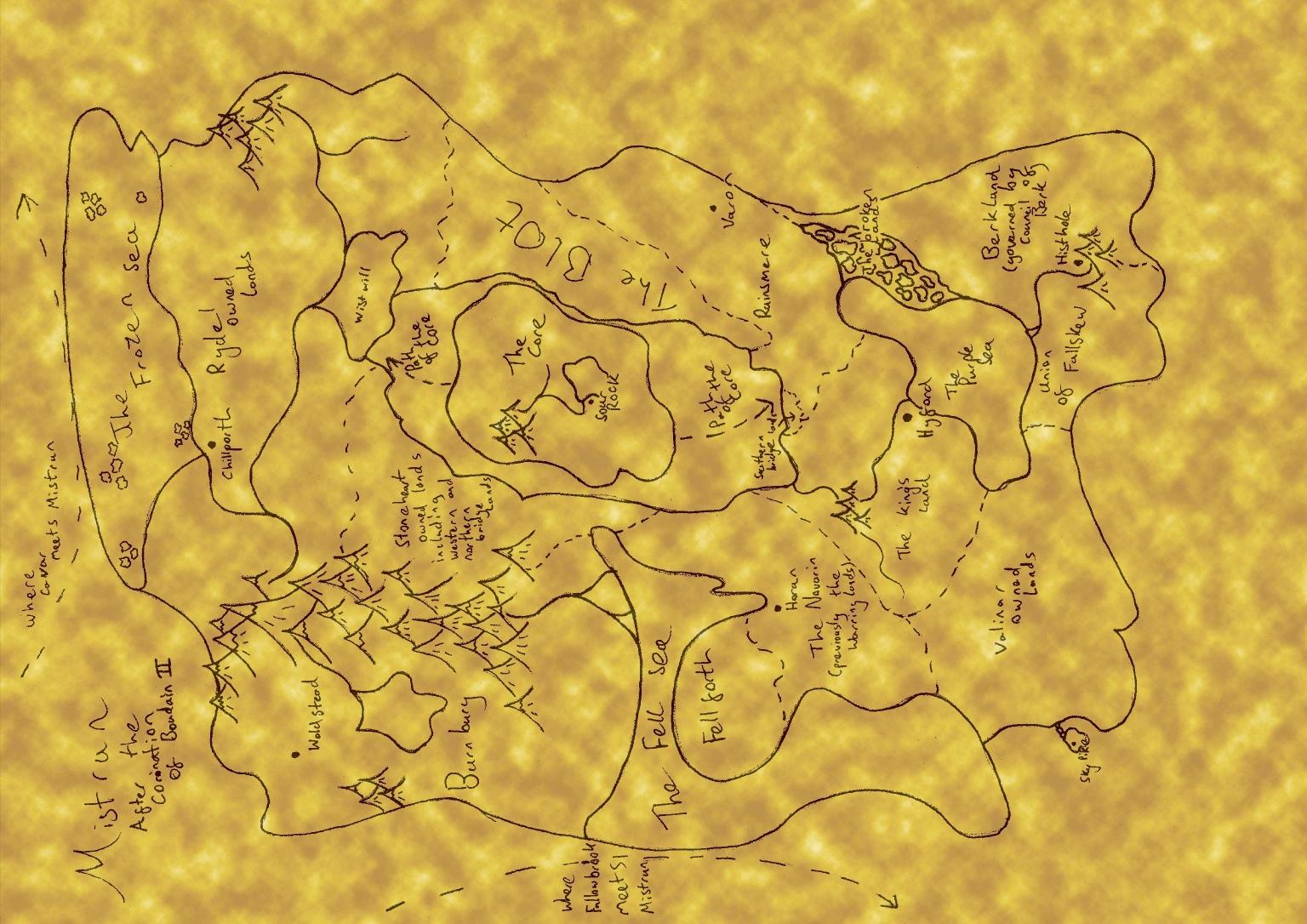
A Curse Upon Mistrun



# Part 1

## 1. Faces of the Dead - Badger

Shock overcame Badger as he ambled toward the shattered gates of Hyford. He walked through a sea of dead bodies which parted only to make a path to the gate. It was as if some unseen force prevented them from flowing on to the path. Lifeless they lay, blood stained their patchwork armour and their blank stares were haunting. This was the fate of a frontline soldier. Weakly equipped and charging a fortified town anyone’s chance of survival would be low. However, charging Hyford, the town that boasted the best defence in the land and the Capital of Mistrun, these soldiers hadn’t stood a chance. The men consisted of the five armies who had sieged the city for weeks, slowly chipping away at the forces inside. They were a union of powerful families from across Mistrun who had fought against the crown. This was the side of the victors.

Badger, his brother and his men could have been inside the walls when the siege had started. Instead, they had been one of the families who had fought to overthrow the king. Would the battle have ended the same way if they had fought with the crown? Would his Banners burn like the Berkmer Banners that had been ripped from the walls? His Family would likely have been killed, and lie as expressionless as the dead before him if he had picked the losing side. Maybe his family’s resources could have tipped the balance of the war. They certainly helped take Hyford. “Lord Stoneheart,” Badger’s page John Rydel interrupted.

“What is it, John?” Badger Snapped.

“Sir, it’s just…”

“Just spit it out”

“The Tribunal requests your presence immediately sir.”

“Well inform the Tribunal I will be there right away,” Badger responded. John Scampered off. Perhaps Badger was too harsh on John, but he was supposed to be learning discipline and had only been Badger’s page since just before the start of the war. John’s paging would strengthen the bond between the Rydel and Stoneheart families. A bond that had lasted for centuries between the two families and didn’t show any sign of wavering.

The last battle of the war had happened only hours ago. Did they have to decide the fate of the entirety of Mistrun so soon? Badger picked up his pace to Hyford after glancing into the eyes of the dead another time.

Entering Hyford the stench of human excrement and urine invaded Badger’s nostrils. Huddles of peasants in ragged clothes lined the streets. The people shivered with only a thin layer of skin over their bones. Food would have been prioritised for soldiers and fighters leaving many with only scraps to eat. There were fewer bodies in the streets, the battle had moved quickly after the gates were broken. Throughout the lower sections of the city, there was little activity. Even on the way through Market Street, Badger saw few signs of life.

When Badger reached the upper section of Hyford he was greeted by his younger brother, Edward, who didn’t seem to be in a hurry to get to the Tribunal either. After a brief conversation, they walked in silence toward the keep and tribunal. The upper sections of the city were busier, but there was a quiet to the people. They seemed to be in a sort of daze. Many seemed to be almost aimless in the way they moved causing them to slowly shuffle along.

At the highest point of Hyford was Cragtop keep the heart of the capital. A soldier met the Stonehearts outside leading them around crumbling brick and catapult stones to the entrance. Inside the keep was mostly untouched save for the tatters of cloth where banners had once hung. When they reached the war room, the soldier opened the doors and then stood to the side allowing Badger and his brother to enter.

Inside the tribunal consisted of most of the heads of each of the five armies that had sieged Hyford. There was no representative for the Rydels who Badger was speaking for. Orson Rydel had entrusted his army to Badger for the war. The lords surrounded a long rectangular table with a large map of Mistrun at the centre. At the head of the table sat Boudain Kordan soon to be king of Mistrun. “Please take a seat my lords, or would you like to go for a stroll around the keep as well?” roared Boudain through his great, bushy, black beard. This was met with mild chuckles from the various lords and generals around the table. Badger and Edward took seats quickly and with no protest. It had always been hard to argue with Boudain in person.

As expected the lords quickly agreed that Boudain should be king. He had been the face of the war, bringing lords from across Mistrun together to remove the Berkmer family from the throne. He had even managed to get Badger to fight with him after their families had been waring for years. After this many petty lands were distributed most of which didn’t affect the Stonehearts or Rydels. To Badger’s surprise a small noble family the Novars had been given a sizable portion of land to the west that was renowned for its warring factions. They had contributed their wealth to the war along with a large band of mercenaries.

When the tribunal reached its end Hawk Novar raised his cup, “Long may Boudain reign.” He exclaimed. Which was met by an echo from the Lords around the room. Not long after that, the room began to empty, and Boudain approached Badger and Edward before they managed to leave. “Badger, Ed I hope this can be the start of a long and prosperous relationship between our families. We barely know what they were squabbling over to start with.” He bellowed followed by a hearty laugh. “This should be the start of a fruitful peace Lord, or should I say, your Majesty,” Ed responded quickly. He had always been quick to hold on to hopes of peace. “A long and fruitful peace.” Boudain roared and moved on to speak to another lord attempting to leave.

Outside they were met by John Rydel who led them to their rooms in the guest quarters of the keep; they would stay in Hyford until after the coronation to show good faith to the new king. “I wouldn’t hold on to hopes for peace with the Kordans, Ed,” stated Badger as they walked toward their quarters for the night. “Boudain may become a good king, but it will take more than one man to remove the roots of conflict that have grown between our families.”

“There will not be one man removing those roots if we work with him, brother. We could finally live without the fear of invasion every summer.” Ed responded. Sometimes Badger forgot that Edward was no longer the little boy he had grown up with. Although he was often naïve to the ways of the world, he could make a powerful point. Badger sighed, “You know that I want that more than anyone, and I will certainly try to work with Boudain. Just be cautious not to let your guard down yet.” Ed seemed to accept this.

When they reached the guest wing the two brothers parted. Badger dismissed John, who had been walking just behind, as he was about to enter his room but he lingered there for a minute. He looked as if he wanted to say something. “Are you okay John?” Badger asked. He received a murmured response, “sir, it’s just my uncle. He would want peace between you and the Kordans.” John’s uncle was Orson Rydel the great lord of the Rydel family. “Thank you for informing me John, but please allow me to get some rest.” John left Badger to an uneasy sleep. Scenes of the battle from the day before and its aftermath playing over and over in his head.

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There was no delay in the coronation of Boudain as only a few days later it was underway. He needed to solidify his rule before cries of usurper began to rise among the people. The whole affair was rather underwhelming as a result. Servants tripped over each other, war banners were repurposed for the occasion and only the noble families that had been involved in the war were present. It was mostly Boudain’s charisma that carried the event, making jokes and jabs at the mess of events that occurred. He was crowned before the throne in Cragtop Keep as a call of, “Long live the king of Mistrun, may he protect the realm and people.” Filled the great hall.

The merriment after the coronation seemed to have had much more thought and effort to its conception. Tables had been brought in to the great hall of the keep. They ran down the two main sides of the long hall. Also, there was a large table for the king and his family on the podium that held the throne. Songs told tales of the recent war, a great feast was held that must have been plucked from the last of the cities supplies, and dances were performed in the centre of the hall.

As the night simmered down and the tales became darker the celebration thinned. The new king became louder, but his ramblings less cohesive. Ava the king’s only child joined the Stoneheart’s table. “And so Badger Stoneheart the decisive sits in the court of the Kordans, how will he fare?” she said in a hushed tone. That was probably an insult to Badgers last minute decision to side with Boudain after remaining mostly neutral for much of the war. “I believe I shall fair just fine in the court of the Kordans as long as they keep their end of our agreement,” Badger said so those close by could hear. The Stonehearts had joined the war as part of a peace agreement with the Kordans. It was called the Blue Gold Peace after the colours of their banners, although the majority of the Kordan banners were a brown colour and had only a gold trim. Badger didn’t want to see a Kordan on the throne, but if he had not helped them removing his family would likely have been Boudain’s first act as king.

Many nearby turned to listen and some muttered amongst themselves about the event. Ava smiled slyly, tipped her head and openly stated, “I am sure the agreement will be honoured lord Stoneheart.” Before retreating from the table. She could be tricky and had in the past got between deals the two families had tried to make. If Badger hadn’t raised his voice she would likely have tried to talk circles around him until she convinced herself the Stonehearts were some great evil.

Ed, who had been sat on the other side of Badger, leaned over admitting, “I may believe in this peace brother, but if anything manages to halt it that thing will surely be her.” Back at the Kings table, Ava kept an eye on the two brothers, Badger nodded toward her signalling to his brother that she was watching, “let us not make her more suspicious Ed.” He glanced to where Badger had nodded and then quickly returned to his normal seating position. Ed was right about Ava being a possible wedge between the two families, although this wasn’t the time to discuss it.

Badger didn’t retire particularly late as they would begin the journey home the next morning. After the war, it would be important to return to his lands quickly as to not neglect them. His mother would keep the land well while he was gone, but without the soldiers there reports of many groups of brigands and thieves had sprouted. It would also be beneficial to leave the kings court soon to leave a good impression with the new king. A simple disagreement could easily sour a newly formed peace.

When Badger was young he and his father were in the Kordan lands of Rainsmere in hopes to start a peace agreement. He had been playing with one of his cousins and had accidentally run into Boudain’s wife. She had ranted at the two boys and not too long after the Kordans disagreed on the peace claiming the southern Stoneheart bridge lands were theirs. He had later found out that Boudain had no interest in the bridge lands as after his wife died he stopped asking for them during peace talks. Before he had any confirmation though Badger had always felt that part of the disagreement had been his fault. If something as simple as that could end the possibility of peace then anything could.

## 2. Holes in the world – Badger

Early the next morning the Stoneheart and Rydel forces left the gates of Hyford. It appeared the army had their own celebrations the night before as the march was slow and the men groggy. Badger and his generals often took care to discipline their men for such behaviour, but after such a battle and the end of the war Badger allowed it. His generals seemed to be in a similar state to the men and likely didn’t blame them for a state close to their own. Badger, Edward, John and the generals rode at the head of the army on their way out of the gates.

Many of the bodies had been cleared from the field outside the gates of Hyford. Many bodies still remained. Kordan soldiers gathered the remnants of the bodies on to wooden carts. The field now stunk of death as swarms of flies swept around it. Off in the distance, Badger caught a huddled figure tearing at a body where the Kordan soldiers weren’t working. The figure had a pale grey skin, was entirely bald and naked. It was much smaller than a human, but its more distinct features were hidden. Badger recognised the figure as a gner; a creature rumoured to eat the bodies of the dead in tales of old.

They were one of the creatures considered as the cursed ones. Thousands of years ago the cursed had risen from the depths, consisting of twisted and deformed human like creatures they spread throughout the land. Some had devious tricks and others swarmed towns and villages but, within a short time, they almost killed every human on Mistrun. At the time people had been divided making easy targets for the unorganised masses of cursed that had roamed the land. A mighty leader rose among the chaos who was called Edward. He taught the people a way to deal with the cursed, drove them back and afterwards was given the name Stoneheart. Edward Stoneheart the Mighty was well loved by the people and quickly became king of Mistrun. Badger’s brother, Ed, had been named after Edward the Mighty as many in the Stoneheart family had in the generations since the Cursed Calamity.

Since the cursed had been driven back by Edward the Mighty they had been believed to lurk in dark places and forsaken lands, but many had come to consider them myth as Badger himself had. From a young age, children across Mistrun were told bedtime tales of the cursed ones, and everyone knew of them, yet few ever reported seeing them. Often people who had mentioned seeing a cursed one were considered mad or delusional. Badger checked again for the gner but saw nothing on his second look. He dismissed the sighting; perhaps he was tired from the recent battle.

The journey back to Stoneheart lands was slow. The path was long and windy and the armies travelled through field, bog and forest. None of these things really bothered Badger, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that any moment they would be ambushed by the Berkmer. He expected men to jump out of the woods or riders to run them down with the dead king Rudolf Berkmer at their head. Rudolf had always been smart and tactical, perhaps he had escaped and only a decoy had died fighting at the door of Cragtop Keep with his last men.

A few days into the journey Ed asked Badger what had been troubling him after recognising how quick to jump Badger was. Badger grunted a reply about how he just needed some time to adjust now that the war was done. After that Ed would joke and talk with Badger more frequently. He was clearly trying to improve Badger’s mood, but Badger couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right. As the days went by, Badger slept worse and found himself patrolling the camp by night. On a few occasions, he thought he saw movement in the shadows, but when he looked closer he found nothing.

As they neared the Stoneheart lands a mist fell over the troop; that showed they were close to the Southern Bridge Lands. The Bridge crossed one of many deep chasms across Mistrun from which cold mist protruded. This chasm was much larger than any other in Mistrun allowing a whole land to float around within it. The land in the centre was called the Core. The Southern Bridge Lands connected the Core to the South of Mistrun in the summer. All of the Core and some surrounding land was owned by the Stoneheart family or minor lords loyal to them. The Core is a large floating land in the centre of Mistrun that moves north in the winter and south in summer, through the huge chasm at the centre of Mistrun, leaving a gaping hole in the land where it is not. This causes its inhabitants to have harsh winters and scorching summers. From what Badger knew Mistrun was like a greater version of the core floating through the mists of the world and occasionally connecting to other lands.

Badger couldn’t imagine a world where Mistrun was connected to the lands it occasionally met, but in some tales of the Cursed Calamity, it had been told that the world had been all one connected land, separated only by oceans. When the Calamity occurred the world had broken shaking the ground. As the world split the mist rose from the chasms, and from the mist emerged the cursed ones. Badger believed this just a tale. The world was how it was, it didn’t need some grand explanation. Yet when Badger tried to dismiss the Cursed Calamity from his mind, he swore he saw a hunched figure in the mist.

Kicking his horse Badger left the marching men and hurried toward where the figure had been. Ed called after him, told the generals to continue and then followed. When Badger reached the spot where the figure had been he found nothing. He swung his head around frantically searching for what he had seen. Something had definitely been there; Badger’s eyes had never lied to him before. Soon Ed was with Badger, “Brother, is it not you who usually comes chasing after me? What is it you have seen?” Ed said in an accepting manner. How could Badger explain what he had seen in the mist or the shadows to Ed? Surely he would be accepting of Badger’s explanation even if he did not believe him. “Perhaps the mist plays tricks on me Ed, but I could swear I saw a man here just now.” Badger found himself explaining.

“It is not just the mists though, is it? You have been quick to startle this whole way brother. What is it that troubles you?” Ed’s voice was calm and cool, this was how Badger had reacted to him when he had run off scared of some unseen creature when they were younger. Badger had been acting erratically. “I think we may have been followed. I saw someone not far from our camp on a few nights, and just now, a man just here. I am not mad Ed.” After telling Ed he was not mad Badger instantly regretted it; that was what a mad man would say. “I do not think you mad. Men have been known to be shaken by war and I have noticed your lack of sleep. You must relax brother. We have won.”

