she readied a courier to call fo reinforcements. Then a second cry arose. She

heard panic, then waves of shouted instructions. A dark, rumbling energy made its presence known. She turned to Torvo.

“Did you feel them?” She hissed. “Stevias did it anyway. At least I will not die cowering in fear.” She charged over the dunes, the rest of her group right behind her.

She saw the first shade a quarter mile to the north, racing south through the ranks. The alliance troops became curiously still. The shade passed row after row of them. Suddenly an archer loosed an arrow into it, with a shaft of red. The beast crashed onto the ground and slid forward thirty feet before stopping. Its massive bulk was already sinking inwards, and soon was a flat husk of itself.

Sirinha kept charging, her position having been compromised by now anyway. Two more shades shot through parallel ranks of tents to the west, then turned on her regiment. They stood no chance. The untethered shades devoured Shadows and Makers like scythes through a field. Sirinha’s group overwhelmed the nearest alliance troops, then she called a halt. She pointed to the bodies of those they had just slain. All wore plants on their tunics. She grabbed several and attached them to her own outfit. Torvo and the others followed suit.

One of the shades that had been ravaging the other grey sections rounded the corner and came up their row, heading directly for them. She spoke on a hunch.

“Clear your minds.”

She became still, an oak in the woods. Torvo and the Makers did the same. Only two of the Shadows could accomplish it. The others panicked and tried to flee. None made it more than ten feet. The sight of a shade consuming a person sickened her. She

fought to remain calm. The shade looked up, then moved north past their position. The sound of a bowstring signalled its end.

Sirinha motioned to retreat, her party now down to six. None of the rest of the regiment survived. They moved in silence to the waypoint, then she spoke to Torvo.

“He meant to kill you too.”

The big man looked back at her, his gears turning.

The battle for Citadel town ended within hours. The grey forces on the streets suffered horrible losses, lacking any defense against the shades. Stevias had released them unbound to any oath, free to consume whatever they pleased. Over two-thirds of the alliance survived by employing living camouflage. They brought down a dozen shades with Bloodcap-tipped arrows. Kelia and Gwendolyn had prepared eight hundred red-shafted arrows, each fitted with a cap and then distributed to all the ranks. The town fell soon after the last shade.

The surviving grey forces retreated to the Bastion. The halls were crowded with wounded and Makers tending them. Sirinha and her small party pushed through crowds of soldiers awaiting orders. At the hall of eight walls she found a group of commanders in discussions. She saw fear on their faces.

“How did you survive out there, sir? We barely made it here once the shades were loosed.”

“They have means to kill them. I witnessed three brought down by arrow. I know not what spell it carried. We could not collect any, the beasts devoured the rest of our regiment. How holds the southeastern flank?”

“Stable for now. Several bulwark doors choke their access. Our fleet is holding steady as well, though our route to the docks is now blocked.”

“Have you any numbered stones?”

“We are still clearing debris from the chamber, sir.”

“Send word once you reach them. We will clear a path to our port.” She turned to Torvo.

“A word, please, before we return.”

They stepped off to the side. She invoked a strong spell to prevent eavesdropping.

“What are your oaths? I would eliminate Stevias. His recklessness will leave us nothing to rule. How will Liana side? And you?”

“My oath is to Liana. I will say no more.”

“I will not move on her. Make sure she knows this.”

Torvo considered this, then nodded once.

Pennirell, Hav, Dierdre and Kelia departed as soon as Kelia handed off the Bloodcap arrows and instructions for camouflage. The rendezvoused via far pathway with Derrick, Riall and Lapine, then made for the Keep. They were followed closely by two regiments, both equipped to deal with shades.

Dusk approached as they left the rendezvous point, south of the Bastion. They arrived at the Keep in full darkness, night having already fallen at this location over a thousand miles to the east. Derrick hunched inside his cloak against the steady rain blowing down from the north. Hav put a hand on his shoulder.

“This is hunting weather. Our scent blows behind us, and none will hear us above the rain.” He smiled.

They moved north, following the same stream bed as before. A trickle flowed through its channel now. Pennirell stopped, then pointed it out to Riall. Shortly after they came to a stop at the location where they hid from the large raptor on their prior visit. Pennirell gathered them close.

“We may use the water to our advantage. It can confuse the ground spells that line the approach to the Keep. Derrick, take that upper section of stream,” Pennirell pointed to the northeast, “and create a channel through its bank towards the Keep.”

Derrick invoked Clay, then redirected the stream northwest. He dammed the current path, ensuring all of its water followed the new route. Derrick led, continuing to guide the stream around rocks and other obstacles. The group followed, walking in the water, their pace dictated by the speed of the water. This part of the steppe is not steeply inclined, traversing the last two miles took an hour.

Derrick stopped at two hundred yards, where the strongest spellwork began. Pennirell and Riall came forward. Once enough water had flowed atop the spell they began an incantation. The pooling water rippled, then spread laterally, shimmering as it moved. They both put their hands into the largest pool, then performed a counter spell

to diasarm the ground alarm. They mixed their spell with the rain water, masking their presence.

Inside the Keep the Makers on duty noticed the dropping strength of the perimeter spell.

“Bloody weather,” one said.

“Or bad drainage. Who dug the clearing channels? We should have them fix this. I’m not going out in that.”

“Nobody ever comes near this place anyway. Not once in two years. It can wait until tomorrow in the light. Make a note, to cover it for now.”

Ten of the quietest troops carried ladder sections to the base of the Keep. The ladder tops were wrapped in leather to prevent them making noise upon contact with the stone walls. Once a section was in place the another would climb and attach the next. After four sections they reached the parapet atop the thirty foot wall.

Riall went first. He moved silently to the last rungs, then crouched below the edge to peer over. He then placed his hands on the top and vaulted over. Some flashes of light were visible to those on the ground, but no sound. Seconds later he leaned over and waved them up.