The two returned to the head of their men after that, they spoke of more jovial topics on their way back. No one spoke a word to them of it when they got back, but Badger knew rumours would spread of the great lord who rode off frantically into the mist. He felt a fool and knew it was a mistake to act as he had, even if something had been there. He should have called for a scout to check their flanks or reported the sighting to one of his generals.

Only a day’s ride later they reached the bridge, Void’s Crossing, to the Core. However calling Void’s Crossing a bridge was an understatement, it stretched for miles across the void. When at the centre of the bridge you could see neither the Core nor the South lands due to the mist. The supports at either side consisted of huge wheels allowing the bridge to turn as the Core moved, and the bridge extended along the land as the Core got closer to the South Lands. This allowed the bridge to move with the Core keeping the Core accessible for much of the summer. At the centre of the bridge was a large lock that could be undone preventing the bridge from being torn apart as the Core retreated in the winter. The Stonehearts owned land where the bridge met the south allowing them safe use of Void’s Crossing. Similar bridges were used at other crossings to the Core.

After crossing the bridge the lock was undone, it would soon be autumn and the bridge was close to reaching its full extension. Now people would have to travel for miles around the deep hole where the core had been to get to Stoneheart lands. They would either have to go through the warring lands to the west, which Hawk Novar now owned, or the Blot a land of fire and ash to the east. In Stoneheart lands the journey sped up and Badger found himself more relaxed. Soon he was sleeping easily and he looked over his shoulder less. It seemed as though his brother had been right about Badger’s sightings; hopefully, his eyes would not deceive him so again. It was not fit for a lord to be seeing creatures in the shadows. Badger knew that.

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Within a day’s march, they were out of the mists and far from the edges of the Core. Leaves had begun to fall from the trees here and rains were frequent. Badger felt at home, rain was common in the months between winter and summer on the Core. In the South Lands, rains had come sparingly and when they had the rains had been a powerful force. Here the rain pattered lightly on Badger’s garments, a friendly tapping unlike the fierce blows of southern storms.

A scout returned reporting a clear road to Sour Rock the home of the Stoneheart family and the greatest city in their lands. The land had been named after how useless it had been; although it was close to water, the rocky terrain had left it infertile. Edward the Mighty had taken this as a challenge building his castle and the first capital of Mistrun on the rocks. Many lords of Sour Rock had tried to change the name to something more appealing, but none stuck and so Sour Rock remained the name of the pride of the Stoneheart family.

That night Badger slept better than he had since the war had started. The proximity to home and the lack of sightings of strange figures had allowed him to finally relax. That was until he heard the cries of a dying soldier. He woke at first thinking he had dreamt the scream, but then he heard it again louder. Throwing a fur cloak over his nightshirt Badger rushed outside. The guards had been alerted to the disturbance; Badger joined one who headed toward the cries. “Report soldier,” Badger ordered.

“Sir, we don’t know what is happening. We will be some of the first to reach the sounds.” Badger nodded his thanks as they rushed to the scene. A tent had been ripped to pieces. At the centre of the mess of cloth and blood lay two dead men, barely identifiable, covered in claw marks. Above one crouched a gner ripping bits from one of the men’s chests and eating them raw. As a number of guards gathered around, the gner looked at them bones showing through the thin skin of its hunched body. For a moment it seemed like it would not react, but then it threw its head up screeched a high ear piercing sound and dived at the closest man. Before it reached him another had impaled the gner with a spear through the back, it flopped lifelessly to the ground. Gner had been known to be deadly in packs, so it wasn’t surprising that a lone gner died so easily.

The men looked to Badger who told them to bury the men and find a cart for the creature. At Sour Rock the sage would be able to confirm if the creature was a gner; sages preserved the knowledge of histories and any manner of things in the world. Most noble families had a sage loyal to their banner. As the gner was loaded on to a cart Badger examined it. The pale white skin. The hunched figure. The claws of fingers. This was a nightmare from the bedtime stories of his childhood.

Ed was shortly by Badger’s side, he looked with horror in his face at the gner. After a few moments he said, “This is what you saw, isn’t it?” Badger turned to him.

“I wish I had been seeing things, Ed. A cursed vision is better than a cursed world.” They lingered there for a while without uttering a word, but each knowing the other was thinking about what other monsters could return from their childhood. Perhaps this had been a lone cursed one, but Badger felt it was not. Creatures, no matter how nightmarish, were not born from the land. There would be others.

For the last part of the journey, a dark mood was cast over the men. Rumours spread about the creature that had torn through two men like they had been butter. The men and even the horses were unsettled, they seemed to slow and their merry chants were silenced. Badger’s lack of madness was little consolation after the confrontation with the gner. Maybe the sage would know some way of combating the cursed, maybe even how Edward the Mighty had removed them from Mistrun.

When Sour Rock was in sight the men grew less sombre standing a little straighter. The Stoneheart blue banners with the heart made of stone brick at the centre, one of the more literal noble banners, stood out brightly on the outer walls of Sour Rock. Badger was a Stoneheart, they could take any cursed that came. It was in Badger’s blood and unlike his ancestor he had a united force and fortified towns. The cursed may not be as much of a threat as Badger first considered, but he would need to take precautions in case they did return in force.

## 3. Preparations – Badger

Without knowing about the gner Badger’s men had encountered, the people of Sour Rock were overjoyed. The war had just ended, the Stonehearts had a peace with the Kordans for the first time in years, and many people’s loved ones had just returned. The wave of celebration almost knocked Badger’s worries about the cursed out of him. People lined the streets inside the walls as the soldiers paraded in, they cheered believing their troubles were finally over and that they could relax. There was much to celebrate, but Badger felt their respite would not be as long as they wished. If the cursed came in the same way as they had in the past these people would have to struggle for any one of them to survive.

After getting through the crowds, Badger rushed the corpse of the cursed one to the sage. He didn’t have time to take in his home; he needed answers. How long did they have? Would the cursed come in force? Was this a gner? The cart with the body was soon in the sage’s garden within Sour Rock keep. After a short wait, the sage emerged from his study mumbling about a rare spice he had been busy with. “I’m sorry to disturb you Mayer, but we may have encountered one of the cursed on the road,” Badger told the sage as he began uncovering the gner. “Put that away,” Mayer snapped. “Bring it inside and slow down. Tell me what happened.” Badger soon found himself carrying the body inside and explaining the recent events to the old man.

Although Badger outranked Mayer, the sage was rarely formal with him. He had been there for as long as Badger could remember and was as much a part of Sour Rock as the walls or the keep. It was custom to call those of a higher rank than you sir, or by their title until they put you at ease in Mistrun. Badger had never thought to mention this to the sage.

Once inside, Mayer uncovered the head of the gner and began examining it with various tools while encouraging Badger to continue his explanation. After Badger had finished he kept working while Badger stood by. When the sage had looked at the skin through a small eyeglass he nodded muttering to himself and then turned to Badger. “This is a gner I believe.” He said through his croaky voice, “What this means though is hard to say. From what I know the cursed were not all killed but pushed back into the depths from where they came. This could just be a lone gner or it could be a sign of more to come. I have heard tales of men being possessed or ripped apart by mad beasts that sound very much like cases of lone cursed arising.”

“Are you saying we shouldn’t do anything about this Mayer?”

“I’m saying we should wait. Sometimes it is harder to do nothing than it is to take unnecessary action. If you encountered a single gner there won’t be an army coming. Gner weren’t considered to be particularly intelligent, they don’t scout ahead like men. If many were coming you would likely have encountered their whole force.”

Badger considered this, how could he just sit by while his people and family were threatened? He had the resources and ability to at least try to prepare for the cursed. The sage was usually right, but how could he judge what the cursed ones could do? They had been gone for centuries and he used rumours to back up his claim that they wouldn’t invade as they had during the calamity. They needed to be prepared. Before leaving the sage’s study Badger told him to research how to deal with the cursed. He wouldn’t let his people fall to an event that they had the foresight to avoid.

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A few days later Badger sat in his study planning for the cursed and attempting to resolve issues that had arisen while he had been gone. His mother had done a good job of overseeing the Stoneheart lands while she had been acting great lord; only matters which required a substantial number of soldiers needed to be dealt with. The men that had been fighting in the south could now be repurposed to deal with the various issues. Brigands littered the Core taking advantage of the lack of men here during the war, they shouldn’t be too hard to deal with. It would keep his men fit and ready which would be important to fight the cursed. Badger had also ordered refortification of Sour Rock and other towns as strongholds against the cursed ones and had begun training more soldiers. That was the best he could do until Mayer found out more about the cursed.

A knock at the door interrupted Badger’s planning and he called for the knocker to enter. His mother entered, “Lord Stoneheart, a moment.” She always used Badger’s title although he had often insisted that she didn’t. “Of course mother, what is it?” Badger questioned.

“We’ve just heard that Boudain will be sending an ambassador within the next few weeks.” This would make sense, Boudain might want to keep an eye on them for a while or he may want to improve their relationship. However, it meant that Boudain would need to send his ambassador around the void now that Void’s Crossing was unlocked. “Surely that is not the only reason you are here,” Badger observed. “Wouldn’t you have a messenger tell me otherwise?”

“I think these preparations for the cursed may be a mistake. I understand your concern, but the Kordans may see military preparation as a threat to their position.”

There was certainly a possibility that Boudain may feel threatened with the Stonehearts amassing a military force given the history of the two families, however, if they could show them the gner the Kordans could not question Badger’s motives. Perhaps Badger could encourage Boudain to prepare all of Mistrun for the cursed ones. A united force would certainly be beneficial. “I think they will understand given the gner corpse in our keep mother, although it may be wise to appear to be training fewer soldiers than we are.”

Lady Grey, Badger’s mother, nodded, “Would you like me to see to that?” Badger agreed, his mother would know how to conceal the training while Boudain’s men were in Sour Rock. After that they chatted, it was the first time Badger had managed to properly talk to his mother since he had returned. She seemed to have aged while he had been gone, her voice was not quite as chirpy and her face seemed more worn and tired than it had before. Nevertheless Grey was still quite energetic and afterwards rushed off to attend to something with the other ladies in the keep.

Badger spent much of the rest of the next few days researching cursed. In their library, they had few books on them and many had been written recently to entertain. The sage had some books and notes that had been preserved that were much more specific, but very limited and Mayer wanted to use much of them for his own research. Badger learnt very little about the cursed from this research, however, in many sources, it appeared the cursed ones were made up of many species. It was as if there was a whole animal kingdom, but each animal was replaced by some terrible creature. The different types of creatures didn’t work together and often only protected their own.

John Rydel, Badger’s page, had been helping with the research. At first, Badger had just been asking him to carry books for him, but John had seemed to take an interest so Badger had asked him to help. “Sir, how long will it take to fight the cursed?” John inquired. Badger had no idea when they would come, never mind when the cursed would be gone. “It is impossible to know John. Why do you ask?”

“Sir, my uncle. He had hoped that when the war was done you would be able to aid him in fighting the raiders this cycle.” The Rydels lived in the north most region of Mistrun; Orson Rydel, John’s uncle, was great lord there. Around every five years, Mistrun would connect to another land in the north called Cavar. This was due to the movement of Mistrun and other lands through the mists as the Core moved at the centre of Mistrun. Every time this happened the Rydel lands were raided. The movement of Mistrun was called a cycle and followed a path that took five years to repeat. Orson would be deeply offended if Badger didn’t help defend against the raids. The Stonehearts had the men and resources to help as long as the cursed didn’t come during the raids.

“Unless the cursed ones come in force we will be able to help fight the raiders this winter. If they do come we will have bigger problems than raiders.” Badger assured John. Soon they continued their research but found little else of use. Children’s tales provided little tactical information or solid ways of dealing with the cursed. Hopefully, Mayer would have more luck.

## 4. Visitors – Badger

By the time the Kordan ambassador arrived at Sour Rock preparations had been made to hide the heavy training of new soldiers. Some were trained in local villages or other towns on the Core and the rest trained in the barn of the closest farm to Sour Rock. Badger stood on the wall above the main gates of the outer wall observing the force of the ambassador as it made its way toward them. They had received reports that a significant military escort accompanied the ambassador and that was certainly the case. Enough men to take a small town were with the ambassador.

A force in brown rode to Sour Rock. The occasional member of the force had gold trimmed clothing. Although Kordan banners were brown and gold, gold parts on armour were often reserved for the highest ranking soldiers. As the ambassador got closer to Sour Rock, Badger was beginning to be able to make out the faces of the front of the force. It was then that he realised who the ambassador would be, right at the front of the men Ava rode. Perhaps Badger should have been more careful with his preparations for the cursed; Ava would be looking for anything remotely suspicious even if she was only in Sour Rock diplomatically. Badger began to descend from the wall so he could greet the force. He would need to be very welcoming if he wanted to dissuade Ava from convincing herself that they were doing something wrong.

Ava greeted the Stonehearts at the entrance to Sour Rock keep. They exchanged formalities, Ava thanking them for their hospitality and the Stonehearts welcoming her. She had stayed with Hawk Novar on the way around the void and mentioned how accommodating he had been. It appeared he was now calling the warring lands he had been given the Novarin. Badger didn’t expect he would maintain them for long. They had been hard for anyone to maintain control of so a minor noble who had come to power through inherited wealth likely wouldn’t get far. Yet if he did he could become very powerful.

Fortunately, Ava decided to rest for much of the rest of the day so Badger didn’t have to worry too much. After some consideration he decided that the soldiers training on the farm wouldn’t be an issue; they were a relatively small force and most lords kept a good force trained. Badger did send them a message informing them not to make too many trips between Sour Rock and the farm in hopes that would reduce suspicion. One of the best guest rooms in the keep had already been prepared for Ava so Badger was able to relax more for the rest of the evening.

Badger was awoken early the next morning when one of his guards reported that Ava was seemingly inspecting various parts of the keep. It sounded as if she may have been up for hours, but the guards had only recently become warry of her behaviour. Luckily Badger had little to hide from her in the keep. He decided it would probably be best for him to go and find her quickly. After readying himself in a rush, Badger made way to where the guard had said Ava was.

The king’s daughter was in the backrooms of the kitchens when Badger did find her. “I hope you slept well, Ava. Is everything up to your standards?” Badger said interrupting Ava’s search through the pantry. “You have no need to act Badger, we are alone. I was just ensuring the breakfast your maids brought was not going to poison me.”

“I can confirm there is no poison. We have no reason to act, is this peace not beneficial to all of us?” Injected Badger. It was worrying that Ava was so loose tongued, she clearly didn’t care if the Stonehearts were angered. Maybe she could be diverted with the purpose of her visit. That was if the purpose wasn’t to look for anything remotely suspicious in Sour Rock. “Perhaps we could discuss why you have made such a long journey in this worsening weather over breakfast. I could have the cooks prepare food as you watched if you wish.”

Ava paused for a moment; she would not decline the request, but clearly wasn’t happy with just accepting. “You will be eating the same dish of course.” She stated. It appeared she would not trust anything without proof. “Of course lady Ava.” Badger nodded. He then led her to the kitchen and asked the cook to prepare whatever Ava wished for the breakfast that day. Then, as the food was prepared, Ava watched attentively. What did Ava think Badger would gain from her death?

Soon they were at the main table in the hall of Sour Rock keep discussing tax and other minor issues that still needed to be resolved. The king would want these things resolved quickly, but surely his daughter did not need to come all this way to resolve them. Ava had either requested to come to Sour Rock or Boudain wanted more resolved than taxes.

The discussion went on for a long time and Ava and Badger were left mostly alone in the hall when they had done. After they had finished Ava requested a tour of Sour Rock. She appeared to want to continue the inspection she had begun earlier, at least now Badger would be able to see what exactly she was inspecting.

Sour Rock was considerably smaller than Hyford, the capital of Mistrun, but was still very defensible. The outer walls had never been penetrated in battle and contained much of the main town. The inner wall contained the keep and noble apartments. Outside the wall were many smaller buildings. Sour Rock had seen little combat in recent years so the town had begun to expand outside the wall. There was a stark contrast between the new buildings and the rest of Sour Rock. The buildings outside the wall appeared rough and feeble compared to the main town that had been made centuries before. Edward the Mighty had truly lived up to his name with his construction of Sour Rock.

On the outer wall, Ava questioned the defences. “What do all these ropes and levers do? Are they new?” Many towers in Sour Rock had a series of levers and pull ropes like this. Some were for claw like blades that could be released to fall on would be climbers of the wall, others allowed metal shields to be pushed out of the battlements. These had slits and provided a greater defence for archers. Both were easily reusable but had complicated systems that were difficult to fix. As far as Badger knew these systems had been there as long as the walls had; he explained this to Ava.

After the two had looked around the town and Badger had begun to head back to the keep Ava turned to him. “Wait I would like to see Sweethill farm great lord.” That was the farm Badger had been training his soldiers at. Could Ava have had his messenger followed or was this just coincidence? “Perhaps we should have dinner first Ava, Sweethill is quite a ride.”

“I do love the rolls they make at Sweethill, we could eat there.” Maybe Badger could send a messenger ahead of him; he could say he was informing the Sweethill farmers to have some rolls ready. “Certainly, I will make sure some rolls are ready for us when we arrive.” Badger turned to John Rydel who had accompanied them seeing to their needs for much of the tour. He asked John to inform Sweethill that they would arrive shortly. John would know to get the soldiers away from the farm before their arrival.

A short time later Badger and Ava arrived at the farm with a small escort. The old lady who ran the farm met them outside. “I hope we did not come on too short notice. My messenger likely only just arrived.” Badger greeted the old farmer. “Great Lord we have received no messenger, but we are happy to accommodate your visit.” Where was John? If he wasn’t here then Ava would likely find the men training in the barn. Badger opened his mouth to speak, but Ava began before he could. “Do not worry we will only be visiting your farm for a little while, shall we start with the barn lord.” One of Ava’s men, who was part of their escort, was opening the barn door before Badger could respond. As the door opened men in Stoneheart blue turned with a similar look of shock to Badger’s own.

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When they were back in Sour Rock Ava’s force quickly departed. She had claimed that Badger was despicable and a typical Stoneheart; fortunately she had only seen a small portion of the force Badger was training. It wasn’t particularly unusual to train such a force. In an attempt to convince Ava that there was a reason behind the training, Badger had asked her to wait while he had the body of the gner fetched. She had claimed that Badger lied with wild stories. How could she believe reasoning based upon an ancient legend? Seemingly before Badger could get a man to go to fetch the gner Ava was gone. As she departed she stated that the king would know and Badger and the Stonehearts would suffer for their actions.

Badger had thought dealing with the cursed would be enough, but now it seemed he may have made an enemy of the Kordans as well. That evening he discussed the situation with his brother. “If you show Boudain the gner he cannot refuse your motives, brother,” Ed assured Badger.

“Yet if he refuses to see the body as his daughter did he might consider this treason.” Boudain had always been more reasonable than Ava, yet after the day Badger had just had he felt the king could refuse such evidence. “He is an understanding man Badger. He will at least organise some form of trial, you can show the gner then.” Badger knew his brother was right, Boudain was a good leader. They could have fought with old king Rudolf, but they had instead chosen Boudain. Badger should have more faith in his decision.

A man entered the room interrupting Badger’s line of thought. He reported a body had been found dead just off the road near Sweethill. The body was a young man and was suspected to be John Rydel. Badger rushed to see the body; it was Orson’s nephew. He had let the Rydel Great Lord’s nephew die as his page. There was a large cut on John’s neck, blood stained his front. He lay motionless on a cart not too dissimilar from the one the gner had been on. Badger had been careless. Ava was trickier than he had thought and may have just extended the Mistrun civil war. Even if the Stonehearts took no action against the Kordans the Rydels likely would now.

## 5. Paths and Plans – Ava

Ava had known a peace with the Stonehearts was too good to be true. Since she was a child their families had been at war and the throne had oppressed her family. Now the Kordans mostly just had the Stonehearts to deal with. Ava only wished her father would remove them with more finality; a peace agreement just meant they could come back later. That was what Rudolf had done repeatedly when he was king. Every time the Kordans began to thrive he would kick them back into the sand of Rainsmere, but would never completely remove their family. Excessive taxes and strict military limits had allowed the crown to make the Kordans weak and defenceless, but the Stonehearts were the true evil. They had attacked the Kordans at their weakest killing Ava’s brother when she was just a child.

The Stonehearts deserved a greater punishment than that which her father would give. They were preparing an army and that was a clear threat. Boudain would surely see the issue with their actions, he had too. Only after the Stonehearts had been stopped would the Kordans truly be able to rest. Killing the Rydel boy was only a small price to pay to ensure that, although it would have been better had someone less consequential took his place.

Badger had clearly thought Ava an imbecile sending messengers to his men that he had in hiding. Any minor lord would have had spies enough for one to follow them. She would make sure Badger was the first Stoneheart to die. He had only fought with her father to save himself and now he thought he could get away with turning on them.

Soon Ava’s entourage left the mists. She was glad to be away from the core. The wretched unrelenting drizzle of rain wore her down as did the presence of the Stonehearts. It wouldn’t take long for her to be in the company of the far more hospitable Hawk Novar. He had offered help to stop some remnants of the Berkmer family and was far less likely to poison Ava.

Hawk’s town of residence was Horan which was relatively central to the colourful planes of the Novarin. It was only a small town. Due to the nature of the Novarin’s past most towns had grown much more slowly within it. Hawk would stop the constant war among the savages here, then maybe he could build a more fitting stronghold. Maybe Horan would one day be as Varon, the Kordan home town in Rainsmere, with Hawk in charge.

Travel was easy across the plains of the Novarin and Ava was happy to take in the beautiful scenery. Forests sprouted in bunches around the plains. Within these woods, the trees were accompanied by giant flowers with bright colours of pinks and blues. On the plains were much smaller versions of these flowers barely larger than a blade of grass. There were also similar sized plants with small transparent bubbles as heads which popped as you trod on them.

In contrast to the barren sands of Ava’s childhood, this land was a wonder. She had not known so many colours had existed until her first visit to these lands. Then the beauty had been tainted by war, but perhaps Hawk could make this land as tranquil as it should have been. He certainly had the wealth to do so, but the rumours of some of the warring tribes had surprised even Ava. Their uncivilized nature led them to pray to false gods. Even the Stonehearts didn’t stoop that far with their atheistic traditions.

Rounding a small wood Ava’s entourage met a bloody scene. Horan was under attack by savage tribes. Most of the tribes of the warring lands were formed of a small green skinned race called the ticklon, but some were also human. The savages attacking were all ticklon. Some of their members wore animal skulls as helmets and others had antlers protruding from their shoulders. They fought viscously as if the animals which they wore had possessed them. They were unlike civilised men. Novar’s mercenaries fought in lines repelling the wave of savage attacks with spears and longswords. Their bright yellows and reds stood out on the battlefield, an impenetrable wall which allowed no skulled wave of savages to pass.

Within moments of Ava’s arrival, the tribes began to scatter; their numbers had dropped considerably. One group came in Ava’s direction. Men surrounded her shouting about protecting her. They raised their shields and Ava’s view was obscured. Some shields were bashed, Men fell inward toward Ava. She was left helpless watching as her men protected her. All she saw was the battering on her men’s shields that seemed to come at all angles on the circle of men that surrounded her. In what felt like a lifetime later to Ava, her men lowered their shields and the shouting stopped. Some Kordan men lay dead, but many more of the green skinned tribesmen lay around them.

Ava looked around quickly. Only a small number of the tribesmen had actually attacked and many more had rushed on past them. Ava was certain they could have slaughtered all of her men. She needed more next time she travelled and perhaps they should be better trained. Novar’s mercenaries rushed over and hurried them inside Horan. Hawk stumbled down the wooden wall to greet her.

“We had not expected you for days Lady Princess,” Hawk rasped, “I hope the Savages have not troubled you.” The savages needed to be dealt with. If Ava was going to have an effective relationship with Hawk these raids needed to be stopped. “I am certainly troubled by these men, how will you take Valinar if you can’t keep them off your doorstep? I expect my men treated for their injuries and well bedded.”

“Of course my Lady. That is the least I can do for the daughter of the King. Were the tax and trade agreements with the Stonehearts successful?” Hawk was clearly trying to change the topic away from the recent battle, but talk of the Stonehearts just angered Ava more. “The Stonehearts are traitors to the Crown. They have effectively broken our peace agreement. Now allow me to retreat to my rooms Hawk. We will speak further when I have recovered from this near fatal experience.”

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The next day Ava felt less agitated by the recent attack. She and Hawk discussed the future relationship between the Novars and the crown. Recently the Novars had been very supportive of the crown and had helped especially in the battle against the tyrannical old king Rudolf. Many of the family’s relations had died leading to the Novars inheriting a substantial amount of wealth. This had been enough to propel them into rivalling many great noble families. In helping Hawk’s father and brother had died in battle leaving Hawk as head of the family. Hawk believed the great lord of the Valinar family had left the Novars to an inescapable death during battle. Ava did not know if Hawk’s family had been left to die or if they had been unlucky, but she would use Hawk’s desire for vengeance to her advantage.

Ava had had reports that Arvar the great lord of the Valinars was harbouring Rudolf’s bastard brother Clinart. This could be a potential threat to the throne, but Boudain would not directly challenge Arvar due to his previous military success. If Hawk could bring his lands under control then he would likely be happy to attack Arvar. This could remove any lingering threat of the Berkmer for Ava’s family. “We are making steady progress Lady, the Novarin is under greater control by the day. However, we would be able to make better progress if the crown could provide some support.” Hawk explained. There must have been very slow progress considering the recent attack. Providing direct support to Hawk would implicate the crown when he attacked the Valinars.

“We can provide weapons and coin Hawk, but that is all. My father requires many resources to secure his reign.” If Hawk could not control his lands with that then he had no chance against Arvar. The great lord of Valinar’s strategic genius had allowed him to overcome what appeared impossible many a time in the past. “That shall be more than enough, lady. Thank you.” Hawk accepted.

They had discussed similar possibilities on Ava’s journey to the Core, but she had explained that she would make her decision by the time she returned. Ava’s father would likely not agree with this course of action so Ava would have to send the supplies without her father noticing. He wouldn’t consider Clinart much of a threat and would say that Arvar would not harbour such a claimant to the throne. Boudain had too much faith in the lords of Mistrun if they were traitorous enough to overthrow Rudolf they could just as easily plot against him.

Ava did not stay in Horan long. She allowed her men to be tended to and rested and left shortly after. Hawk suggested she stay longer, but the sooner Ava was back in Hyford the sooner she could bring the downfall of the Stonehearts. Through the rest of the Novarin, Ava’s men did not encounter any other savages. Yet Ava made sure her men remained aware, she would not die to some random attack. When back in the King’s land, the land the king did not give to any great lord that surrounded Hyford, Ava was more comfortable. Soon her father would be forced to put an end to the Stonehearts, then her family would be free.

## 6. Intrigue at Cragtop - Ava

On Ava’s return to the capital, it did not take her long to get an audience with the king. It should have been easier than it was, she was the king’s daughter after all. Boudain had almost delayed her as he was trying to reorganise the guard. Treason was far more important than deciding how many guards would be on the west wall at night. If the king did not see that now, Ava would ensure Boudain would see it by the end of the audience. They were gathered in the great hall with the king sat on the throne and those within the king’s circles gathered at either side of the room. Ava stood at the centre of the room to present her case.

“We have gathered to discuss possible actions against the crown that Princess Ava has discovered on her visit to the Core.” Boudain introduced the situation. There appeared to be some shock amongst a few nobles in the room, but others just nodded. “Ava will present what she has discovered and I will consider how it shall be dealt with.” The king continued. He wouldn’t want the peace to be broken with the Stonehearts even if there was clear evidence against them. Ava needed to make sure the Stoneheart’s training of soldiers appeared to be in opposition to the king.

“Upon arrival to Sour Rock I was greeted coldly,” Ava began, “from this point, I felt the Stonehearts had returned to their old ways of attacking the Kordan family. I was rudely awoken at unholy hours of the night due to my room being situated close to the rowdy stables. Food was only brought on my request in the morning and there appeared to be no plan to feed me otherwise. After we had discussed agreements, which I doubt will hold, I asked to see a farm close by that had cooked good food last time I had visited. I feared I would not be fed again had I not asked to go, however, when I arrived I was met by a large troop of soldiers instead of a good meal. They appeared to be training, likely preparing for war. I believe this could be an act against our family, father.”

The king considered this for a time while the others discussed what they had heard amongst themselves. Ava stood waiting, interrupting the king now would not help. He would believe he had heard all he needed, Ava had given him what she knew, and any extra opinions would only weaken Ava’s case to him. After a few moments, he roared silencing the court. Then he decided, “Badger will come to the capital to report for his actions. I do not yet believe the Stonehearts mean to act against us, even given the past between our families. They have always been close with the Rydels who will likely be raided soon; this could simply be preparation to help fight raiders in the north. He will be sent for right away and will stand before the court when he arrives.”

Ava had done what she could. Boudain had made his decision and there would be no way to change his mind now. There was still a chance for Ava to convince the king to see the Stonehearts differently, but he would not change his decision about bringing Badger before the court. She had hoped Boudain would see the treachery of the Stonehearts without the need for Badger to go before an audience. With this Badger might still worm his way out of being considered a traitor.

The audience soon left the great hall of Cragtop keep and Ava with them. She could dig up some tragedies caused by the Stonehearts in the archives or find a way to convince her father that their involvement in the recent war was only to save their own. Boudain would consider past actions of the Stonehearts a poor reflection of the current family unless they involved Badger, Lady Grey or Edward. It would be hard to find evils caused by Badger and Edward since they were so young. Yet Lady Grey had likely done some devious deeds to weaken the Kordans. Ava had already tried convincing her father that the Stoneheart involvement in the war was not to benefit the Kordans, so Lady Grey was Ava’s best target.

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“I do not care for their past actions, Ava, we have done the same, if not worse, to them. We will have an end to the conflict between our families.” The King explained. He and Ava were in his quarters. After finding information to implicate Lady Grey, Ava had found a time to speak privately with the king. She had dug up accounts of a suspected poisoning of Kordan men by Grey; when seeking shelter for harsh weather they had stopped in Stoneheart lands and were never heard from again. Frustrated Ava began to argue that this act was unforgivable as it was unprovoked. Boudain put the quill down that he had been using to sign various documents that needed his approval. He interrupted Ava, “Those scrolls you dug up contain how we wanted the situation to be perceived. Those men were would be assassins of Morvan Stoneheart. Surely you are understanding enough to see these men did not have peaceful intentions in Stoneheart lands.”

Although Ava had assumed these men hadn’t been in the Core peacefully, she had hoped she would be able to use this information to persuade her father. On her search for incriminating information, Ava had found few acts that hadn’t been openly reciprocated. This disappearance of Kordan men had been the best information she could find against the Stonehearts. Yet if the men had been trying to kill Morvan, the then great lord and Badger’s father, it would not be enough to convince Boudain. He knew the accounts about the Stonehearts inside out and had ordered the events in most of them. There appeared to be no way to convince him to go against the Blue Gold Peace. Perhaps Ava would have to take action herself to stop the Stonehearts.

“I will hear no more of these accusations against the Stonehearts.” Boudain continued, “I have been forced to try Badger given the situation in which you informed me of his training of soldiers. He will stand trial, but that is all.” Ava could not understand how easily her father forgave those who had contributed to their family’s oppression. “This is preposterous, father, an army is raised under your rule and you do nothing. You are weak.”

“That is not what will be seen. A trial will be held and the situation will be considered. Now leave me, daughter.” Boudain silenced his daughter’s outburst, only raising his voice when he asked her to leave. Ava left her father’s chamber and only when she had distanced herself did she allow herself to sob. She would now have to sit and watch while their enemies escaped justice. The Stonehearts should be ended, and yet they would linger. A constant threat to Ava’s family they would wait for a perfect time and strike. Then it would be the Kordans who reached their end.

Ava had previously thought Badger could worm his way out of the fate he should receive, but now she knew he would not even have to try. It was up to her to stop him; the King would not, no matter what he heard in the trial. Ava wiped her eyes and emerged from the alcove in the corridor that she had been hidden in. Nothing would stop Ava from protecting herself, not even her father. If he did not see the benefits of replacing the Stonehearts then Ava could stop them without him.

## 7. Unnatural disturbance - Boudain

It was not easy being king. Boudain had not wanted to become the king; he had known that if he did then he would rest little. To ensure that Mistrun was the kingdom it had always been intended to be, an undivided country, would take all a king could muster. Boudain had pitied Rudolf when he had been king, he had tried his best to bring peace in the kingdom. Unfortunately, in doing so he had alienated a number of noble families including the Kordans. Before Boudain had even been a great lord, his family had rebelled and Rudolf had punished them for this for the rest of his reign out of fear. Other nobles had other reasons to fight, but Boudain felt without any encouragement they would not have fought. Rudolf hadn’t been such a bad man, he had just gained too many enemies as he had grown older.

Boudain was sat upon his throne in the great hall of Cragtop Keep. On the pedestal, the throne was elevated by Boudain felt he was almost as close to the ceiling as the floor. One did not need to be so removed from their subjects; how could you truly understand someone if you could barely make out their face. Various people from all classes of Hyford waited to address the king. They waited to ask for aid from the crown in various tasks or for resolutions to disagreements. It seemed the line did not end. As one person left the great hall another would enter. The current problem had two farmers disagreeing over which pastures were for whose livestock. Someone did not forget what land they owned, and these men were likely trying to use Boudain’s new leadership to their advantage. If one could convince the new king that they had to the right to let their animals graze where it was the others right that would benefit the convincing one.

“Since neither of you can decide who can use which lands, and you both claim to be able to use more each time you speak, you will both have an equal portion of the lands you previously used.” Boudain roared. It was not a hearty roar, but a necessary roar allowing all to hear. Shortly after the farmers left, their argument silenced, and the next man approached. For a moment Boudain could have sworn the man was Rudolf Berkmer. This jolted him from the monotony of his task, but after a few blinks, the man looked nothing like the old king had. Boudain could not let himself daydream like that, he would appear weak if he slept in his chair so early in the day at a middling age.

“Out with it man, what do you wish?” Boudain roared in a far more heartily fashion. During the siege, the man’s cheese shop had been burnt so he wished for aid repairing it. “I will ensure your repairs are funded. Cheese will flow freely in Hyford.” Boudain exclaimed. The start of seeing Rudolf had restored Boudain’s charisma, at least for now. The requests continued until late afternoon, although many still remained they were asked to return the next day. There was only so many petty squabbles and shop repairs Boudain could stomach in a day. What he could stomach plenty of though was wine. He had a vintage Calvari wine somewhere in his quarters, perhaps a chalice or two.

On Boudain’s return to his quarters, he saw a man in a dark red cloak running down the corridor. “You stop. What troubles you?” Boudain shouted rounding the corner the man had just escaped around. There the man entered Boudain’s quarters. “You would run from your king and then enter his quarters without permission?” Boudain’s voice echoed down the corridor. He followed the man into his quarters. This was perhaps foolish, the man could be an assassin and Boudain did not even call his guards.

On entering the room Boudain told the man to turn around and show his face. The man slowly obeyed. As he turned he lowered the regal red hood that he wore. The old king Rudolf stood before Boudain a large scar across his face, the blow that had appeared to end his life in the recent battle. For a moment Rudolf just stared into Boudain’s eyes and then he was smoke. The red smoke that had embodied the dead king slowly dispersed around the room leaving no trace. Was this another waking dream or some northern magics? Boudain tried to dismiss it, but he was overcome by a wave of guilt. Rudolf had died and it was his fault, he would have known which farmer had the right to which land. Despite how harsh Rudolf had been to the Kordans he had kept then kingdom as one. He had done his best to keep the peace as Boudain would now.

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The following day Boudain hunted. The party was relatively small for a royal hunt; Boudain’s guard and a few men from his court were with him. As they followed the trail of their prey the king chatted with Layal one of his closest advisors. “I have never seen a boar so large as the one you managed to wrestle that summer Layal. It still impresses me to this day. If you catch one half the size today you would have my gratitude.” Boudain rumbled quietly in an attempt not to startle any animal that may have been close. A diplomatic feast was to be held with Arvar Valinar attending that week and a good animal would show respect. “You know I can do better than that, lord. Do you think I have lost my talents?” Layal whispered in a far more appropriate tone.