Sirinha stood in the hall of eight walls, concentrating on the complex spell needed to open a doorway to the Keep. When she was ready she glanced at Torvo, then opened it. They stepped through with weapons drawn.

The air that greeted them crackled and popped with energy. The main floor was a battle zone, littered with half a dozen bodies. Stevias stood directly in front of Sirinha, facing away. He was locked in combat with Arina and Dariusz. Without hesitation she thrust her sword into his back.

He felt it coming with a fraction of a second to spare and turned slightly, rendering the wound non-fatal. He cast fire in her direction without looking, but she had already rolled to the side. She looked up at the council gallery. Liana sat impassively by.

“I have no quarrel with you,” Sirinha shouted to her.

“Nor I you. He must clean up his own mess this time. Torvo.” She motioned for him to join her. She stood and walked out of the gallery. “Whoever wins can find me in my chambers,” she called back without a second glance.

Sirinha joined Arina and Dariusz in fighting Stevias. She blurred the air in front of him and threw a leather pouch to her left, then moved right. A blast incinerated the pouch. She swung her blade in a low arc, with no intent to kill, rendering the energy of her attack nearly undetectable. The blade struck home above his right heel, severing his achilles tendon. He responded by hitting her with a wall of energy that sent her flying backwards into a stone wall. Arina siezed the opening and lanced him with a bolt of white hot energy. He could only partially raise a shield against it, and rocked back as

part of its force hit home, burning his neck and igniting his clothing. Sirinha smelled burning hair.

A loud clap issued forth from his location and he was gone. She saw a blur of motion in the gallery. Arina was already in pursuit, with Dariusz on her heels. Sirinha was about to join when her intuition stopped her. She looked down and saw a small pool of blood. Stevias' blood.

Dierdre joined Riall on the roof, followed by Hav, Kelia and Pennirell. She saw a guard lying unconscious by a door that led downward. Derrick waited below for their signal. Riall tested the door and found it unlocked. He nodded to Pennirell, who sent the signal.

As they entered from above, Derrick invoked Clay to create openings in the Keep on every level, enabling ground troops to flood in. In under a minute thirty of their force were inside.

[55]

Tensions grew at the iron market, the situation threatening to boil over at any moment. The alliance had stationed horses and practitioners along the wall at small intervals to mitigate the damage from coil strikes, but everyone knew it was only a stopgap measure.

The greys did not leave them guessing the next move for long. Cued by an unseen signal thirty teams of two rolled out the large beacon stones towards the cut in front of the wall. A Shadow rolled each stone, accompanied by a Maker tasked with shielding from arrows. Nearly every stone reached its destination.

For five minutes Mira moved as Clay, pulling the stones deep underground. She dared not go longer, since they had no way of knowing which would go off first. Her work succeeded in clearing the smaller cut east of the road. The road itself was too rough to negotiate on foot with a three hundred pound stone, so that section of wall was also clear. All defenses now focused on the western side, running nearly two miles from the road down to the river.

Mira returned to find everyone tightening weapons belts and double checking everything. She did the same, then joined Rachael and Jurnigan on the wall. By luck the first blast struck a stone on the eastern side, now one hundred yards underground. The earth domed up a few yards from the force of the strike, then settled. The second strike was more costly.

Halfway down the wall towards the river the air began to crackle. Practitioners ran to the stone being targeted, then stood in an arc behind the wall at a distance of ninety five yards. A dozen joined to create a semicircular shield spell. As the buzzing grew louder, they planted their feet, held fast to the shield and closed their eyes.

The bolt arrived, still terrifying even when you know it is coming. The explosion blew a crater into the soft earth of the trench, and swept with devastating power for a hundred yards in every direction. Much of the sandy soil turned to glass from the heat of the blast. A wave of earth swept outwards like a giant ripple in a pond, with the former beacon stone at its center. By the time it reached the practitioners most of the coil strike energy had dissipated, but the ejected material retained its momentum. It slammed into the shield spell and knocked almost everyone over, but not before the material fell. A new arc-shaped section of wall formed where the shield was, half in height of the previous wall and connected on either end to the original wall.

The greys launched their attack immediately after the blast, led by Shadows on horseback. They charged out of the woods and raced across the devastated land. A few yards past the original wall's location the horses started rearing up, then limping. Glassy shards and sharp rocks littered the area in front of the new debris wall. Though

the newly formed arc of wall was only six to eight feet high, a horse would need to be running full speed to leap it. The riders realized they were now in the way, then cleared out to make way for the foot soldiers.

The ground troops observed the plight of the horses and adapted. They moved deliberately rather than attempting a full run through the shards, leading with a wall of hand-held shields. Makers threw blasts of energy outwards to clear paths, enabling steady progress. Arrows filled the air, but the greys pressed forward with sheer numbers, eventually reaching the debris wall. The sound of bowstrings was rapidly replaced by the sharper sound of steel on steel, as hundreds of swords met.

The coils struck three more times down the two mile wall, on each occasion practitioners curtailed the flight of blasted material into a new debris wall. This tactic succeeded in thwarting cavalry incursions, and evened the odds, but could not stop the rising tide of their numbers from making it to the wall. Alliance troops rallied to meet them at every turn. Soon the entire length of the wall was engulfed in the fighting.

The greys kept adapting tactics. As soon as a mass of alliance troops would rush to bolster a section of wall, they would catapult a beacon stone into their corpus. The horses with sleds succeeded in localizing the damage far behind the lines with minimal casualties, but the effort was taking a toll.

Mira winced each time she felt the massive energy impact. She worked in the medical tents healing the wounded, glad to avoid the front lines during full-scale conflict. She knew Rachael and Jurnigan were out there, but tried not to think about that. To avoid getting lost in worry she threw herself into helping heal others. She had

learned a little from Dierdre about drawing larger amounts of energy, and put that to use here. Hours passed in a blur, by the time she looked up the sun was rising. She realized it had been a while since she felt the deep thump of a strike. She walked over to the command tent and found Hadley strategizing with the ground commanders and practitioners. He saw her approach, still wearing a bloody apron.

“Taking a break from the healing business for a moment?”

“Yeah. I have to eat something or I might collapse. Is it me or did the coils go quiet?”

“That’s right. We do not have word but we think they are targeting other fronts for the time being. We have taken all the catapulted stones and put them in a single pile, so that the next volley takes out the lot.”

“That’s odd. Why would they throw a stone over if they knew it was not going to be hit right away?”

“Urgent news from another site, perhaps. Maybe our friends at the Citadel are causing some proper havoc.”

Mira bit her lip. Mention of the Citadel made her think of Derrick. She looked vaguely east with a worried expression. Hadley saw her face and softened his tone.

“The greys have eased off the push, with the stones going silent, so that is some good news. Might be a good time to get some rest.”

Finn rushed in, out of breath from a long sprint.

“Come quick! It’s Rachael.”

She ran off behind him back towards the medical tents. Her vision narrowed to just the ground in front of her as she ran, her mind blocked everything else in her overwhelmed state. When they reached the tent her heart sank. Rachael lay on her back with an arrow coming out of her chest.

“Get one of the Aiann to help me.”

She scrubbed her hands and knives, then approached the table.

The sea battle had taken a nasty turn. The greys co-opted a tactic from the alliance. They began putting beacon stones into empty skiffs and fixing the sails to direct them into groups of alliance ships. They struck successfully several times in this manner. The only counter-measure that proved effective was to intercept them soon enough to throw the stone overboard, before they came within range.

The Corvus survived a couple close calls during which they were doused by falling sea water, flotsam and the odd fish. Presently they were experimenting with a new tactic, working in concert with the Pemberton.

“Mr. Briggs, pull taut,” Captain Rowe spoke while peering through his glass.

“Five degrees to starboard,” Mr. Briggs said to the navigator.

A rope line began to react, one end tied to their mast, looped around a capstan and disappearing over the port rail. Four hundred yards away the Pembroke shifted slightly to port, its mast holding the other end. They sailed in unison, sweeping the rope along the surface between them. The center of the rope held a dozen grappling hooks

spread over twenty yards. They approached a stone-laden skiff that was moving in the opposite direction, heading for the alliance fleet.

Deft hands on the capstans adjusted the tension, ensuring the rope met the bow of the inbound skiff. The rope connected, then began to slide down the bow towards the skiff's waterline. One of the hooks caught, snapping the rope taut. Crews on both sides held locked the capstans in place and ducked out of the way, unsure how the rope might respond. The two fleet ships outweighed the skiff by a large margin, their forward progress brought the smaller ship to an abrupt halt. The idea was that the grapple would catch the bow and the rope would lift the skiff upwards as they passed, overturning it. Instead they watched as the grapple pulled the bow down to the water and dragged the skiff backwards, the stone still safely aboard.

Mr. Briggs signalled the Pemberton.

"Curious flags. He either wants to play tug of war or build a teeter-totter," Hicks said with a furrowed brow. The capstan operator understood. He had the crew begin alternating pulls and releases, watching the rope to cue their timing. Soon the skiff rocked side to side, causing the stone to slam into the rails on each side. They kept going until the skiff canted hard enough to spill the stone overboard.

"Not quite to plan, but it worked," Mr. Briggs noted, then pulled on his jacket, expecting a dousing from the soon-to-be-hit stone.

"We shall have to work on that one," the captain replied. "Set course for retreat, we are overdue to recharge our reserviors."

A few minutes later they were sailing south, away from the front lines. Mr. Briggs signalled the rest of the fleet to avoid that area.

“Where’s the hit? They have had plenty of time by now,” he wondered aloud.

“Probably going after other targets,” Captain Rowe speculated. “Or perhaps they saw us, and will leave that one lying in wait until we wander atop it by mistake. Either way, this is a good time to regroup.”

Stevias took refuge in the coil room. He drew enough healing energy to stop the bleeding from his ankle and bandaged it, using fabric from the dead operator on the floor. He did not know the operator’s allegiances so he killed him on sight upon entering.

The coil room occupied most of the Keep’s basement level. The coils sat in the center of the room, raw elemental energy trapped in a binding anchored to the earth by tons of solid stone. A shielding wall stood between them and the entry door, made of stone bricks stacked in a pattern that leaves every hundredth stone out, thus tempering the light that could pass. It was through this wall that Sirinha gained her first glimpse of the coils earlier. On the other side of the coils a massive iron cylinder ran to the far wall, facing west. The cylinder was ten feet in diameter, a solid metal conduit capable of handling the discharge energy without melting. A rack of cantaloupe-sized stones ran along the northern wall, each numbered and paired to one of the larger beacon stones used in the field. Makers imprinted unique energy signatures on each pair, enabling them to hit each large beacon stone individually. When a stone’s number is called the

operator loads the smaller stone into a fixture on the pedestal placed between the coils and the exit cylinder. During discharge the smaller stone attenuates the energy, matching it to the target stone in the field. Once loosed, the bolt seeks to complete the circuit, travelling anywhere in the world to do so.

Stevias was the mastermind of the entire apparatus that he now used as a hiding place. The door to this room was the strongest they had ever built, giving him some time to regroup and plan his next move. Presently he paced, limping, while clenching and unclenching his fists, so angry that he could not think. He forced himself to take slow breaths. Several minutes later he felt his mind begin to clear, when he was interrupted by a noise at the door. He laughed. Incompetent lackeys. I will soon be rid of the lot.

Sirinha stood outside the door with Dariusz and Arina.

“Coward,” Arina spat the word out. “He knows he is safe in there, for a time.”

“If he has free reign to release more shades we are finished,” Dariusz worried.