On horseback, the party had been riding for some time. They had been following the boar that they hunted for a good portion of the afternoon and would likely have their prey in sight soon. The tracks they followed grew fresher and easier to trace. Layal raised his hand stopping the party and then indicated a dismount. Layal was in charge of the hunt, Boudain respected people’s strengths and had known the man since childhood. Some men stayed to tend the horses and only a small group came with Layal and Boudain. With bows in hand, they overlooked a clearing through the bush. In that clearing was as large a boar as Boudain could have wished for. They stalked around to get a better vantage of the boar.

“Would you like the shot my king, or shall I go down and wrestle the creature?” Layal said under a layer of sarcasm. Boudain raised his bow in an indication that he would like the shot. He slowed his breathing, nocked his arrow, drew the string back and aimed. Only moments passed as Boudain found the perfect shot, but they felt far longer. The arrow was let loose and the sound that Boudain hadn’t noticed was absent seemed to return to the world. The boar squealed as it choked an arrow piercing its neck. It fell. An easy hunt, a good omen. The gods may favour the feast.

“It appears it is you who has not lost their skill, my king. Excellent shot.” Layal exclaimed as they approached the beast. With a quick cut, the squealing was silenced and soon they were on the journey back to the capital. The journey back seemed to go far more quickly. Layal praised the king for his shot the like of which he hadn’t seen for some time. They rode behind the cart which now contained the boar admiring the creature and the joy it would bring to the feast. Then the face of the beast appeared that of a man. Boudain wiped his eyes and looked back at the beast to find the man’s face still looking back at him. It was Rudolf again just staring at Boudain. Layal had begun conversing with another man so did not notice when Boudain mumbled, “Why do you haunt me?”

Boudain had brought the downfall of this man as quickly and with as little thought as he had this boar. He tried to look away and dismiss the image before him, but he could not. To Boudain’s surprise, the head began to talk to him. No one else appeared to hear. “You ended my reign, king.” The head spat vehemently. “You will now live the cursed life of one who must rule. Even though you try to make things right the world will act against you and your subjects will turn upon you.” Boudain was shocked. He intended to plead the head for forgiveness, but with a blink, the head was a boar’s again. Boudain moved to the front of the party for the rest of the day.

When Layal caught up he asked the king why he had left so suddenly. To this, the king replied that he had wanted to admire the landscape. Layal was more than just an advisor for Boudain, but he could not tell him what he had seen. Boudain was getting over the sighting when he saw Rudolf looking at him from the forest. He looked away and saw another Rudolf on the other side of the party. Everywhere Boudain looked the old king was gazing at him knowingly. Hundreds of Rudolf’s surrounded them and no one but Boudain saw them. “This is false. It cannot be.” The king exclaimed as he fell from his horse in panic.

A man was by his side right away. Boudain batted him away saying he could pick himself up. Layal approached “Are you losing your balance in your old age my king?” he said jokingly. “I would not lose it before you in your recklessness.” Boudain jabbed back almost instinctively. He looked around as he picked himself up. Rudolf was no longer around them. Boudain could not show weakness by allowing anyone to know of this. Fortunately, the dead king did not appear to Boudain for the rest of his return to Hyford. However, Boudain now felt guiltier. Had he been one of the constant issues for Rudolf while the old king was just trying to improve Mistrun. A man who had wanted the same as Boudain had died needlessly to his hand.

## 8. Ultimatum - Badger

That morning Badger had received a letter from Orson in response to the news of the death of his nephew John. Badger had spent much of the day pondering how to reply. The Rydels did not blame Badger or his family and believed Ava had killed John after receiving a report of the situation from Badger. From this, the Rydels had decided that the Kordans did not deserve the throne. Badger was beginning to doubt the Kordans after Ava’s outburst, but he didn’t want to act against them until he had heard Boudain’s judgment. However it appeared that the Rydels would still act against the crown without Badger, and if the Stonehearts did not help that may ruin their standing with the Rydels. Trying to way up the situation, thoughts whirled around Badger’s head. He had got as far as addressing Orson at the start of the letter in response when a messenger visited.

The letter that the messenger bore was sealed with a brown Kordan seal. This was almost certainly from Boudain regarding the issue that had arisen with Ava. After dismissing the messenger it took Badger a moment to bring himself to open the letter. He could not know what Ava had said and how the king had perceived her words. Badger opened the letter reading it quickly and then reading it again to clarify its contents. The king had asked him to return to the capital for trial, little else was said. The letter would not help Badger make a decision about responding to Orson and didn’t help him to see what the King thought about the situation. Now he was left with more questions.

Should he go to the capital? Would he just be executed? Could this response be used to make the Rydels stand down for a time? If Badger didn’t obey the king he would be committing treason and would start a war against the crown. Yet the war might start anyway if the Rydels decided to act against the crown. The only possibility at peace was a just trial in Hyford, but that relied on Boudain having not been persuaded by Ava. As Ed had said, it would be easier to remove the roots of conflict between their families if they worked with Boudain. This was a strong move for the king even if he did not intend to sentence Badger. It showed justice working effectively in Mistrun.

Later Badger discussed the situation with his family. Lady Grey, Badger and Ed gathered around a hearth in one of the living quarters in Sour Rock keep. The temperature had dropped considerably as it was now late autumn and the Core was over halfway to its northernmost point. “We have fought so long to end our conflict with the Kordans and I intend to keep the peace. That would be most beneficial for our family and would be the most honourable thing to do. I still have faith in Boudain, but if this does go wrong you will have to step up Ed.” Badger said authoritatively. Grey looked worried and Ed nodded his assent.

“You could be killed or worse Badger.” Lady Grey protested. “They may not even try you. The Core would be left without a great leader at its time of need.” It was uncharacteristic for Badger’s mother not do address him formally. “I have given this great thought, mother. Ed has grown into a strong leader, sometimes even I do not see it, but brother you could easily replace me. It is worth the loss of me for peace, I do not believe it will come to that. Boudain is a good man.” Badger said in an attempt to convince his mother. “I agree with Badger.” Ed began. “This peace could bring a new age for us and Boudain will surely honour his word. We should honour our own word and trust in our new king. I do not believe Badger will be needing someone to take his place as great lord.”

After hearing Both Badger and Ed Lady Grey was as convinced as she would be. She still appeared worried about the safety of her son but accepted what he had to do. That night a message would be sent to Boudain to say that Badger accepted the king’s judgment and he would make his way to Hyford soon. He would take the gner body with him in hopes he could use it to aid his trial. Before leaving Badger would need to send a letter to the Rydels to try and convince them not to attack the capital.

In his letter Badger explained the king’s letter and that he had accepted the trial. He told Orson that he believed the king would not have been party to the death of his nephew and that Boudain could become a great king. He urged Orson to seek justice against Ava instead of the entire Kordan family but said that the Stonehearts would fight with the Rydels if Badger did not return. Hopefully, that would be enough and the Rydels would not be angered by the lack of support from the Stonehearts. The letter to Orson would be sent that day along with the letter to the king.

Badger intended to leave the next day to allow his message to the king time to arrive before him and so that he could ensure the training of his men was in shape before leaving. In Sour Rock, they had discovered little more about the cursed ones so preparations still consisted of just training soldiers to fight against them. If they were as easy to stop as the gner had been perhaps that would be enough. The training was now continuing as it had been prior to Ava’s visit and was being done more openly. It would be more efficient to train soldiers if they didn’t spend half of their time trying to hide.

After an inspection, the men seemed to be making solid progress. The force would soon be strong enough to defend Sour Rock from invasion with good warning. As men were training across the Core they would need to be gathered together to mount a good defence. However an invasion by the cursed might be a different matter, it was likely they would not fight or invade like men. An unpredictable foe was a dangerous one in battle, and a creature few had seen for centuries was as unpredictable a foe as a general could expect. They would need the numbers to be able to defend more than a normal siege to be prepared for the cursed.

Badger began communications with the other lords within the Core to encourage them to train as many as they could spare. Ed would be able to follow this up while Badger was gone. The forces would be spread while they were trained, but once united, even if just a few of the lords loyal to Badger cooperated, they would be one of the strongest armies the Stonehearts had ever commanded. Such a force would surely be enough to hold off an attack from any cursed ones that were to come.

After preparing as much as he could for his men’s training Badger prepared himself to go to the capital. He would take a light escort as not to appear aggressive and to travel more quickly. Hopefully, the king would make a more favourable decision if he was not kept waiting for too long. They had to pack for all weather as autumn in the south was still relatively warm. The journey would take Badger through harsh conditions, the only time worse to make such a journey on Mistrun was at the heart of winter. The journey would be worthwhile if it maintained the Blue Gold Peace. Leaving Sour Rock Badger wished his family farewell and encouraged the people to have faith in the judgment of the new king Boudain. Badger’s words were partially for his own encouragement as well; once he reached the capital he was completely in the hands of the Kordans.

## 9. Warring in the Warring Lands - Hawk

Equipped with pikes and swords sent by Ava and the Kordans Hawk had been making substantial progress securing his new lands. The savage tribes of ticklon and undeveloped humans that inhabited the Novarin were weak to the tactics of the mercenaries he had hired. Hawk had never been tactically inclined, but watching the flaming champions in their yellow and red cut through tribes that had been warring for decades defined their superiority. Currently, they fought one of the largest forces of tribesmen that Hawk had seen since the Novarin had been founded. It seemed increased numbers did not favour them as they tripped over each other and fought almost clumsily when they amassed a greater force.

Hawk’s flaming champions continued to push through the savages. Many were caught upon the pikes of the second and third lines of infantry, but those that got closer were cut down by the great swords of the front line. It was soon reported that the savages retreated, this victory would allow Hawk to take the last considerable town that the savages held. Soon he would be able to divert his attention to Arvar Valinar. He was the one who truly deserved Hawk’s attention, Arvar would not be allowed to get away with letting Hawk’s family die. Hawk would make sure of that. Surely the small and dispersed savage forces would be little threat now. Perhaps Hawk would be able to avenge his family sooner than he had anticipated.

After the chaos of retreat and the end of battle, the Novar forces made their way into the town, if it could be truly called a town. It was far smaller than Horan and had no walls. There were roughly thirty buildings of varying sizes, but none of them was particularly large. If this was all the savages had left then Hawk considered that perhaps he had won. The tribes had been divided from the start, yet Hawk had not expected success to come so easily. The campaign had lasted only a season and previously few had been able to tame what had been called the Warring Lands.

As Hawk was settling down for the night one of his mercenaries came to explain that their general wished to speak to him. When Hawk met the flaming champion general they looked out on the field where that battle had taken place. From the roof of what appeared to have been the town hall, they had a good view of the area even as the sun began to set. General Carden got straight to the point, “See those figures hunched over the dead lord?” he pointed out across the field, “We saw one or two after the last battle, but now there’s a hundred sir. We think they may be cursed ones, we do. Possibly stragvor.” He looked to Hawk seeming to expect an answer.

For a moment Hawk considered this. Then he thought over what he had heard. Cursed ones? That was ridiculous, they did not exist. “General those are quite clearly not the cursed. Get a closer look, it is likely just savages looting the battlefield.” The General gave an almost understanding look to Hawk’s outburst. Perhaps he was in almost as much disbelief as Hawk. “Sir I said the same to my man. We have the body of one at the cost of a few of my good men.” He led Hawk downstairs to a storeroom where the body had been lain upon a table.

Green blood seeped from various wounds on the beast. Red, seemingly human, blood coated the mouth and fangs of the hulking creature. It looked to be built from human parts, but it was wrong. It had four legs two of them where the arms should have been. On each foot, a sixth toe on the inside looked to give the creature the ability to grip on to things. The body was more animal like than it should have been but still resembled that of a man. The limbs were like trunks and the creature could easily have smashed a small building. With no head, the face of the beast protruded from the body in a position that would face forward when the beast walked on all fours. The purple grey hairless skin looked unnatural on the beast shaped creature. Stood up it would be three times the size of most men,

“And they do not seem to attack unless we get close.” Hawk nodded, he had been nodding to the entire explanation from Carden, but had not truly listened to most of it. The sight of the creature had invaded Hawk’s thoughts, he considered little else. The General went on to suggest they avoid the creatures unless they were to attack to which Hawk gave a deflated agreement. How could such a creature even exist? The thought of the creature shook him. He did not settle again, but the soldiers seemed not to have been affected. As long as the Flaming Champions knew how to deal with something it did not bother them. Hawk could not understand the beasts. The oddness of them was wrong and if they were cursed they might threaten the Novarin.

After some attempt at sleep Hawk rose and returned to the rooftop. He looked down at the hulking beasts roaming the field under the moonlight. They looked to be picking at the corpses. If they would eat humans perhaps they would attack them for food in the future. Hawk shook himself, this was perhaps all some twisted dream. The shaking did nothing. He did not wake.

## 10. Untimely Feast - Boudain

Boudain prepared for the feast with Arvar who had arrived that morning. It was important for a host to look his best to ensure he did not offend his visitors, it was even more important for a king. Layal attended the king’s quarters assessing his presentation and conversing with Boudain. “Does a man gathering men truly justify punishment from his king?” Boudain asked companionably as he adjusted his clothing. Layal sat seemingly considering this before carefully answering his king. “That would depend of course. If a man was known to pose some threat then perhaps a punishment would be justifiable. Yet even a man who had not previously been threatening could become dangerous if his forces swelled to be greater than those of his king.”

Since Boudain had seen Rudolf he had begun to consider the choices he had taken as king in greater detail. Rudolf would likely have punished Badger for amassing an army, if that was what it was, but that could have ensured the peace he wished to preserve. Would trusting his subjects be beneficial or would it give them the ability to take advantage of Boudain? “What if a man was to grow his force greater than that of his king for a good purpose? He may use the men to deal with a great threat to the kingdom, that would be of great benefit to the king.” Boudain responded almost instantly, he had considered these ideas deeply.

“If that was the case, why would the king not also be amassing a force to deal with the same situation? Surely the king’s subject would tell his king of a threat to the entire kingdom if he foresaw one.” Layal may have been right. Why were the Stonehearts and Rydels left to repel the northern raiders? That was a job all of Mistrun should have been invested in. Layal gave a contemplative frown and then continued. “Unless the subject could not tell his king of the force he wished to stop. Some fear or time constraint may have prevented him from going to his king.” There was certainly a time constraint in creating a force to stop the raiders, but surely that would be easier to meet with help from the wider kingdom. Yet the Stonehearts and Rydels had fought the raiders in the north every cycle, perhaps they feared they would receive no help if they asked.

Boudain put a close to the topic by explaining to Layal that he had given him much to think on. Afterwards, they returned to their usual conversation. Layal had passed the kitchens in Cragtop earlier and begun to explain how the boar they had hunted had been beautifully prepared for the feast with Arvar that evening. Preparations had been going well, all would turn out as intended as long as Ava did not push any ideas about Arvar harbouring Clinart Berkmer. She had mentioned it to Boudain, but he hadn’t agreed to deal with the situation. Arvar had been exceptionally loyal when fighting Rudolf and would likely not support Clinart’s claim to the throne even if he did keep him safe.

A short time later Boudain sat upon his throne at the head of the great hall in Cragtop Keep. At the centre was the boar, almost as well prepared as Layal had described, the room had been well presented for the occasion and now fine golden Kordan sun banners lined the hall. Dotted at points around the room were purple Valinar banners with a crossed war hammer and axe as the symbol at the centre. Light reflected off the golden sun at the centre of the Kordan banners as candles throughout the room flickered warmly. Arvar Valinar, his wife Rodina, Ava, and Layal all sat at the King’s table within conversing distance. Ava scowled into her dish and spoke rarely. Much of the conversation was led by Rodina who talked about fine wines and a fruit that had recently become popular in court. The fruit had come from Cavar, the Calvari had so many delicacies and yet once a cycle they still raided Mistrun.

It did not take long before Boudain tired of the conversation. The Valinars did not need to prove their loyalty to Boudain and the feast was more custom rather than necessity. As long as Arvar did not grow much stronger than other forces in Mistrun it was unlikely he would attack Hyford or Boudain. He began to study the boar, only one side had been cut open and the face was fully intact. The arrow wound had been neatly hidden. The face looked directly Toward Boudain’s table, it was suddenly Rudolf’s again. Rodina asked Boudain a question breaking him away from Rudolf’s intense stare. After he had answered the question he looked back at the boar seeing no resemblance of Rudolf. He endeavoured to pay more attention to the conversation.

Now Rodina was talking about the herbs that were used to cure a common disease in the warring lands that had become the Novarin. To this Ava perked up. As Rodina spoke her voice gradually became deeper her face more wrinkled and masculine. Within moments she was Rudolf. The words changed from being about herbs to worthiness. The gash on Rudolf’s face now seemed to be fresh. Blood flowed from it. The red liquid dripped all over Rodina’s meal and into her wine. “You struggle with ruling as did I. Unless you do as I did not, your fate will be the same. Let go of your hopes for Mistrun. Do you really think you could change anything? No one can. Peace cannot last.”

Rudolf then began to chant, “No one can change Mistrun.” He became louder and louder. Boudain tried to look away, but whoever he looked at became another Rudolf increasing the volume of the chant. Soon everyone in the room was Rudolf telling Boudain how his attempts to rule were futile. Boudain leapt upon his table cup still in hand. At the top of his voice, he roared, “Under my rule, Mistrun will be one. We will be untied and nothing will stop that. The land will see peace after a past ridden with war.” For Boudain nothing changed, the chanting continued, but for everyone else the room filled with applause and cheering.

The king began to point around the room at various Rudolfs, “No you will not stop me he spat, I am better than you. You think me a fool that these tricks would work.” Boudain forced the words out with sheer anger. Rudolf continued, but underneath Boudain’s hallucination, the hall fell utterly silent. Boudain fell to his knees in Arvar’s soup and began to weep as Rudolf’s chanting drowned his consciousness. For a long time no one in the room moved, but Boudain didn’t see them. He just saw the many Rudolfs. No one seemed to know what to do or how to act. Layal and Ava began to make excuses for the king about how he was not well. No one really paid attention to them, but they all stared in shock as Boudain was dragged from the hall flailing.