“Then we must hurt him now.” Sirinha held up the pouch containing his blood.

Riall and Pennirell led the attack as they descended from the roof to the top story of the Keep. The senior Makers and Shadows stationed there were caught off-guard but reacted quickly, blocking their path. Riall blasted them with enough power to vibrate the walls, killing the bulk of them. One Maker that survived escaped into a side room and sounded the alarm.

Simultaneously alliance troops stormed in from the open doorways that Derrick had created on all three levels above ground. They secured the ground floor quickly, but met fierce resistance on the middle floor.

Pennirell felt a deep thump, followed by a rumble as he descended from the top level. Alliance troops lay scattered, covering the floor. At the other end of the hallway Torvo stood, a large war hammer in his hand.

He raised it in preparation for another blow. Riall froze his arm in place, but Torvo countered him. Kelia joined in, fully immobilizing him. A door opened on the right side of the hallway. Liana sauntered out, a look of mild annoyance on her face. She invoked a spell in another language, her voice clear and loud like a singer hitting a note. The spells holding Torvo wavered momentarily. He swung his hammer at the wall behind him, breaking open a large hole. A clap of thunder filled the hallway, then they were gone.

The group continued descending to the ground floor, where they met Derrick. Pennirell was about to speak when howling shrieks erupted from the basement. Hav stepped forward to stand by Riall, then tilted his head to the stairwell. They moved cautiously down.

Arina, Dariusz and Sirinha joined forces to invoke a blood spell on Stevias. Cries of pain came from the coil room. No matter how power a practitioner has, if you have their blood you can hurt them. Their goal was to cause enough pain that he would be unable to summon shades, giving them time to force entry.

Stevias saved them the trouble. He drew power from the coils and blew the iron door outwards killing Dariusz instantly. A blast of white energy followed, partially melting the door. Sirinha dove across to Arina's side of the doorway and began the blood spell once more, trying to incapacitate him.

"We must get closer," Arina said.

They raced inside, shield spells raised.

Riall and Hav led the group down the stairs. Hav peered around the last corner, then gave them the all clear. They ran to the iron door atop Dariusz, then paused. Riall looked at Pennirell, who shook his head. This was not our doing. A barrage of light, heat and sound issued forth from the coil room.

Kelia, Riall, Dierdre and Derrick joined to create a massive shield spell. They entered the coil room followed by Hav and Pennirell. They saw Sirinha and another Maker engaged in a titanic struggle with a third Maker, whom they assumed must be Steve.

Steve was winning. He drew more and more power from the coils, wearing down his attackers. Soon he had them under enough pressure to invoke a second spell. He opened a gateway and let in a shade. Derrick and Dierdre hit it with such force that it slid backwards into Stevias, interrupting his spell.

Hav set upon the shade before Stevias could react. The Nightshade cut the air twice then the shade lay in pieces. Stevias snarled and sent a wall of energy that knocked everyone down. Dierdre stood up and found herself side-by-side with Sirinha.

“I have some of his blood,” Sirinha whispered. “Delay him long enough for me to use it.”

Dierdre put aside the sheer incongruity of the proposition, then launched an attack on Stevias. She hit him with more power than she had given the shade. Derrick joined her, fueled by the pain he knew Stevias had inflicted upon Mira.

Initially they immobilized him, pressing him against the coil pedestal. Their advantage did not last long. His power rose to meet theirs, enhanced by the coils. Sirinha finally invoked the blood spell once more, causing him to convulse in pain and lower his defenses. An archer from the ground regiments loosed a stone-tipped arrow from the hallway, striking Stevias on the cheekbone with a sickening crack. He faltered, then stood fully, angrier than ever. Dierdre risked a glance at Hav. He lay unconscious against the wall.

“Kelia! We need Hav!”

Kelia broke off her spell work and dashed to Hav’s side. She took a pouch from her belt and waved it under his nose while drawing healing energy. Derrick stepped up his effort to cover the gap. He reached down to the far pathway below the Keep, and gathered more strength. He pressed forward, slamming Stevias to the ground.

“Enough!” Came a muffled cry from where Stevias lay. He went limp, then flicked his wrist. A wave of light filled the room, then another wall of force hit. This did not bowl them over like the previous one, but it did largely disappate their spell energies.

Stevias stood once more, bathed in bright light from the coils.

“Enough. You have caused me enough pain that I shall kill you all slowly.”

He turned up the pressure, drawing once again on the coils. Deirdre felt herself being squeezed from all sides. She looked left and right moving her eyes alone, and saw the same thing happening to the others.

“I will start with yo-” He broke off and put a hand on his temple.

A sharp metallic clang interrupted his threat.

Hav climbed to his feet with great effort, holding the quivering Nightshade in front of him. Stevias directed more energy at him, but Hav kept coming. Sparks flew as the massive spell crashed into the vibrating blade. Hav slowed as he got closer, as though moving through waist-deep mud. When Hav was but two paces away, Stevias reached for a pouch on his belt.

“No ... you ... don’t!” Derrick screamed, his voice barely audible above the roar of energy all around. He drew more power, letting go of himself in the process, until he could no longer tell where his own body ended. He felt as if he extended miles underground. He invoked Clay and closed the distance before Stevias could complete the motion to deploy the contents of the pouch. Derrick skewered Stevias’ hand with a talon of stone, then pressed it into his abdomen. Stevias drew further power from the coils and directed all his energies at Derrick. He pushed so hard he succeeded in moving him six feet back, despite Derrick being rooted so far into the earth. The ground split, opening a deep chasm between them.

Hav moved while Stevias focused on Derrick. He leapt across the chasm just as Stevias levelled his gaze upon him. Stevias’ eyes went wide at the sight of the inbound

blade. He raised a shield spell in a fraction of a second, only to watch the vibrating blade move unhindered through.

The Nightshade swung silently through Stevias' neck, cleanly beheading him. He was still conscious as he fell, and watched his body follow him into the chasm.

A loud bang slammed into Dierdre from her right, followed by thick black smoke. When it cleared Sirinha and Arina were gone.

Kelia and Riall crossed the gap to join Hav. They stepped around the pedestal, careful to avoid looking directly at the coils. The others followed, then got into position. Hav waited for the signal, then struck the hilt on the stone pedestal. He swung laterally in the open air next to the coils. The Nightshade cuts the fabric of reality every time it moves, which snaps shut behind the blade after it passes. The rift it creates does not want to stay open, and it slams shut with such force that it causes the unsettling not-quite-there sound the people perceive.

Derrick and Dierdre combined their power to keep this rift open. Gwendolyn had taught them what to do, based on her earlier forays into this arena. When Hav struck the hilt they listened for its song, then aligned their energy to it. They each rooted to the earth and pulled one side of the rift as the blade cut.

An eight foot tear emerged in the wake of the cut. Otherworldly light poured through. Hav quickly swung down on each end of the coils, severing their moorings. Riall and Kelia summoned their most powerful shield spells opposite the coils, pushing them towards the rift.

The coils barely moved.

Pennirell joined them, pushing with all his power. They moved less than an inch. The coils were just too massive. He felt he was trying to move a literal mountain. Derrick and Dierdre strained at their limits, unsure how much longer they could hold the rift open.

“Move the rift!” Pennirell yelled above the din.

Dierdre shot a worried look at Derrick. He managed a shrug. They crept along, using Leaf and Clay to root their foundations deep into the earth. Derrick took the lead, pulling his side toward the coils. He slid along, and felt the rift began to widen. Dierdre fought to follow at the proper distance – if she moved too fast it would slam shut, too slow and the rift may become large enough for something unwelcome to enter.

Inch by inch the rift moved. An agonizing minute later it sat beneath the coils. Riall, Kelia and Pennirell all slammed their shield spells down upon it like a hammer, to no effect.

“Help us lift,” Derrick croaked out.

The three of them joined in moving the rift upwards. Slowly it engulfed the coils, their fantastic light dimming with each passing second.

“Are we there yet?” Dierdre screamed.

Hav covered his face with his cloak, then jumped as high as he could to peer over the top of the rift, stealing a glance at the coils.

“They are through!”

They released all their spells and the rift slammed shut with a thunderous clap. Derrick and Dierdre fell to the ground, heaving for breath.

“Did we do it?” She asked, looking up from the floor.

“Yes, they are gone.” Kelia smiled at her.

The pinky finger on Dariusz left hand twitched.

Mira worked frantically on Rachael. She used every technique Derrick had taught her over the past few months, but it was not enough. She felt she was nearing the end of her abilities when Jurnigan arrived.

“You called?” He said while stepping inside the tent.

“Get over here! I need you. Help me heal this artery. And wash up first.”

He joined forces with the other practitioner, giving Mira a chance to disengage for a moment.

“Ok, I can do this,” she said as she picked up a small knife as a makeshift scalpel.

She had taken the arrow out successfully, however a section of artery was still sliced open, one side ragged from the rough arrowhead. She took a few breaths to steady herself, then sliced the loose bits off, leaving a clean edge. Next she picked up a clean needle and thread to suture it shut.

“Oh no! The gap is too big to close.”

Fear gripped her. Had she removed too much?

“Give her some of yours,” the Aiann said.

“How?”

“Cut a small piece from yourself. Use it to close the gap.”

“But it won’t take, it won’t match her body.”

“If taken by force, yes. But if given willingly, you may invoke a blood spell, giving it permission to leave you.”

“Can you lead the spell?”

“I will tell you what to say.”

Mira steeled her resolve, then cut a quarter inch sliver of flesh from the side of her abdomen. She placed it over the artery, then looked up. The Aiann led her phrase by phrase through the incantation.

Mira felt the energy rise within her. The power of blood spells always surprised her. At the last step she willed it to join Rachael, while rubbing her fingers together, mixing blood from each of them. The tiny triangle of flesh grafted onto the artery, its edges scarring like tiny welds. She laughed incredulously, unsure if she could trust her eyes.

“Oh my god, it worked! I think. Does that look right to you?”

The Aiann peered in, then nodded once.

She closed the site of the wound, following the exact procedure Derrick had taught her. After the last suture she sank down onto a cot, exhausted. Jurnigan continued to pour energy into Rachael until her breathing became normal. By the time he finished Mira was fast asleep.

Sirinha looked at Arina. They had just arrived in the hall of eight walls and had shut the door firmly behind them.

“How did they get to the Keep so fast?”

“Does it matter now?” Arina replied, looking around. “They have the advantage of numbers now, as well as that dark weapon their swordsman wielded.”

“I want to know how much time we have to decide our next step.” Sirinha thought for a moment. “Let us board ships and take the fleet south. There are many lands there with few occupants.”

“They will follow us.”

“For a while. After enough distance they will lose their desire to risk their lives to engage so distant an enemy.”

Arina considered this, weighing her options.

“I see no glory in dying on this foreign peninsula. Let us be gone.”

The alliance forces gathered outside the Keep, risking a smile here and there, hoping it is really over. Derrick wandered over to Dierdre.

“You feel that?” He asked.

“Yep. It’s him.”

“Hav.” Derrick waved him over. “Time for the next act.”

Hav narrowed his eyes and became serious. He looked at Pennirell. The group went quiet, then walked back towards the Keep. At the door they adopted a casual demeanor, and began making small talk as they walked.

They descended the stairs to the basement. Derrick pointed ahead with a glance. Hav drew the Nightshade quietly as they walked towards the fallen iron door, still atop Dariusz' silent form.

"What did you say you forgot?" Derrick asked Dierdre, standing in the archway leading into the coil room. He pointed at the door.