## 11. Understanding – Ava

“You are the royal sage. How did you ever achieve such a title when you cannot even begin to diagnose your king?” Ava screamed as Sage Farin hobbled around the king’s bed. He was a small man and had not the urgency Ava believed should have been required. He had reported that Boudain likely had some form of infection that was inducing hallucinations based upon the recent war. To Ava this seemed unlikely, Arvar had undoubtedly poisoned the king to further his aid to that bastard Clinart. She stormed out of her father’s room shouting that Farin needed to be better and he had the nerve not to even falter in his attention to the king. If Ava was ruling she would never allow a man like that to remain the royal sage.

In the guest lounge, Layal attempted to convince the traitorous Arvar of Boudain’s sanity while his men were already packing his things away. “How is our king? I do not doubt he will make a quick recovery.” Arvar asked as Ava approached. How could he lie so easily? The man who had likely poisoned the king now simply asked how he was. “I am confident he just has a minor infection. Although perhaps you would understand these things better than I.” Ava said a calmly as she could muster. She did not truly know how her father was, but she would not let this traitor think the Kordans weak. “That is great news. I thought it best to leave to give your father time to recover. I do hope you understand.”

Ava thought she understood completely. This man had entered the king’s court, eaten at his table, and poisoned him. Now he wanted to escape before anyone could pin the blame upon him. “Do not feel you must leave so soon Lord, at least stay the night.” Ava would not let him get away so easily, yet perhaps allowing Arvar’s entourage to stay would allow them to exploit the king while he wasn’t able. “I hate to decline, my Lady, but we are already packed away. Rodina would like to be back home to attend to her garden before the winter bites as well, wouldn’t you darling?” She nodded to Arvar and within little time they had left Hyford.

How could they do that? They had not done what Ava had wanted, and she could not help but feel they had beat her. Arvar was winning and she did not understand how. Layal was still in the vicinity so Ava spat at him, “This is your doing, you let Arvar get away with this.” Layal just shrugged bowed and left Ava. No one respected Ava, they didn’t see her influence. She would show them all one day. She would pick up the pieces of Mistrun and then build a wonder from the rubble. Then no one would overlook her; they would have to show her some respect then. If they did not she would make them.

Energised by rage Ava stormed back up to her father’s quarters to address the issue that was Farin. Yet when she got there the sage was not. In a quick check for Farin around Boudain’s quarters, Ava found little. As she was about to turn and leave the room she saw a brief distortion of light at the centre of the room. That had been described somewhere, perhaps she had heard of something like it when she was young. She thought for a moment and then understanding overcame her anger. Soon she rushed to the library where she could find documents on various creatures. It didn’t take her long to find the book she was looking for. Once she would have spent hours reading through the documents of the Cursed Calamity especially when she had been able to visit the capital.

She flicked to the page about the shade with haste. Inside were crude sketches of the distorted light and a dead shade and the next page detailed information about it. Its weaknesses, what it did, how it fought, and what its body parts were useful for. There were similar pages for every cursed that was believed to have existed. Some even believed the documents in the capital were written during the Calamity. Quickly Ava recovered what had been cast back into the depths of her mind. Moongrass could be burnt to repel shades, but they would often move on to possess another member of the person they had possessed’s family or one of their friends. When they possessed someone they would create hallucinations that pulled upon the host’s deepest emotions. These emotions were then fed upon by the shade and could often cause outbursts and at later stages insanity from the host.

It didn’t make sense though. Cursed ones didn’t really exist and Boudain had been poisoned by Arvar. These books were surely just fictions meant to entertain. They fed upon the belief that the Calamity had happened to appeal to the masses. Unless these accounts of so called cursed had been based on some other creatures. Maybe shades existed, but the other cursed surely would not. Arvar could have captured one and set it loose to poison the king’s mind. He would think that he had outsmarted them. That must have been it, Ava had not been wrong.

Fortunately, it was uncommon for shades to cause serious physical harm and it took a long time for them to drive someone to insanity. Ava could bide her time and cure the king without anyone knowing what had happened. She just had to wait until she could find some moongrass. Then the integrity of their family would not be damaged. While she waited, Ava would have to rule in the place of her father. Along the way, she would gain the respect of the court any way she could.

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In court, Ava ruled with a fierce grip as the queen regent. One would not outsmart or get the better of her. She could judge the character of the peasants that entered the hall with ease as she sat upon the throne. The separation she had from the rowdy crowd showed her superiority, they could not doubt her now. She had just resolved an issue of two farmers who could not determine who owned which cattle after some cows strayed into the other’s land. Such matters were beneath her, but she had made a grand resolution to the problem. The farmer who had allowed his cattle to stray clearly did not care for his cattle sufficiently, so Ava gave all cattle that had strayed to the other farmer. The man who had lost the cattle was angry, but he would, of course, learn how to keep cattle now. From the farmer who had received the cattle, Ava was sure she would receive undying loyalty.

Layal moved to her side. He had been stood at the back wall of the court as he often did to advise her father. She did not need advice from such a man that did not respect her. Before Layal began to speak Ava gave him an angry stare, but that did not deter him. He rudely opposed her judgment, “Perhaps, my Lady, it would be of greater benefit to the crown if we did not punish people for doing good work. Both of these men will think twice about coming to court now since they may stand to lose their livelihood.” Ava looked away from the disrespectful Layal. She nodded confirmation of her decision to the court, Layal would be dealt with for his disobedience later.

After the two farmers left a servant approached explaining that the ranger Ava had sent to collect herbs for her had returned. That was splendid news among the herbs she had requested had been the moongrass to cure her father; she wouldn’t attend to him yet though. The court needed her and she was governing so well. Although these court matters were beneath her, Ava had been enjoying herself. A further day under the shade’s influence would not harm Boudain. It had only been a matter of weeks since her father’s outburst at the feast with Arvar. The ranger had found the moongrass quickly. Records suggested that shades could take years to fully torment their victims.

That evening Ava went to Boudain’s quarters with the intent to burn the moongrass and cure her father. On entry the king was rambling. Initially the rambling was incoherent, as the weeks had gone by Boudain had shifted from having outbursts to an almost consistent rambling, but as Ava approached her father his words became clearer, “I am not fit to rule. I see that now. I see it. Just leave me.” It was as if he spoke to Ava, could he know how she had been ruling? Did he know that Ava had come to cure him and now want to stop her so there would be a better ruler? She pitied her father, but this may be the perfect way for him to pass on the crown. She tucked the moongrass she had been about to burn back up her sleeve. With one look at her writhing father, she left his quarters.

Now she would have to solidify her position. Layal would certainly oppose Ava’s prolonged leadership as he had opposed her decisions in the past. He would have to go. She could not give him a worse position; that would cause a disturbance. No, she just needed to move him away from the capital. He could govern the Kordan lands, no one had been appointed to that yet. Layal would not refuse the honour and he would be in Varon, the home of the Kordan’s, and far from influence in the court. In that evening Ava signed the necessary documents and had Layal informed. He initially protested as he did not wish to leave the king while he was so ill, but agreed when some persuasive force was put into the offer. In a matter of weeks, Layal would be away from Hyford and would have little influence upon it.

Yet before Ava could sleep soundly with her manoeuvring of the court, to her clear advantage, she did one more thing. She had to ensure that the same fate that had befallen her father did not stop her reign. Moongrass was burnt in her room that night as it would be for every night following that. She could not risk the possibility that the shade would grow bored of her father’s emotion and come to feed upon her. Ava was too important for that, it could cause the collapse of the kingdom.

## 12. Ava’s Revenge - Badger

Winter’s frost had been creeping behind Badger and his small force as they travelled south. The journey had been slowed and was more taxing due to harsher conditions. Having to use the Western bridge to the Core, Simply known as the Link, they had been required to take a much longer route than Badger had taken to return home earlier that year. Now the bridge from the south had been unlocked, and the northern lands weren’t yet close enough to the Core to use the bridge there, the western bridge was the only way out of the Core. The Link was the best way to the Core for most of the year. Only when the Core was at its furthest South or North was the Link unlocked. As the core moved it curved around the Blot to the east which was the only bit of land the Core was almost constantly connected to. However, few, if any at all, took the path to the Core through those scorched lands. Geysers of lava covered the Blot and when they periodically erupted they caused a molten rain to burn any who passed through. It was rare any would survive a journey into that land.

Badger’s route had taken him through the warring lands, or the Novarin as Hawk called it. Badger had briefly stayed in Horan, but Hawk had been away on his campaign to control the lands that he had been gifted. Hawk had been very happy with his lands, but the king had only truly given him a piece of paper saying he owned them. Since Hawk had been required to fight for the Novarin, Badger believed he hadn’t really been gifted the land. It was more like Boudain had bribed a minor lord to end the war throughout the warring lands. Minor nobles like the Novars would be so invested in the position such an opportunity would afford their family that they would overlook the cost. It had certainly been a smart move from Boudain that appeared to benefit both parties.

When they reached Kordan lands and neared Hyford the frost had appeared to retreat back into the Mist. The travelling conditions improved, but Badger and his men were weary from their long journey around the void. Hopefully, this trial would not be too harsh, perhaps Boudain would allow some time to rest before it began. Hyford looked magnificent once again, a clear field framed the pristine walls and buildings. Not a crack or fallen stone was in sight. This was how the capital of Mistrun should be and Boudain had done a magnificent job to restore its glory in just over a season.

On entering the city Badger was welcomed by a Kordan captain of the guard who mentioned how well the Stoneheart men had fought to take Hyford. The city was a bustle, it seemed everyone had something to do. The streets, once littered with rubbish and starving families, were now so clean that the stone seemed to shine. Badger had believed such a swift recovery impossible, but the city had surpassed recovery and seemed to be prospering. Badger and his men headed up to Cragtop; Boudain would hopefully meet them there.

The people of the capital had been parting to make way for Badger, with respectful nods after seeing the blue colours, yet suddenly they seemed to part much more quickly. Royal guards with gold trimmed armour surrounded Badger from all angles. Badger signalled for his men to lay down their weapons as he unbuckled his sword belt. “There has been some misunderstanding, I come here peacefully and willing as king Boudain has ordered. I will not be needing an escort to the keep.” Badger said calmly. It was unlike Boudain to be so cautious as to send a force to capture a man already within his wall. Especially when that man was causing no harm. The captain of the guard stepped forward, “We don’t like to do this sir. You’re a war hero round here, but it was the queen’s orders. Now if you’ll come with us.”

“Queen? What happened to Boudain captain?” Badger said in surprise as he obliged to the guard’s request. The guard happily answered, “Ava is sat on the big seat now sir, apparently she’s queen regent. King had a fit or something, started shouting in the middle of a feast, hasn’t been right since.” The captain continued and went into great detail about all the rumours as they ascended to Cragtop. Badger barely listened to them instead he tried to find a possibility where he somehow survived this trial. Surely he stood no chance now. Ava the one whose outburst had caused Badger to require a trial, and had seemingly hated the Stonehearts since birth, would now decide Badger’s fate and the fate of his people.

As soon as Badger entered Cragtop he was put in chains and thrust into a seat in the great hall to be tried. Ava sat above in the throne looking almost menacing. Her piercing voice quieted the room, “The man before you, so called great lord of the Stonehearts, is a traitor to the kingdom.” No one moved, the people looked shocked, “He amasses a force to invade and usurp the throne from my father, but I have caught the Stonehearts before they have had a chance to act. Do you dare defend yourself, Badger?” Some of the crowd began to boo and Ava’s mouth drew into a gleeful smile. The gner body was now out of his reach and he doubted Ava would honour a request for it to be brought. It seemed the outcome of this trial was already decided, Ava was just here for the show. Badger could play into that perhaps.

“Oh, I dare my dear queen. Cursed have returned and threaten to plague our lands once again. Sour Rock is under siege from a great force of creatures that we cannot hope to hold back. We are in desperate need as your family was when you invaded Hyford. We may not survive the winter.” Badger attempted to feign a sorrowful look; it persuaded the people. They muttered about sightings of cursed ones and many knew what it was like to be under siege. Ava was not impressed, “Silence,” she hissed, “This man attempts to deceive you. The cursed are just legends, a fiction. The recent rumours hold no strength. We cannot allow such treachery to stand. Badger will be hung at the end of the week and a force will be sent to reclaim Sour Rock for the throne.” Angry the people booed and shouted. Their monarch had just denounced a belief that had been rooted in centuries of storytelling and had recently been confirmed by rumours of sightings. This was not the result Ava had wanted, scowling she stormed from the hall.

Badger had not known rumours of the cursed were beginning in the capital, but they justified his preparations further. If Boudain had been around Badger may have even been able to encourage him to prepare for the cursed with him. That didn’t really matter now though, Badger’s army was being trained across the Core and would take some time to assemble. When Ava’s army arrived they would take them by surprise. With such a divided army Sour Rock would fall before half of the Core knew they were being invaded. Then the men he had trained would be systematically removed leaving nothing to stop the cursed. After the Core had been taken Badger’s family would likely be slaughter by Ava.

The guards had hesitated to move Badger so he had been sat in the centre of the great hall for some time before they picked him up. When they did come Badger was escorted to and thrown in a cell in the dungeons of Cragtop. The cell seemed to be as deep in the dungeons as possible, no other inmates could be heard or seen. The people did not have faith in Ava, but they would not yet oppose her.

That night Layal visited Badger. Badger knew him from sight and as an advisor to Boudain but had never spoken to the man. “I do hope you had a good journey, my Lord,” Layal whispered as torchlight lit his face. Badger snorted a laugh, “Would our king want this, lord Badger?” Layal continued, “I am not so sure, but I do know that he would never have allowed such a display as just happened in the great hall.” He may not have known Layal well, but Badger was already beginning to like him. “What is it you propose king’s man?” Badger asked bluntly.

“I do prefer not to talk so clearly of such matters, but since you ask in such a way I will. When I can I will get you out of this cell. There is not long until I must leave for Varon; I am to oversee the lands of Rainsmere. If I can I will find a way to help you escape before then; I am sure a quick solution will be better for you also.” Badger thanked Layal and he left as quickly and quietly as he had entered. Perhaps Badger had a chance to save himself and his family after all. If he could escape soon maybe he could outpace Ava’s army to Sour Rock and gather his forces before they arrived. That was if the army did not leave too soon and Badger was freed quickly.

## 13. Bitter War - Hawk

After Hawk’s recent success against the tribes that once controlled the Novarin, he had pushed the Flaming Champions on into Valinar lands. The mercenaries had protested initially due to Arvar’s military reputation. His tactics had helped topple Rudolf and had turned the tide of many a battle before that. Arvar hadn’t lived up to his reputation during Hawk’s invasion. In a short period, Hawk and the flaming champions had swept through Valinar lands and were approaching the edge of Mistrun. Since Mistrun floated through a void the edge was usually the end of the country. That was not the case here, the Valinar family’s main stronghold was a small floating island just off the southwestern edge of Mistrun. It was called Skypike and had never lost a siege.

Skypike was chained to Mistrun so it did not float too far away, but the chains were still long enough that one could only access it by foot when it floated close to the mainland. This happened roughly once a month and when it did there was only a narrow bridge. Skypike had enough land to sustain its people for a substantial amount of time and had plenty of food stores. Yet with the speed Hawk had taken much of the Valinar lands, he believed much of Arvar’s might exaggerated.

Carden approached, Hawk expected he would likely be reporting a victory, but a man behind him brought a prisoner with a bag over his head. The prisoner had relatively noble attire although it was dirty and torn. “More success I assume Carden? Why did you bring this scruffy man before me?”

“Sir, I think you’ll be wanting to see this one. I haven’t never seen Arvar before, but this one claims to be him. Was travelling toward Skypike in a nice little carriage so we jumped them.” Carden explained. For a moment Hawk couldn’t believe his luck. The tactical genius who had caused his brother and father’s death had just stumbled into his hands. “Remove the bag, quickly now.” Carden removed Arvar’s bag. There was no denying that this was Arvar Valinar. He began to speak, “What are you doing Hawk? Our families were so close, I fought with your father and brother…”

“No, you killed them,” Hawk snappily interrupted, “You abandoned them and that allowed them to be surrounded by Rudolf’s men. Do not deny it.” How could Arvar be so bold as to claim he fought with Hawk’s family after all he had done? “It is true. Hawk, I left them, but there was nothing I could do. If I had stayed more men would have died and there was no way they could escape. We would have lost too many and it would not have helped your brother or father.” Arvar could not know that; he could have tried. Why did he think the result of such a battle was so predictable? From all Hawk had seen of war, battles were pure chaos and no result could be determined fully. “Put him in one of the cages, I will deal with him after I have taken his lands,” Hawk ordered Carden.

In a short time, Carden returned and explained that they had captured a few others along with Arvar’s wife Rodina. The others had been locked up near to Arvar. Mid report Hawk heard a dreadful scream of a roar. Chaos and shouting erupted in the camp outside. “Find out what is going on Carden.” Hawk blabbered as he began to cower. He peaked his head out of the tent door and quickly returned, “It’s those damn four legged cursed. They’re trampling the tents with ease. Could be trouble.” Carden’s last few words were drowned by the howling the Savage ticklon made when they entered battle. One rushed past the tent door cutting down the guard there before he had time to react. Hawk was under a table now, “Go and deal with them!” He shouted at Carden.

Cries of varying creatures and people sounded outside. Warped roars that must have belonged to the cursed ones echoed through the camp. Hawk dared not move, how could he? What would he do? At some point in the battle, a huge not quite human foot pierced the other side of the tent causing some of it to collapse. Hawk cowered further into his hiding spot, but the cursed lumbered away. The cries grew less frequent and the savage howling faded off into the distance. Hawk still did not move, not until Carden entered the tent. “We’re all good sir. The camp is safe now.” Carden announced as he entered.

“What happened?” Hawk asked as he peaked his head from under the table. “Seems the tribesmen have changed tactics, sir. A small force ran through the camp cutting down all they could. We think they forced the cursed giants in our direction. When the cursed ones left so did the ticklon savages. Surprised they came so far from the Warring Lands though sir.” Hawk left the half collapsed tent, even he could tell that the skirmish had resulted in a major loss for the Flaming Champions. There were few ticklon bodies in sight and all that hinted at the cursed being there was squashed or torn bodies strewn around the site. Blood spattered the green grass and splintered wood was scattered, bodies and weapons lay discarded between the fallen tents.