"I think I lost my earring in there. Don't laugh, it's from my mum, you know."

Stevias listened to their idiotic banter, waiting for them to leave. Earlier he had departed his body just after the Nightshade removed his head, and entered Dariusz. With his remaning power he sent healing energy to mend the damage that the door had done. He was only a few hours away from being able to invoke Clay and escape.

He did not see the Nightshade coming this time. Hav swung through the iron door, cleaving it in two along with Stevias' new body.

Stevias leapt out, intending to take the body of whoever was attacking him in his desperation. Unlike the previous time, he did not have the luxury of choosing a host body in advance. Five practitioners were waiting for him. They trapped his energy in a spherical shield spell. Hav slammed the hilt on the stone floor, then lifted the blade into the sphere.

Stevias' essence lost coherence. Without a host body to ground his energy, he could not withstand the force of the vibrating darkness. He was gone within seconds, finally disappearing in a small shower of sparks.

Dierdre looked at Kelia.

“Did we get all of him?”

She closed her eyes and listened for a few seconds.

“His current form is no more,” Kelia said at last.

“That sounds dangerously vague,” Dierdre replied with concern.

“This is the best outcome we can hope for. Once energy changes form so thoroughly we no longer may guide its course.”

“The consciousness known as Stevias is no more,” Riall stated. “The energy will become part of new things.”

Pennirell nodded, then suggested they move.

“Let us gather what proof we can, then make haste back to the Bastion, to put an end to the rest of the fighting.”

They each picked up a numbered stone, then returned via the far pathways.

“They have ceded the Bastion, and flee in their ships,” a ground commander informed them upon arrival.

“Their armada is still formidable, we should engage with caution,” a fleet commander warned.

Lapine stepped forward.

“I am an authorized representative of the queen. Preserve our remaining ships and return to protect the home Isle, lest another foe choose this moment to strike. If we exhaust ourselves extinguishing the greys we will soon be overrun.”

“Nothing?” Hav challenged. “Let them get away after all this?” He waved a hand north at the battlefield.

“Surveillance. Let us learn where they go, then decide if we would risk further loss of life,” Lapine stated flatly.

Pennirell put a hand on Hav’s shoulder.

“Let us preserve as many families as we can, by returning our people to the home Isle.”

“The coils are no more,” Lapine told the queen in the packed hall at Meadowbrook. The room exploded in cheers. Relief was plain on the queen’s face.

“Thank you all. We owe you a deep debt of gratitude. However, we may not celebrate just yet. We must quell the fighting that persists here on our home soil. The iron market is in particular need of assistance.”

“On our way,” Pennirell replied.

A group of more than two dozen departed. They arrived to a conflict still raging at full scale. Stamford deployed troops carrying flags and horns. They walked to the line and trumpeted over the wall, drawing attention to the flags of parley being flown.

Troops began to slowly disengage and retreat back to their respective sides of the line. Senior Makers and commanders from the grey forces swiftly closed on their position, eager to investigate this new deception. They had strict instructions not to surrender nor negotiate, however their stance was not so clear-cut since they had been

unable to reach high command for several hours now. Cautiously they approached the line.

Hav rolled one of the smaller numbered stones out to the middle of the cut.

“It is over,” Stamford called out.

They held up other numbered stones taken from the coil room.

“Your weapon is no more. Your council has fled the Bastion by sea, leaving you here alone.”

“We do not believe you. These stones are clever fakes.”

“Inspect their energy signatures. You will find no tampering. They are as we found them in the basement of the Keep. Take a day. Send a team back to see for yourselves. The Bastion has fallen. The Keep is now empty, out on the far eastern steppe. We will honor truce here until you return.”

The Makers and commanders talked quietly among themselves.

“I recognize that stone’s signature. It is mine. This is most troubling.”

“Get more proof. If we go back and they are bluffing we will look the fool to the High Council.”

One of the most Senior Makers was aware of the recent coup and the change in High Council members. He stepped forward.

“What are the names of those you faced at the Keep?” He challenged.

Pennirell spoke up.

“We faced and defeated Stevias. We found him engaged in a duel with Sirinha and another woman unknown to us. We joined forces and defeated him next to the

coils, after a great effort. Sirinha and the other woman fled in the confusion following his demise. We encountered one other pair, a very formidable woman with silver hair, and her equally capable guard. They also escaped, through a hole in the very stone of the Keep itself, struck by his massive hammer.

The Maker listened impassively, then returned to the others. A spirited debate followed, all of them talking and gesticulating wildly. They shortly reached consensus. The Maker came forward once more.

“We will cease hostilities while we verify your claims. Rules of parley are in effect.”

The battle for the iron market ended with these words.

Derrick found Mira asleep in a medical tent, asleep beside Rachael. She woke at his entry.

“Is he ... ?” She asked nervously.

Derrick nodded, then hugged her.

Tears of relief streamed down her face. She sat up, then looked at him.

“And you’re sure?”

“Had to kill him three times before it stuck. That guy was seriously bad news.”

Jurnigan walked back in and sat down. Derrick told them about the battle in the coil room, and the second visit to the re-inhabited form of Dariusz. He paused to drink some water, then asked about Rachael.

“Should be up and about any time,” Jurnigan answered. “You should have seen her in action,” he jerked a thumb at Mira. “Pretty nice work with the small knife.”

“And some help from the Aiann.”

She showed the scar on her side, then described the blood melding spell that the Aiann practitioner had shared.

“So are you two connected now?”

“I don’t even know. I guess we’ll find out.”

Mira thought about her wound, then rubbed it and looked at Rachael. She woke up and reached unconsciously to the arrow wound. Jurnigan leaned over and hugged her.

“Welcome back.”

“What did I miss?”

“Hey, can we continue this in the canteen, I haven’t eaten since breakfast,” Jurnigan said as he helped Rachael get to her feet.