It took Hawk some time to take it in as he ambled through the camp, but then something struck him. What about Arvar? Hawk rushed to the prisoner cages. Arvar could have escaped or been killed. Carden, shocked, took a moment to start following Hawk. “Sir, what is wrong?” Hawk said nothing, he could not allow Arvar to escape his grasp. After so long his revenge for the death of his family had been in his grasp, he would not allow it to escape him. He could not.

Rounding a crumpled tent they approached the cages open. “Where was Arvar, Carden?” Carden’s face drooped, “Carden!” Hawk shouted. Carden just pointed to an open cage. “Have them hunted send everyone you can. I want Arvar found,” Hawk wined, “They can’t have got far, and his wife will surely slow him down.” Carden began to speak and then stopped. He made a slight cough, Hawk looked at him in confusion. All Carden did was nod to a body beside one of the cages. It was a woman, her throat slit. Hawk knelt closer and turned her head so he could see it. This was Arvar’s wife Rodina. Arvar would be hard to catch alone. Hawk punched the floor in anger and screamed at the sky like a spoilt child. With haste, Carden left the scene and began shouting orders to scouts that had survived.

## 14. Side Routes, Hidden Passages, and Back Exits - Badger

Badger was damp. The air was musty and cold. A slight draft whistled through the dungeon, but all else was silent. There was no way Badger could tell how long it had been since the torch in the corner of the room had burnt out. It had surely been days since anyone had been into the portion of the dungeons where Badger was kept. At this point he was beginning to give up hope, Ava had almost definitely sent her army to the Core so even if Badger did escape he would never catch up. His family didn’t deserve to die for this. Ava had no reason for hating the Stonehearts. She had always despised Badger’s family and yet Badger had always attempted to make peace with the Kordans. What was wrong with her? Would Boudain have done the same? Maybe he was just better at hiding his hatred.

As Badger nursed his resentment for Ava a dim light at the end of the dungeon appeared. It grew brighter and closer to Badger. When it was almost next to him Badger felt that the light might blind him. Shielding his eyes Badger tried to make out the light’s bearer. As his eyes adjusted he began to see Layal’s smug face. “Why do you bother Layal? It is too late, my family will be dead before I have chance to warn them.” Badger moaned. “Nonsense lord, although your journey will be difficult if you wish to reach the Core in time to prepare your men.”

“I’ll do anything that must be done to save them.” Badger knew he would not stop if there was still a chance of saving his family, he could not. Layal nodded his illuminated face, “If you wish to arrive with enough time you must travel through the Blot. The army set out five days ago now; travelling the same way you might be able to outpace them, but there would be little time to prepare for their arrival in Sour Rock. The Blot is the most direct route, going that way alone you might arrive with weeks to spare before Ava’s army arrived. Now get up and put this on.” Layal opened Badger’s cell and presented him with a guard outfit.

Badger didn’t protest about going through the Blot or the direct orders from Layal. Most people would think it madness to even approach the Blot never mind travel through it. Yet Badger had a reason to travel through that burnt land; if he did not his family and many people of the core would surely suffer. This was a chance to help them, Badger would have been soon dead if not for Layal. With all the life that was left in him, Badger would return home and save his people. He would save them no matter the toll of the Blot.

Slowly and carefully Layal led Badger through side routes, hidden passages, and back exits. Those who saw the pair didn’t give them a second glance, but Badger was still tense. When they exited the keep and had only the outer wall to penetrate Badger asked, “Why Layal, I don’t understand why you helped me.” Layal gave Badger a look and then returned his concentration to weaving through the streets of Hyford.

“Last time I saw you I asked if our king would want your imprisonment. Ava rules poorly in his place and yet she believes herself the most cunning ruler to have ever sat upon the throne. Sage Farin discovered her burning Moongrass in her room, the deterrent for shades. After that Farin noticed that Boudain had similar symptoms to someone who had been possessed by a shade. I do not think our king would have taken any of the actions Ava takes and I know she could have helped him.”

It took a moment for Badger to absorb the information Layal had just given him. A shade? They were one of the cursed. Ava knew about it but didn’t try to stop it; could she have used the shade to claim power somehow? “After what has happened he may even help you gather an army to fight the cursed,” Layal continued, “I know Sour Rock is not under siege by them, but it would certainly be beneficial to be ready to fight them.” Layal looked back at Badger who just stared at him. “What,” Layal shrugged, “That’s why you were gathering the army on the Core isn’t it?” Badger nodded dumbfound. Boudain had picked his advisor wisely.

It was a short and easy route out of Hyford after that, they used a side passage to exit the main wall. Layal gave Badger a pack he had been carrying with plenty of rations and some oils that could be rubbed on to the user to reduce the amount that heat burned the skin. He gave no guarantee the oil would work since it had been the best thing Layal could find to help Badger in the short amount of time that he had. There Layal left Badger. Within a short time, he had disappeared back into the walls of Hyford.

Badger set out toward the Blot. First, he would travel through Rainsmere to the east; a desert but it would not be too harsh now the winter dawned. The real issue would be the molten land of the Blot. How Badger could get through such a place he did not yet know, but he would. As soon as Badger could he left the Hyford armour and threw on some peasant clothing Layal had left in his pack. Hopefully, that would draw less attention. He did however keep the guard sword that had accompanied its uniform. That could be useful. Now he had a chance to save his family, Badger would make the most of that opportunity.

## 15. Oppression from the Grave - Boudain

Boudain had no idea how long he lay in his quarters. Many people came and went. He didn’t know who they were, Rudolf consumed them. As the days went by an earthy smoke began to penetrate Rudolf’s grip. It was as if Boudain had found some new limb that could repel Rudolf when the smoke came. After submitting to Rudolf for so long the revelation that Boudain could fight him was liberating. He felt himself again if only for a moment and then the smoke pulled away from his nostrils. Rudolf descended upon Boudain’s consciousness again.

Smoke. As soon as Boudain smelt it he used all he could to wield the weapon it provided against Rudolf. Rudolf retreated quickly enough for Boudain to glimpse his quarters properly, green fires burning on the walls and Farin was exiting his quarters. “Wait!” Boudain cried, but his plea was drowned by Rudolf’s claims that he couldn’t rule. Boudain had touched reality, he would escape Rudolf. He attempted to use the weapon without the smoke. Rudolf would not let Boudain go, but perhaps he could practice combatting him.

The next time the smoke came Rudolf assaulted Boudain instead of retreating. He screeched becoming a black creature dripping tar. The tar began to envelop Boudain, but the smoke revealed Boudain’s weapon. Swiping forth with the weapon Boudain cut a hole through the tar creature through which he could see his room. Layal and Farin conversed. They were worried for Boudain, Layal had to leave Hyford soon. Why? Tar covered the scene and then strangled Boudain.

Rudolf’s attacks had weakened briefly. Boudain concentrated on the weapon. The smoke had only shown him it, the weapon was a part of him. If he tried he could surely wield if without the smoke. Boudain found it. It was weak but had grasped its power. As the weapon slipped away Rudolf returned. He was angry.

Since Boudain had tried to use the weapon without the smoke Rudolf hadn’t let his guard down, his torment was constant. It would never end. The smoke was not coming. Perhaps it had never been. No, there it was, the earthy smell again. Boudain breathed deeply. He was filled with smoke, but before he could strike Rudolf vanished. Farin sat explaining how he had come across the smoke to Layal. It was created by moongrass and Ava had been using it. Since Farin had only heard tails of it being used to repel shades he believed that might have been what was causing Boudain’s illness. Layal noted that Boudain had recovered slightly before the smoke escaped his lungs. Rudolf knew the smoke had gone. He was back and unrelenting.

During Boudain’s torment, he had contemplated Farin and Layal’s conversation. It wasn’t Rudolf. A shade had been causing these visions. He could fight that, he thrust the weapon toward his captor. Any trace of Rudolf vanished and it became an ungodly beast. Its twisted neck looked broken as its gaze pierced Boudain’s will. Before he could truly see the shade, Boudain lost consciousness.

He awoke to smoke. No twisted, night black creature haunted him. Layal’s face was close to Boudain’s. Layal whispered, “I will not leave you Boudain. I cannot. Your daughter wishes to send me away so she can rule in your stead. She has usurped your throne by exploiting the chance attack of this shade. If Farin had not noticed her using the smoke then…” The creature leapt into Boudain’s face smothering him. Darkness consumed Boudain before he could appreciate what Layal had spoken.

From the depths of himself, Boudain drew up the will to wield the weapon against the monster of a shade that infected his mind. He heard raised voices, “Allow me to stay, our king is recovering. I would see him well before I go.”

“He will recover without you. It is important you go to Varon.” Ava said slyly. The sounds of someone resisting and then being dragged away followed. Boudain wanted to call out against the action. He wanted to stop the guards right there. “Unhand him you fools. That is my advisor.” Boudain roared. He felt himself in that moment. The dragging ceased, but Boudain couldn’t be sure if the shade had taken control of his senses again or if he had actually stopped Layal from being taken.

This tug of war between Boudain and the shade that had been Rudolf continued for what felt like an eternity, but each time Boudain pulled he could feel the shade come slightly closer to toppling. It was almost a certainty that Boudain could beat the shade now. Farin continued to burn moongrass, but Boudain needed it less and less to wield the weapon against the shade. He felt he became more lucid with each passing moment even if this improvement was only minor. Boudain looked forward to the day he would banish this parasite from his mind.

## 16. Unwanted Discovery – Ava

Ava sat by her father’s bed. Recently he had become more lucid. His ramblings made more sense and occasionally he could hold a conversation. What would she do if he recovered? Surely people would see that she was a better ruler. Then he wouldn’t take back the throne, would he? Ava wouldn’t let him. Boudain was her father, but he wasn’t a good king. He didn’t have the will to stop their enemies.

A guard entered the room, “Ava, your majesty, we have…” the man began.

“Can’t you see I’m tending to my father, what is so important that you would interrupt me?” Ava snapped, the guard had disturbed her. He could have come at any time, but he chose now. “It’s, it’s just, Badger. He’s gone.” The guard mumbled. “What do you mean gone? You better have more information than that.”

“It seems the lads watching him, they were bribed to not go down there for a while. Layal told them he would feed Badger.” Ava had sent Layal to Varon only the day before, that traitor must have freed Badger. He had protested against leaving, by freeing Badger he may have been getting revenge for being sent away. Fortunately, Badger would never outpace Ava’s army. That would mean that they would take the Stonehearts by surprise and strike them down for good.

She would have to deal with both Layal and Badger after she had defeated the Stonehearts at Sour Rock. That shouldn’t be too much of a problem, Layal was surrounded by Kordan’s in Varon and Badger would stand little chance when he arrived in Sour Rock when it had already been taken. For that was where he would go, he placed too much value in saving his family.

“Your men are ill disciplined and weak. Ensure they are punished for taking bribes and allowing a man who has committed treason to escape.” Bribery could not go unpunished, especially if it led to the escape of such a man as Badger Stoneheart. This was only a minor setback though. Ava would ensure that Badger and Layal paid for their crimes against her.

The man began to leave the room. “Oh, before you go what is your name?” Ava asked inquisitively. The guard responded cautiously before being dismissed by Ava. She would make sure to have him publicly punished for interrupting her time with her dear father. She didn’t know how yet though. Maybe she could put him in the stocks or have him fight the dogs. The dogs were far fairer. That way he could leave early if he won. Ava did enjoy the spectacle of a dog fight. She could even throw in the traitorous guards that had taken bribes from Layal. That would be far better than allowing their captain to punish them. People would have more respect for her if they saw that she was the one who punished people.

Now, where had she been? She looked toward her father’s bed. What would she do if he recovered? She would win power by her popularity with the people. Farin, that awful sage, entered the room. Maybe he was doing his job better now, but he wasn’t doing what Ava wanted. She wouldn’t be able to convince him to stop helping her father, how was he doing that anyway? Maybe she could find another way to ensure Boudain never recovered though.

“So sorry to disturb you, Ava, I’ve just come to tend to our king, I hope that you don’t mind,” Farin said and then proceeded to hum his way over to the bed. Boudain began to struggle more in his bed, he shouted like he was commanding soldiers in some great battle. Ava did mind that Frain had entered, but she could not justify rage against this old man. Instead, she stormed from Boudain’s quarters without a word to Farin. On her way out she realised she would have liked to see how Farin was helping her father, but Ava had already committed to storming out of the room. She would have to find another time to see what the old sage was doing.

## 17. The Way Home - Badger

Sand seeped between Badger’s toes as he climbed a dune on his journey through the Kordan lands of Rainsmere. His sandals felt heavy with the sand as he climbed the dune, but when he reached the top all the sand ran from his open feet. Badger had seen no one since he had left Hyford. He had made a point to avoid the roads before he neared Varon, but since he had entered the desert he had been less careful. It seemed unlikely that the Kordans would come this way looking for Badger and he had covered his tracks well enough before he had reached the desert. Since no sane person ever ventured into the Blot no one would expect Badger to go that way.

From the top of the dune, Badger observed the Blot. Black scorched rock broke the sea of sand Badger had been travelling through. The land of the Blot appeared scarred and jagged in comparison to the smooth dunes that surrounded him. Lakes of orange and white lava that swirled and bubbled pocked the black stone before him. In the distance, a geyser of lava spurted, an abscess that had burst to shower the land with its infection.

Badger could not see the Core from his position, but he knew that he faced it from the position of the sun. After applying the oil Layal had provided generously to every part of his body Badger descended into the blot. As he approached the bodies of lava Badger felt a noticeable rise in temperature, but with the oils, his skin did not burn and he could get quite close to the lava without feeling the need to retreat. He wisely did not wish to let any of the lava touch him still; the oil would likely not protect him from such a burn.

Travelling deeper into the Blot Badger began to sweat. The oils prevented the heat from being unbearable, but Badger still felt the power of such a heat. It was hotter than any conditions Badger had endured, but his resolve to save Sour Rock pushed him on. Frequently Badger reapplied oil to ensure he could continue. When he stopped he would drink from his ever lower supply of near boiling water. The heat engulfed him, everything he touched was warm. Badger dared not draw his sword for fear the metal would melt his skin away.

Yet through all the heat and hardship, the journey felt manageable. Badger knew if he continued to put one foot in front of the other he would eventually emerge into the Core. He longed for the cool winter of that central part of Mistrun; to lie in the snow and let it envelop his sweating body. Sometimes that kept Badger travelling as much as the thought of saving his family and people. He would not allow his last thoughts to be consumed by the desire for the cold as he melted away though.

Sometimes the time seemed to jump as if Badger had blacked out and yet kept on walking, and others the time dragged like every step took a century. When one of these things happened Badger wished he was experiencing the other. During the flashes of land Badger wished he was more conscious and aware so he could react to what happened. Then when time slowed down the excruciating heat had him wanting to be away from this hellscape.

As Badger neared the centre of the Blot geysers of lava encircled him. Suddenly more aware Badger tried his best to avoid places where the lava would erupt, for he was certain that caught in the rain of magma they caused he would be burnt alive. Looking down he made out small holes where the rain of lava had burrowed its way into the blackened rock. Such holes in his skin might burn through as deep as the bone.

Badger heard a low bellow of a horn like those used on the battlefield. He could not decide if he had imagined it or if he truly heard it. Could it be fighting in the Core? Had Ava beaten Badger to Sour Rock? No. It was undoubtedly Badger’s imagination. He was miles from any life, even if some great battle took place at Sour Rock Badger would not hear it. Then the horn came again louder. Badger surveyed the horizon but saw little from the warped air created by the heat. Could that have been a rock moving or was it just his dizzy vision?

Badger reached for his water, squeezing the last singular drop down his throat he realised just how dry it was. Many lakes around Badger began to bubble in unison. As the bubbling climaxed into a great roar a chorus of eruptions burst around Badger. Badger tried to run away from the crescendo of lava exploding from the ground, but everywhere he turned another line of lava stretched past the horizon to the sky. All fell silent for just a moment. Badger breathed deeply from his useless attempts at escape. The horn bellowed one last time. Lava fell from the sky. Drops as big as a fist landed around Badger. He lowered his head and closed his eyes to shield from the holes the fire would burn.

Pain. For how long the lava fell Badger did not know. Each droplet that touched him seared his skin. After the first few drops Badger was on the floor, one had burnt through his ankle he was sure. He used his arms to shield his face but there was little else he could do. As he lay there wiggling from the pain he smelt cooked flesh and blood. Each drop that touched him was more painful than the last. His peasant clothes had caught fire, but the slow burning of them was nothing in comparison to the lava that dug deep into his skin.

Then the lava stopped falling. Badger just lay there relieved that the onslaught of drops had ceased. Everything was burnt or burning. Badger breathed heavily and rasped as he did. When he did try to stand he could not. His head rung his vision fuzzed and he collapsed back to the rough ground. As Badger lost consciousness a ringing bell sounded close. The ringing penetrated his mind as he drifted away. Badger had restless dreams all ending with that same ringing. All he knew of his waking moments was sweat and pain.

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Badger awoke numb. He could feel little of his body. The walls of the room he was in were of smoothed polished black stone. There was a censer that burnt with a herbal smell in one corner of the room. No windows and a sealed metal door prevented Badger from knowing any more of his location. All he knew was he had been there a long time. Would Ava’s army have reached Sour Rock? Badger needed to go. He had to save everyone.

Pulling off the sheets Badger lay under revealed his skin, it was pocked like the land of the Blot. Some form of white cream was lathered all over his body. This cream along with the censer likely numbed his pain and aided his recovery. Who had helped him? Hopefully, they had helped enough; Badger had to leave now. If he did not the fate of his family and people would be disastrous.

Standing from his bed Badger initially wobbled but managed to steady himself. His right ankle was weaker than it had been. Reaching the door wasn’t difficult, hauling it open was much harder. The giant iron door was far heavier than it looked, but with a bit of force, Badger levered it open. The mouth of the open door revealed the last thing Badger had expected.

He was in a large open room carved out of black rock as his little room with the censer had been. Many people with ash coloured skin worked away. Pulleys were used to raise items up to high balconies in the open space. Some people stripped golden leaves from small plants, while others sieved through a pool of lava at the centre of the room. They all seemed to work as one. Their movement was almost hypnotising.

Suddenly one man ran over to Badger snapping him out of his hypnotic daze. “You must rest, being caught in a firefall like that will kill a man if they are not tended to properly.” The ashen man exclaimed. Badger focused himself to his task, “Thank you for your hospitality, but I must leave. My family and everyone I know will die if I do not reach them in time.” The man nodded,

“It is a great dishonour to not do all you can in such a situation. Please allow us to help. Wait.” The man disappeared for a moment. As Badger waited he observed that the room had been moving the whole time he had been in it. Some large bull like creatures turned cogs in the corners of the rooms, perhaps they moved this place. As the room moved, the hole that had contained lava moved to the rocky Blot landscape and then back to lava. These people were harvesting something from the Blot and it appeared that this room was some safe way of travelling through the scarred land.

Shortly the man returned with a brown suit which appeared to be a leathery material. He explained that the suit would protect from light lava showers and would make the heat of the Blot bearable. Badger thanked him and was about to leave when that horn bellowed again. This time it rung through his ears. It was much closer.

The man ran in front of him, “You cannot leave yet good man. The horns signify that soon there will be firefall. Even with that suit, it would be best you avoided it. When the bell rings it will be safe. We have men watching the land.” Badger nodded his assent he would not be caught in the lava rain again if he had that choice. While he waited for the lava to fall he asked the ashen man where they were and how long he had been there.

The man explained that he had been there for three suns and that they moved toward the western edge of the Blot now. That would have taken them a little closer to the Core and three days would reduce the time Badger had to reach Sour Rock, but he might still make it in time to beat the Kordan army. Apparently, the ashen people called themselves dard’nah. As the man was explaining the dard’nah the bell rung bringing back Badger’s restless dreams. He shook them from his memory thanked the dard’nah man and hastily left. He had no time to waste. He would make it to Sour Rock, he felt certain of it.

As Badger left he looked back at the large rock he had just been inside. It moved slowly and the wheels must have been hidden beneath it. If you were at a distance and weren’t looking you would barely notice the rock move. Badger wanted to take in all he could about these ashen people, the dard’nah. They were intriguing and resourceful, but he had to reach the Core. Badger hiked toward his goal with a newly found pace. The Blot had not broken his resolve.

## 18. Back in the Core - Badger

After leaving the ashen people it was not long before the Core was in sight. In the distance, Badger saw the end of the burnt black land and lava pools. The slow movement of the Core was visible where it met the Blot. The heat proof suit had helped Badger significantly making it almost seem trivial to traverse the Blot now. Since Badger had left the dard’nah people the numbing effects of their medicine had begun to wear off and he now felt the pains of his wounds. Although he was close to home, traversing the core might be the hardest part of his journey with Badger’s wounds.

The mist that seeped from the small gaps between the Core and the Blot, as the two lands scraped past each other, battled with the heat of the Blot and then retreated into the colder Core before quickly disappearing. The heat left wet patches melted from the winter snow around the edge of the Core. There were small burn marks on parts of the core where the lava rain must have bombarded the land.

Fortunately when Badger reached the point where the two lands met there were only small gaps between the Core and the Blot. In many places, like Void’s Crossing or the Link, bridges were required to reach the Core from the main land of Mistrun. Badger was able simply to step into his homeland here. That step was a great release. He had never given up on his goal, but Badger had believed that the Blot might best him. So many times he had been close to death, but now he was home. After he reached Sour Rock his family and people would be safe.

Suddenly a searing pain shot up Badger’s leg. He collapsed just before the snow in the wet muddy ground which the heat had created. The suit from the ashen people covered Badger entirely to give full protection from the Blot. Without it, he would have been soaked through and in far worse condition to travel through the now freezing Core.

The pain had come from Badger’s ankle. He tried to stand on it again before falling face first into the mud. This blinded Badger covering the goggle like eyeholes of the suit. Ripping the mask of the suit off Badger realised he had been lucky to walk so far on such an injury. All he could feel was the pain of that ankle. It overwhelmed his senses, but he tried to suppress it. With his other three limbs, he dragged himself into the snow gritting his teeth from the pain.

He kept going and was soon panting his white breath rising into the now cold air. Badger kept going until he had to rest. The force of collapsing into the snow sent him sliding down a hill and close to a nearby wood. He just lay there near exhausted for a long time. Then he began to laugh. Sliding down the hill had reminded him of his childhood. In the snows of winter, he and Ed would build sledges from sticks and see who could get the furthest going down a steep hill not far from Sour Rock. If Badger could fashion something similar from the sticks of the wood it could be easier to reach Sour Rock with only one leg in use.

Gathering sticks wasn’t too difficult, but Badger could see little to bind them together. He and his brother had always taken rope from the keep when they went out in the snow. Many plants that could be used to make rope would have died for the winter, perhaps there was some tree bark he could use. From the right tree, the bark would come off in strands and could be used for the binding.

Badger did not know trees well. The first few trees he tried to scrape the bark from provided large chunks of wood. Many of the trees nearby seemed to be of these types. Yet after some time of searching Badger saw a small thin tree at the edge of the wood. The bark was torn on one side with frayed strands as if some animal had clawed it. Badger did not recognise the claw marks on the tree. He pulled at a strand while remaining cautious that whatever beast had created these marks might come back.

The bark came away in a thin strip. Badger gave it a tug testing its strength. The bark did not snap; it would do. He pulled away a number of strands and began working the sticks he had gathered into a sledge. It took some time since his body was far less manoeuvrable with only a single leg. Finding he couldn’t quite get at angles he usually could meant Badger had to find new ways of doing things he could once do with ease. Although it took time, Badger was able to create the sledge. It wasn’t his best creation, but it would allow him a much smoother journey through the snow.

Soon Badger was on his sledge feeling like he was gliding across flat land in comparison to how he had previously been travelling. Then he began to feel the digging of sticks in to wounds he had not known he had. Some wounds burned while others ached. It felt that with every push of his sledge Badger’s pain increased. Then he reached slightly hilly terrain. Here downhills were refreshing, but the bulk of Badger’s time was spent looking for hand holds to pull himself and his sledge up a hill. If he let go of the hill or the sledge he would either slide down the hill or the sledge would. This resulted in Badger having to restart his climb of a hill on multiple occasions. With lesser use of his limbs, his climbs were clumsy and he scrambled to the top of even the smallest of hills.

It reached a point where Badger was just working his way across the Core because it was all he could do besides stop. Pain ate away at him while his bare face had become numb from the cold. The rest of his body was well insulated by the suit from the ashen people, but Badger considered removing it to numb the rest of his body from the pain of his wounds.

The will to continue had almost left Badger when he reached the craggy land by Sour Rock. The pain was all he felt, it was overpowering. Every movement he made was a struggle the medicine of the ashen people had now fully lost its effect. Badger was almost certain he began to recognise the land. He thought he collapsed on the main road into Sour Rock, but he wasn’t certain. Hopefully, someone would find him. There was nothing else he could do. Physically he could not force his body onward.

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“Is it really Badger? Let me through at once. I wish to see my son.” Badger opened his eyes to find his mother, Lady Grey, and Ed stooped over him as he was pulled along on a cart. He strained himself to speak to them. He had to tell them that Ava approached as soon as he could. It was difficult to speak. His mouth was dry. Ed handed him a cup and Lady Grey insisted, “You do not need to speak you are home now.” She did not know what Badger had to say. “Ava,” was all he could say at first, “Gather our men.” Both Grey and Ed looked worried, but Ed shouted a man and had him send messengers to the men Badger had been training around the Core. “She is queen and believes us…” was all Badger could manage before drifting from consciousness.

Later he woke up in a bed. No one was around, but Badger knew he had achieved what he had set out to. With life he would have lost perhaps weeks before to execution, he had now helped his family and people. Now they would stand a chance in the battle to come with the Kordan forces. There was little more Badger could do in his current state and he accepted that. Somehow the pain he had felt during his journey had subsided, but he knew he was in a far worse condition than when he had left the ashen people. He would be lucky to survive even now he lay in his bed within Sour Rock.

## 19. The Battle for Sour Rock - Edward

Badger had barely stirred since he arrived in Sour Rock. Ed was hopeful, but Mayer the sage still believed that Badger would be lucky to survive. As far as Ed was concerned, if Badger had got back to Sour Rock in the state that he was in then he would surely survive his wounds. Still, the deep scars that Badger had received were devastating. How he had sustained them Ed could not tell, but they almost entirely covered Badger’s body. Due to Badger’s lack of consciousness, Ed stood at the head of the battle counsel. He, Lady Grey, and some of the Stoneheart commanders stood around a map of the area.

Scouts had been sent to the Western Bridge Lands after Badger’s arrival. Crossing the Link was the best way for the Kordans to reach the Core with a large army during most of the winter. Recently the Kordan army had crossed the bridge to the Core. They headed directly for Sour Rock; a marker was placed on the map to indicate their current location. Without Badger’s warning, the rest of the Stonehearts would only have discovered the Kordan army around now. A minor lord in one of the western towns on the Core would have informed them, but that wouldn’t have given enough time to prepare for this attack. With Badger’s help, all of the Stoneheart forces were already gathered within the walls of Sour Rock.

This would be no challenge even without Badger. Although the Kordan force was much greater than the Stoneheart one, the defences of Sour Rock were formidable. The battle counsel discussed tactics, but Ed doubted the need for such a strong plan. His mother worried that he would not be able to fight such a battle. That without Badger it would be extremely difficult to fight against the Kordans. How could she still not see that Ed was capable, that he and Badger were now near equals? Ed would make short work of the Kordan army just as Badger would have and then they would discover what had caused the Blue Gold Peace to be broken. When Badger awoke he would be safe and his journey to the Core to save them would be worthwhile.

This tactics discussion had gone on for too long. “We will send our riders out to meet them, their quick attacks will thin the Kordan forces, and then we will use our sturdy defences to repel what they have left.” Ed interrupted the discussion. Many around the room looked shocked; Ed had the most authority after his brother but they had not expected him to speak up. Many of the generals attempted to protest but could not. Then Lady Grey spoke, “My son. Is that wise? We have an advantage with our fortification and they will surely attack expecting our numbers to be much smaller. If we attack and show our force they may prolong the battle into a siege.” Why did his mother never use his title? She always called Badger lord. She didn’t respect him or his position like she did Badger.

“This is the best approach, I doubt attacking first will encourage a long siege. The siege of Hyford is too close in any soldier’s memory.” After Lady Grey questioned Ed’s tactics some of the generals began to speak up. They claimed that sending riders might be risky. If the riders were killed before they damaged the Kordan force then that would greatly improve the Kordans chances in the battle. Ed dismissed this, he had decided how he would fight this battle. Men often protested against Badger’s tactics, but it seemed he always found the way to fight that was hard for the enemy to predict. Badger listened to their counsel but usually fought his own way. Ed would do the same.

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Ed stood on the battlements of Sour Rock overlooking the approaching army. From this distance, they appeared to be a large brown puddle slowly flowing toward Sour Rock. Ed knew that even though they did not yet look threatening they would fight fiercely. The Kordan force had just crossed the tree line so soon the riders would charge. It had been planned that once the Kordan army reached a certain point the riders would charge and attack them from behind.

The riders rounded the trees from their hiding spot. The Kordans noticed, but too slowly. They could not round their pikes on the horses quickly enough to stop them. Running through the Kordan forces the first charge of the riders took few Stoneheart casualties. They ran past the brown and gold jerseys of the Kordans and rounded on them for a second charge. With long pikes raised this time the army was more prepared for the riders. It seemed the horses could barely pass the first line of the pikemen. The wave of cavalry collapsed parted by the Kordans.

What was left of the riders was a feeble force compared to what they had been. How had so many died so quickly? Had Ed made the wrong decision? He had lost close to as many riders as the Kordans had lost pikes. Those men may have served better hear on the walls. Ed had been wrong. The riders retreated back to Sour Rock. What was left of them would barely add to their force in the oncoming attack. Ed had failed. He had been too confident and had lost much of the advantage Badger had provided them with. Maybe Ed wasn’t Badger’s equal. Could he even win this fight?

After the attack from the riders, the Kordan force approached steadily when they had regrouped. With them, they carried ladders and battering rams. They were prepared to break into Sour Rock. Would Ed be the first to allow the walls to be penetrated? He couldn’t live up to the Stoneheart name never mind the name of Edward the Mighty. He was a weak pretence at a leader. Why had anyone allowed him to fight this battle?

The Kordan army approached slowly on the opposite side from where the town expanded outside of the wall and that sickened Ed. They were more prepared than him. When they reached the wall they would not even be weary from the recent attack of Ed’s riders. Every minute longer the Kordan army took to reach the wall Ed’s doubt grew. He had already lost. It made him want to laugh at his feeble attempt to stop them. Then a soldier approached, “Sir, the archers are ready to fire on your command. We won’t let you down.” Ed couldn’t let his doubt get the better of him. Even if this battle would be difficult he could not let his people down. The Stonehearts may not have been prepared, but they would not go down without a fight.

“How many arrows do we have soldier? Can we afford to waste some?” Ed asked. If they had plenty they could start firing early. That would make the enemy’s approach more difficult. When they reached the rocks around the town it would be difficult to climb while arrows rained down upon them. “We have a good number, sir. Had lots left after Hyford since we got there late.” That was excellent news.

“Fire as many arrows as you can as soon as the enemy is in range. Blackout the sky with arrows. They will not look to the sky without fear of losing their eyes.” The Stonehearts had lost the first attack, but they had not lost the battle. Ed still had the advantage that was the walls of Sour Rock. The arrows initially caught the Kordan forces unaware. They did not raise their shields in time to prevent the loss of a majority of their first line. However, once they had their huge shields raised many of the arrows were blocked. Ed raised an arm to call a cease to the arrow fire. He would wait until the Kordan army reached the rocks the town was built upon to continue the arrow fall. That would expose the men when they attempted to scramble towards Sour Rock.

A splinter force of the Kordans headed up the pathway toward the gates. They cradled battering rams underneath a roof of shields. Ed told a man to gather the cavalry behind the main gate. They would charge the ram when it was close enough that it could not escape. It appeared no arrows would pierce the cover of the rams, but few pikemen accompanied them. That would allow the charge to have a substantial impact on those who approached the gate.

Soon the Kordan men began to climb the rocks below Ed. He thrust his arm forward to indicate the continuation of the arrow fire. Now the enemy was closer the shots were more precise picking at holes in their defences, however, the enemy ladders were hard to drop. Instead of holes, there were indentations for footholds. This meant firing at those below the ladder was difficult. A ladder was getting dangerously far up the rocks. “Focus your fire on the men at the front of that ladder.” Ed called, “We cannot allow them to mount our walls.” The focus initially did little, but when the first man fell he tumbled down the rock toppling many of his ladder carrying companions. The ladder swung around knocking many back off the rocks.

A man diverted Ed’s attention to the men approaching the main gate. The rams were very close now. He rushed to the gate to explain his plan to the cavalrymen before the rams reached the gate. He was on the walls before the rams were at the gate. Just as the first ram swung towards the gate Stoneheart men pulled the gates open causing the ram holders to stumble. Before they could regain their footing the riders had cut them down. The ram carriers had no time to react and none survived. The rest of those who had been approaching the main gate retreated to join the main Kordan force. Ed’s cavalry returned within the walls after clearing the walkway toward Sour Rock. They would not suffer great losses from the Kordan pikes again.

As soon as Ed was happy with the results at the gate he rushed back to where the main Kordan forces were attempting to scale the wall. They had begun to fire arrows back at the walls so the metal shields between the battlements had been raised. These effectively made the gaps in the battlements much smaller so the archers on the wall were far more difficult to hit. A few ladders had been erected on the wall, but no soldiers had reached the top yet. Some more ladders were almost up. Ed reached a tower on the wall where the pull ropes for the shields and wall blades were. He looked out toward the wall waiting for the new ladders to peep over the battlements. Heads of Kordan men rose above the wall on the older ladders, but the new ladders were still not up. A few men got over the wall and then the new Kordan ladders were up. Ed pulled the rope to release the wall blades.

Shocked men who had been about to get over the wall fell with the tops of the ladders as they were ripped apart by the blades. The few who had managed to get on the wall were quickly dispatched. When Ed got a chance to see over the wall he saw the ladders torn to splinters along the rocks below. The wall blades were slowly pulled back, but that was not an issue. With no ladders left men who had been attempting to get closer to the wall now tried to run down the rocks. They could not climb the wall and so on the rocks, they were easy targets for the archers.

What was left of the Kordan men regrouped for one more attempt at an attack on the walls of Sour Rock. With pikes at the front and shields raised the Kordan men swept up the path toward the gate again. Along the path, they recovered their rams. Ed’s archers had difficulty taking down any of the men and he feared sending cavalry at those pikes. He waited, allowing the archers to continue firing to pick off those that they could. Sour Rock still had many tricks up its sleeve.

When the first ram reach the gate for the second time a vat of oil was released through a hole above the gate. This covered the Kordan men but did little until it was lit by the drop of a torch from the wall. The walkway before Sour Rock burst into flames. Screams were barely heard over the roar of the fire, but as the oil burnt away the cries continued. In the absence of the crackling flame, the moaning of the men was disturbing. The Stoneheart men made short work of what was left of the Kordans, but Ed didn’t focus on that. He just heard the screams of the dying, saw the bodies rolling in pain, and witnessed the destruction outside of Sour Rock.

He had won, but he couldn’t help seeing the pain he had caused. It had been for his family and people. If they had not fought against the Kordans they would all have been slaughtered. Yet Ed didn’t even truly know the cause of the battle he had fought. This was most certainly the end of the Blue Gold Peace Ed had been such an advocate for. It was so different commanding such an action. In the past, Ed had always helped Badger, but Badger had always made the final decisions. Somehow Ed now felt more responsible for those who had died in this battle and the consequences of it. His mother had been right. Ed didn’t feel ready to take on Badger’s responsibility. Not yet anyway.