They joined the others in one of the long mess tents. Mira walked in side-by-side with Derrick, holding hands. Pennirell smiled when he saw her, filled with a fatherly sense of joy for her.

“Don’t stuff yourselves,” Finn drawled as they sat down. “Dinner at the palace tonight.”

“How do we know they don’t have a second coil setup somewhere?” Jurnigan asked Pennirell discreetly.

“If they did, they would have used it by now to secure a better outcome than this. They could have sacrificed the Keep with us in it, and defended the Bastion. Nevertheless, it would be wise to pay Timena a visit to confirm no traces of their presence remain. We also cannot rule out the possibility that they retain enough knowledge to repeat the accomplishment. We hope it died with Stevias, but we cannot know.”

“Looks like you will get to see some southern latitudes after all,” Captain Rowe said to Mr. Briggs.

The Corvus had volunteered to be one of the covert ships surveiling the fleeing grey fleet. A host of obvious ships would follow then to the equator, then break off the pursuit. They assumed the greys would lead them to many false ports. A smaller contingent of ships would continue to track them in secret, hoping to pinpoint their real destination.

“Aye. It is good to do some proper sailing again. I grew weary of all that near shore activity, always dodging this way and that.”

Hicks followed in the Pemberton. He stood at the bow with Julian and Marion, whom the captain had married the day before. As junior practitioners they were in charge of the newly fitted energy reservoirs, capable of ship-wide cloaking spells like those the Corvus employed.

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Dierdre enjoyed the ride to the palace this time, savoring every second. The carriage stopped in front of the main stairs to much fanfare. She followed the others into a giant ballroom. She looked around, hand over her mouth in a mixture of awe and surprise. She had never seen a party of this magnitude before, not even back home on the news.

Gwendolyn glided over, a picture of royalty.

“How are you doing?” Dierdre asked with a smile. “Still holding up Ok?”

“Yes. With the removal of the coils there seems to be a settling of things in my mind. A resolution of sorts. I am hopeful my many shards will remain in their current arrangement, affording me a measure of peace.”

“I hope so.” Dierdre hugged her, then looked down. “Are those riding boots?”

Gwendolyn beamed.

“Rode here myself. First time in years.”

Derrick and Mira swept by on the nearby parquet floor, gracefully following along in a formal dance with many others.

“I would have never pictured Mira doing that in a million years,” Dierdre observed.

“Would you care to try?” Hav asked her, materializing from behind them.

“Of course she would.” Gwendolyn pushed her towards the floor with Hav.

“May I accompany you on your visit to Timena?” Lapine asked Pennirell. “I would love to see and speak with one so ancient.”

“Be careful what you seek,” he cautioned with a smile. “But of course. We leave at dawn. Hopefully that does not diminish your plans for tonight.”

“Not in the least. Gives me a good reason to not get snookered into any late-night shenanigans.”

“What shall be the fate of the Nightshade?” Kelia asked with keen interest.

“We dare not destroy it yet, in the event they still possess threats from outside this realm,” Pennirell replied.

“Be very careful with that logic. One may justify keeping it forever with such thinking. Be aware that over a long enough period of time there is no such thing as safe keeping.”

“Do you propose an alternative?”

“Offer to let Timena keep it. Those who have approached her with improper motives litter the trails with their bones. She will not lend it out for trifles.”

Pennirell sat back to consider her idea. The thought of giving material items to Timena is generally unwise, however the Nightshade is anything but normal material. The idea felt right. He found himself slowly nodding.

“Haversham must also accompany us, in that case.”

“If you can tear his eyes off Dierdre,” Lapine shot back.

Dawn the next day was a time of many good-byes. They gathered on the lawn outside the queen’s state room, where they had trained so many commanders and troops not so long ago.

“I think I’ll give his Sherborne a try,” Mira replied to Pennirell, while giving Derrick’s hand a squeeze.

“We will miss you both,” Pennirell said with mixed emotions. He hugged Mira. “May our paths cross again.”

“And again.” She wiped a tear from her cheek.

Jurnigan gave her a big bear hug, lifting her off the ground a few inches.

“Me too,” he said.

“How about you, Dierdre?” Derrick asked.

“Straight back to see my family,” she said without hesitation.

Hav deflated a little in the background. Jurnigan walked over and clapped him on the shoulder, then whistled. Shakti and Mr. Woogins came running from around the corner.

“Woogie!” Dierdre ran over to scruff his fur.

“Now that is a proper send off,” Jurnigan said to Hav, with a grin.

“You are right. I suppose it was too much to hope for.”

“Different worlds.”

Pennirell, Hav and Lapine set off on their journey to visit Timena, setting the waves of departures in motion.

Dierdre looked at Mira with apprehension.

“It’s like the far pathways. Reach out, picture your destination, and go.”

“We’ll be right down the road. You already know the house,” Derrick chimed in.

Mira and Derrick joined hands, closed their eyes, and disappeared.

Dierdre took several deep breaths, visualized the country lane, then reached as far as she could.

Dappled light shone through the trees. Summer fragrances filled the air. Dierdre looked around, not yet daring to believe she was home. She saw the familiar fence back up the lane and her heart skipped a beat. She turned back towards her house, then stopped. She looked closely at the old stone wall, the very same one that set the entire chain of events in motion. One stone resonated a little bit differently.

She smiled and started walking home.

The End

[Epilogue]

She walked in the door, tears of joy on her face. The family dog ran up to her, tail wagging.

“Back so soon? You’ve only just left half an hour ago,” her mom called.

She ran into the kitchen and hugged her mom. Her dad looked up from his tea with a curious expression.

“What’s all this then? Lovely to see you, too. That is a nice look on you, if a bit dated,” her mom said with a smile.

Dierdre looked down and realized she still wore her clothes from the Isles.

“I, um, have been on a bit of an odd adventure. You are not going to believe it.”

“Come tell us in here, chairs are nicer for a long sit.” Her dad spoke as he walked into the family room, carrying his tea.

“Here’s a mug, I’ll bring the kettle,” her mom offered.

Dierdre walked in and sat down. Her father was fiddling with an old chest.

“I thought that thing didn’t open.”

He placed it on the table.

“It doesn’t.” He waved a hand and spoke in a low voice. The chest sprang open.

“Unless you know the proper spell.”

He pulled out two small stones.

“My first practice stones.” He smiled.

“We’d love to hear all about it.”

“You are certain this is the right way?” Lapine peered anxiously over the edge of a steep cliff.

“Quite so,” Pennirell replied as he began uncoiling a length of knotted rope. He glanced around the windswept steppe. The unforgiving landscape held a beauty all its own. This was his first time returning to this location without the burden of a looming crisis, affording him the chance to appreciate his surroundings.

“The called would have invoked Clay to walk down the slope,” he went on. “But we shall employ more traditional means.”

“Are the talents of Leaf and Clay confined to the called?” Hav asked.

“No. Many of us possess one or both. However, today the use of Clay is not advisable for two reasons. Firstly, we do not want to signal any intention by its use. Secondly, it is difficult for two people to brace themselves behind a single pair of shoulders on so loose a surface.”

He finished tying off the rope. He gave each of them a small loop of rope to attach to their belts. He then ran the length of rope through the loops.

“I shall descend first. If either of you fall I will invoke Clay on an emergency basis to secure the rope. Your safety loop will prevent you from falling further.”

Pennirell grabbed the loose end and threw it over the cliff, then began backing down the cliff face. While not vertical, it was steep enough that one could see directly to the bottom a thousand feet below. One by one the others followed. A hundred or so feet down a cave appeared on the left. Pennirell stepped in, still holding the rope. Lapine joined next, relieved to be on solid ground again. Hav swung in after her, smiling as his feet hit the floor. Pennirell tied off the rope and they advanced slowly inwards.

Lapine walked slack-jawed, in awe of the sight. Timena’s abode was exquisitely crafted by means known only to her. Lapine gently touched the walls here and there, confirming their realness. The surface varied from a smooth, polished finish, to a gentle scalloped texture, to rough-hewn stone in the space of a few paces. The air was charged with energy she could not recognize, growing stronger as they walked.

“Come no further.”

The voice emanated from everywhere just as they entered a magnificent cavern. Lapine vacillated between awe and fear. The timbre of the voice conveyed immense power, much like the sensation of being near the coils.

“Bring your obscenity no further into my abode. State your purpose, Gardener.”

“We used this tool to remove the coils from this realm. We would know if the job is complete, that no other coils were manifest by those who transgressed.”

“The coils are no more. Why did you bring it here? My patience grows thin.”

Lapine felt pressure from all sides. She drew breath with effort, fighting to remain calm. She wondered why Timena could not see that they were here to help.

“Speak! You who hold your tongue.”

Lapine felt Timena’s intense gaze fall upon her.

“This tool is unfit for human keeping. Yet it saved our realm from annihilation. Knowledge of the coils persists. The threat may return years hence, requiring its use once more. We approach seeking counsel. Would you harbor it for future generations?”

A gust of angry wind whipped the three of them.

“I am no simple keeper of your belongings.”

“It belongs to none.” Lapine spoke with a confidence that surprised her. “It contains no material from this realm, an affront to all it touches. We will destroy it if it cannot be kept safely. We would relinquish it freely.”

Penenirell sensed a titanic conflict swirling within Timena.

“Remove. It. Now.” She spoke as though under duress.

Pennirell felt the undercurrent and understood. He quickly touched each on the shoulder and began backing up slowly. The pressure continued to grow. Wind blew outward with increasing force. Halfway back to the entrance they broke into a run. By the time they reached the mouth of the cave a gale threatened to blow them over the edge. The noise from within rose sharply.

Pennirell ran the rope through their safety loops then grabbed them and leaped. They swung out over the chasm as a wall of sound exploded outward. Ferocious wind

followed seconds later, blowing a dusty jet across the mile-wide chasm. It slammed into the far side, billowing into clouds of sand and debris from the entrance of the cave.

They hit the cliff surface with a thud.

“That could have gone better,” Pennirell said lightly.

“I, what, what did I say, or do?” Lapine stammered.

“You obtained the answer,” he replied and motioned for them to start climbing.

“Is she always like that?” Hav asked at the top.

“The only constant is her unpredictability. Usually we can only guess at the motives of one so ancient.”

“Usually? Is today different?” Lapine asked hopefully.

“Yes. She revealed a glimpse of the conflict we presented her, the impossible position we placed her in.”

“The weapon would destroy her,” Lapine thought aloud.

“In a sense, yes. I came to realize that her power, her very being, is defined by its confines in this realm. Were we to give her a tool to rip asunder any and all barriers, we would unwittingly release forces more destructive than the coils themselves.”

“Are you saying we almost destroyed the entire world back there?” Hav asked, horrified.

“Yes.”

Hav unfastened the Nightshade and its companion dagger from his weapons belt, then lay them on the ground.

“We are done with it.”

Lapine sat speechless for a few moments, then finally spoke.

“Hav is right. We must destroy it. There is no place for it anywhere in this world. Kelia was right.”

Pennirell listened silently, then nodded.

“At least there is no doubt this is the proper course of action.”

He tied the two blades firmly together, then held them out to Hav.

“On my signal, cast them as far as you can into the chasm.”

Pennirell sat cross-legged, and raised one hand into the air. He began a low chant. Hav felt the air around the Nightshade tingle and crackle. He adopted a spear throwing stance.

Pennirell dropped his hand. Hav took two strides then launched the Nightshade into the air. Pennirell completed the spell that unwound the energy bindings that held it together.

“Close your eyes.”

The chasm filled with the sound of thunder.