## 20. The march on Skypike - Hawk

On their way toward Skypike Hawk and the Flaming Champions had been continuously harassed by the ticklon savages. Ridiculously it appeared that they were worshipping those horrible cursed creatures. Why would they do that? Hawk could understand using them to fight their enemies, but actively worshipping them was completely insane. It was clear that the White Lord was the true God and only idol. The cursed ones were just evil creatures set on destruction. They had no truth or justice, they were just beasts. Apparently, all those tribes were now united under the banner of the old gods. Did they really think the cursed were the old gods? How stupid of them.

Unfortunately, the harassment of the tribesmen and the cursed had left the Flaming Champions weakened for their assault on Skypike, Arvar’s keep. After his escape, no scout had been able to find Arvar, but it seemed he had run to Skypike. As far as Hawk was concerned he was now evenly matched with Arvar. Although Arvar was tactically strong, Hawk had weakened him substantially while fighting through his lands. Now, all Hawk had to do was finish his march toward Skypike and take his revenge.

It would not be long until they reached Skypike now, likely they would be there by the end of the day. When they arrived Hawk would order Carden and his men to attack right away. Skypike would be close to land and Hawk didn’t want to lose any time he could to attack the keep. If they didn’t attack quickly then they would have to wait a whole month before they could even truly begin a siege; that was far too long. Carden had at first been hesitant about attacking right away, but Hawk had offered to increase the pay of the Flaming Champions. Mercenaries were so easy to manage.

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The attack was going fantastically. Arvar had offered little to no resistance. The Flaming Champions were mostly across the bridge to Skypike now. No one was attacking from within Skypike. “Arvar’s abilities were overly exaggerated Carden, we are on his doorstep and yet he does nothing.” Hawk laughed. Carden just nodded. The gates to Skypike swung open revealing Valinar soldiers with purple trimmed armour, but no battle began. The second in command of the Flaming Champions after Carden greeted someone at the gate. All of the men seemed to relax. “What is happening here? Why is no one attacking? Charge! They just opened the gates. We can kill them all.” Hawk screamed as he was restrained by two Champions.

“I’m sorry Hawk, but Arvar paid the higher price. Money’s what we work for. We had a little conversation when I was taking him back to his cell. Turned out he has a lot of money or you don’t pay as well as you think. Anyway, the cursed attack was the perfect time to let him go. Shame they killed his wife though. Pretty, she was.” Carden said calmly. How traitorous could a man be? Hawk had worked with Carden for so long, they had taken much of southwestern Mistrun. Within minutes Hawk had lost everything he had worked for. His chance of revenge, his army, and his lands all gone. Hawk had done everything right. This shouldn’t have been happening.

He screamed and shouted, but it did nothing. Hawk had never been a strong man and the restraint of two Flaming Champions was more than enough to hold him. It didn’t take long for them to drag Hawk into Skypike and throw him into a cell. Entering that cage he was even lower than he had been when his power was stripped away just moments before. Cells were for commoners not would be Great Lords. Arvar had not only beat Hawk but now he disrespected him as well.

It wasn’t long before Arvar entered the room. He stood tall almost seeming to gloat with every step. Arvar had won but he needn’t be so sickeningly proud about it. “It appears you have lost my friend. You do of course understand that I allowed you to take much of my land so those who worship the old gods would weaken your men. Then when the Flaming Champions were worn and worried about fighting me I paid them better than you. I was always ahead, but this was good sport.”

Good sport? How could Arvar still see this as a game? Hawk had told him that he wanted revenge for his family and then Arvar’s wife had died. This was a serious conflict. “You will have to die of course,” Arvar continued, “You did cause the death of my wife after all. Clearing up some loose ends would also be beneficial before I fight the Kordans.” He dropped a longsword revealing the sun crest of the Kordans on its hilt. “They aided your petty attempts to fight me and clearly have some issue with me. That girl Ava could barely conceal her resent when I was in the capital. It won’t do.”

Just as he began to walk away he turned his head to look into Hawk’s eyes. When Hawk met Arvar’s gaze he just smirked and ordered, “Cut off his head.” Before leaving the room without even waiting for a response from his men. The soldiers in the room tossed a coin for who would do it. Hawk couldn’t quite tell if they flipped the coin because neither wanted to kill him or because they both wanted to. At this point, Hawk didn’t care. He had been defeated. Pretending to be a lord he had made a fool of himself and quickly got himself killed. He just wished the guards would hurry up with killing him. They’d now decided to do the best of three coin flips since they weren’t happy with the first result.

Honestly, this anticipation of death was torture enough. Maybe that was why they did it. They just enjoyed frustrating prisoners before they killed them. The guard doing the flipping dropped the coin on the third toss. “Not fair, do it again.” The other guard said. Had the coin been dropped on purpose? Hawk couldn’t tell. He felt he didn’t care about the result of their game, but couldn’t draw his attention away from it. Finally, they decided and Hawk longed for a best of five coin flips. He didn’t want to die and he told the men. He pleaded, but his pleas were muted. His whole consciousness was muted. A man held Hawk down while the other raised the Kordan longsword high above his head. Hawk blinked and he never opened his eyes again.

## 21. Restless Ruling - Boudain

It was a sunny midday when Boudain awoke, but the cold winter’s frost still bit at his exposed face. Boudain got up and approached the window to survey his kingdom. How beautiful Hyford was with a glaze of white. The light shone off the frost creating dazzling effects. Any moment Boudain expected the shade to ruin his peace. He went about his day hoping that the shade would not return he could not allow it. Now Boudain knew what his daughter had done with Mistrun he had to recover quickly to ensure her reign did not have lasting consequences. From what Boudain had gathered she had sent an army to Sour Rock. How he could make the Stonehearts trust him after that he did not know.

After dressing Boudain left his room for the first time since the shade had taken him. First, he would find Farin and learn all he could about the goings on of the court. Unfortunately, Layal was gone; if he had still been in Hyford Boudain would have seen him first. On Boudain’s way to see the sage, he passed many a shocked guard. None dared to bother him out of fear or respect perhaps. How mad did they think him? Would Boudain still be able to rule or would the men of the court and country still worry about him being feeble minded?

“The morning is crisp Farin. Do you still collect frost samples to observe the crystals?” Boudain said as he entered Farin’s workshop. Farin jumped turning quickly, but then after seeing Boudain returned to tottering around his workshop. “I see you have recovered your majesty. Regretfully I have not had time to observe any crystal of ice recently, but I do enjoy their formations still.” Said Farin warmly, then almost as an afterthought, “Has it gone? What do you know of your recent ailment?” Boudain told Farin all he had heard. That he knew Layal had been banished and moongrass had been burned to deter the shade that was infecting him. Farin filled the gaps of what had happened for Boudain and explained more about shades to him.

When Boudain left the workshop he felt ready to face Ava, but before he did he nervously checked the hallway for any dark creatures that might invade his thoughts. When he was sure no shade would pounce he strode to the great hall, flung the doors open, and bellowed, “Get down from my chair this instant. You are not fit to rule and have made foul decisions in my stead.” Ava, who had been answering requests of the people, sat shocked for a moment as the crowd parted. When she regained her wits she screeched, “Someone restrain my father he is delusional and ill.” But no one did.

“An illness takes your father and you decide to exploit the issue. You find the illness is caused by a shade and know the cure, but keep it to yourself so you can rule. And when you do rule you do a poor and disrespectful job. Not listening to advisors, ruling for yourself, upsetting guests. Every action you have taken has been weak and you expect these men to help you. No. No, they don’t want you here and neither do I.” The crowd was silent. Some guards approached and ceased Ava without Boudain’s asking. Ava attempted to stutter a response, but Boudain cut her off with his deep voice, “But you are my daughter. I shall have to better teach you the ways of the court. Put her in a cell to contemplate what she has done and who she has become.”

Boudain then walked directly through the parted crowd, sat on his throne and said, “Well let us get on. I will not be here all day. Who is next?” It took a few moments before the man next in line approached the king to ask about his broken cart wheel. When the man did he did so cautiously. It had been broken transporting goods into Hyford and the man wanted it fixed. Boudain dismissed him quickly saying a broken wheel was no good reason to come and request help at court. Boudain carried out much of the rest of the day as he usually would as king, at least when he addressed the smaller issues. In the back of his mind, he worried what he would do about the Stonehearts if they even lived. How would the rest of Mistrun react?

That evening, when standard courtly matters had been dealt with, Boudain tried to learn all that was going on throughout Mistrun. It appeared Hawk Novar’s conquest of the west had finally halted. His men broke bread with Arvar’s; could this be a peace or had Hawk been betrayed by his mercenaries? It was never wise to employ mercenaries, they had no loyalty. News from the core was little which worried Boudain. He knew not what he would do if either side had won a battle at Sour Rock, but not knowing the result of the battle made his planning far more difficult. On top of that, it appeared the Rydel’s now wished to fight the Kordans. A spy had reported that a boy, John Rydel, had been killed when Ava had visited Sour Rock and the Rydels suspected the death had been Ava’s doing.

Boudain now had threats from all sides. If Arvar had won or made peace with Hawk then he was free to attack at any time, although Arvar had been loyal if he was to amass a large enough force he might take the chance to claim the throne. The Stonehearts could emerge victorious and ready for war from the mists of the Core and the Rydels were angry from the loss of a family member. The Rydels and Stonehearts had long been allies so each would sympathise with the other’s cause. Yet perhaps they would hold back to repel the northern raids. Could Boudain use that to his advantage to prevent another civil war? They would lose too much if they ignored the raids to come so far south surely. That was what Boudain could exploit to recover his position.

Just as Boudain had decided his plan a sudden worry set in. The shade would come. It had not bothered him all day. Now when he was tired and weaker surely it would attack him. He tried to settle and sleep that night, but the idea of the shade kept him anxious and uneasy. When he did not think of the shade he worried about the current affairs of Mistrun. The Blue Gold Peace broke and noble families ready to tear down yet another rule they did not see as fit. That night Boudain barely slept, but the shade did not return.

## 22. A New Great Lord - Edward

After the victory against the Kordan army, Ed went to tell Badger the news. He hoped Badger was awake. Perhaps he could give Ed some advice on how to deal with being the cause of such death. Ed had caused more of that than he needed by allowing his cavalry to fall so early when so many had advised against the action. How had Badger led the Stonehearts for so long and from a younger age than Ed now? He would know what to tell Ed, Badger always knew what to say when Ed was down.

Entering Badger’s quarters it felt cold as if the winter frost came from within the very room. Ed approached Badger who lay peacefully in his bed. He touched Badger’s forehead to check if the fever Badger had caught on top of his wounds had lifted. Badger was as cold as the room. Ed checked his brother for breathing. There was none. Ed fell to his knees beside his brother’s bed and wept. He had died for them and had almost expected to when he set out for Hyford a few months prior. They should never have let him leave for Hyford when Boudain requested it. They should have fought with the Rydels against the Kordans before the raiders came.

“I cannot do this without you, my brother.” Ed sobbed, “Stay and help us. You alone have allowed the Stonehearts to rise in recent years and now they will be left with me. I who has robbed the name of the great Edward the Mighty, but could not live up to the weakest Stoneheart. I worked well with you, I am sure I will not without you. Brother, stay and help us.” His last words trailed off to almost a whisper as he spoke them. His crying became silent but more profuse. Ed slipped to the floor and lay mourning in his armour for a long time.

Sometime later Mayer the sage entered to tend to Badger. “It will do no good Mayer. Badger is dead.” Ed mumbled from his spot on the floor. Mayer surveyed the room touched Badger to check upon him. Then with some difficulty, Mayer sat on the floor beside Ed shedding a few small tears of his own. “Your brother was one of the best I have seen in a long time. He gave his life to save us and we shall make the most of what he has given. Do you see these pockmarks upon his skin?” Mayer gestured to some on Badger’s arm, “I have seen such marks once before. The woman who bore them had travelled through the Blot. In doing so she had escaped her pursuers and saved her newborn child. The marks are burns from the molten rain that falls upon that land. Badger knew he had little chance of survival if he travelled through that land and yet he did. This must have been the only way he could save us otherwise he would not have taken such a perilous path.”

Ed no longer cried. He wasn’t certain if Mayer had consoled him or if he had run out of tears. Not feeling better, but feeling like he at least had more of an answer to why Badger died, Ed stood. Mayer was right they had to make the most of this victory that Badger had provided, but first people had to be informed of Badger’s death so that they could accept what had happened. “I am afraid I cannot live up to him Mayer. He was my guide and my brother. There was so much I could learn from him and so much I could have said to him.” Ed paused for a moment looking to Badger, “I will try Mayer, but things will be difficult without him.” Mayer just nodded as Ed left the room.

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A week had passed since Badger’s death. It had been a difficult week. Lady Grey had taken the news almost as badly as Ed, but she had insisted the ceremony for Ed to become great lord of the Core be carried out straight away. For Ed the last week had been a blur. He had been numb to everything and hardly took notice of his ceremony. Everything was tainted by the death of Ed’s brother. He should have had a ceremony first not Ed. Now Ed was a great lord, but he felt so much worse than when his brother had had the position.

Today they rode to the edge of the core, all in black, but not to any bridge. They went to the rock edges that made way to the void. With them the only cart held Badger. He was dressed in his finest ceremonial armour in an open casket with small blue flowers scattered around him. No one spoke they just rode or walked with black hoods up and heads down. All was quiet and Ed thought about the times he had shared with his brother. How they had not always agreed but had respected each other, how they had always been there for each other when they could, and how Ed would now try to cope without him.

When they reached the edge of the core those in front of the cart parted, dismounted, and stood along the edge watching the cart at their centre. The cart stopped right at the edge and those behind it parted making another line behind those already at the edge. One by one all left a letter in Badger’s casket with parting things they wished to say to him and then returned to their positions. After everyone had left a letter, Badger’s casket was tipped from the cart and off the edge. The casket remained upright with a weighted bottom. Everyone looked down and watched Badger fade into the mists of the void. Ed felt a small fraction of a weight lift as his brother fell.

On the journey home, people took their hoods down and conversed about Badger. Ale had been hidden in a compartment in the cart bellow the casket. Soon everybody was drinking and tales were flowing about Badger’s life and how great a man he had been. One man even claimed Badger had done more for the Stonehearts than Edward the Mighty. By the time they arrived back in Sour Rock, everyone had told their stories about Badger, the ale had dried up and everyone had returned to a more sombre mood. Badger was gone.

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Not long after the funeral Ed received a letter from Boudain. He apologised for the recent attack claiming Ava had stolen his throne while he was possessed by a cursed shade. He regretted the attack and wished to mend the Blue Gold Peace by aiding in the defence against the Calvari raiders this cycle. He would send whatever the Stonehearts and Rydels needed if it was supplies, men, or money they would have it. He understood that they may not trust him so would send any of these things on their terms.

The decision ate at Ed. He treasured peace so much but knew Badger would have been sceptical of such an offer. He communicated with the Rydels. Orson was happy to follow Ed’s lead for he had lost the most to the Kordans. It seemed Orson now trusted that Boudain was not the source of many recent issues and believed Ava had been the cause. The choice was difficult. Accepting Boudain’s offer could prevent a war on two fronts and yet it could also put the Rydels and Stonehearts in a worse position as well. If Boudain decided to betray them he might strike when he knew they were encumbered by their fight against the raiders. If he did not betray them then the raids would be easily repelled and a peace could be restored. That didn’t feel right after the recent battle though.

Even with the cursed ones returning Boudain’s explanation seemed somewhat farfetched to Ed. Although in such a situation, it seemed perfectly fitting that Ava would exploit her father’s weakness to do her bidding. It took some time for Ed to make his decision about accepting Boudain’s deal, but when he did he was happy with it. Badger would have made a more informed decision. He would have known what to do right away and why. It took Ed weeks to make the decision Badger would have made very quickly, but Ed believed Badger would have made the same choice. He only hoped that the choice was the right one. Making these decisions was his responsibility now, and he would have to learn how to make them quickly if he wished to protect the Core.

## 23. Arvar’s Plot - Arvar

“It looks like you will have your throne after all Clinart. Even if Boudain does recover his petty daughter will inherit that throne eventually. I am certain she is the one that caused this attack. It is a shame. I liked Boudain, but I worry that with his state of mind he will have little control now. You should have seen him. He is practically insane.” Arvar said to Clinart as they looked out from the battlements of Skypike. Skypike Island was floating away from the mainland of Mistrun now. They would have to wait roughly a month before they could return.

That didn’t bother Arvar; cursed were amassed on the planes where Skypike met the mainland. These cursed were now just barely visible through the mist as Skypike retreated from the mainland. It would be safer to bide their time in Skypike and wait for the cursed to leave than to fight them and lose many men. Even with a force bolstered by the Flaming Champions that would be foolish. Arvar had never fought any cursed ones, but the tales told of fierce creatures that were unpredictable especially in numbers. They seemed to have been gathering where there were large numbers of dead. Since Arvar had been observing Hawk his men had noticed that after every battle he fought, cursed would gather and pick at the remains.

What would happen when the numbers of cursed ones grew too large to feed just on remains? They seemed to only attack when provoked or hungry. When their numbers grew they would be much happier to fight since more of them would be hungry. Fortunately, the different species of cursed rarely fought together; together they would be even more dangerous.

Clinart, the bastard brother of Rudolf, had said nothing in response to Arvar. He just looked out at the cursed, worried. “Oh cheer up Clinart. This is what you wanted. The man usurped your throne. A few monsters aren’t going to stop you are they?” Arvar said trying to encourage him. Clinart turned to look at Arvar. “A few monsters! Are you mad? There is an army of cursed on the mainland. Those creatures tore this land to pieces and near wiped people from Mistrun altogether. I don’t want to be king if I have to contend with them.”

“Think about this Clinart. If you are king you will be the safest man from the cursed in all of Mistrun. You can have all the guards you want and you will be able to pick any town to make your fortress, apart from Skypike of course. You could even make your own fort if you wanted. The cursed ones won’t be able to kill the most powerful man in the kingdom.” Clinart thought about that for a moment. This was why Arvar had never supported him to take the throne in the past. He was indecisive and a coward. Two qualities a king just could not have. They wouldn’t matter now though, Clinart would be king in name alone. Arvar would make sure it was he who had the power in Mistrun.

Finally, Clinart spoke, “I suppose you are right Arvar. I would be safe in Hyford or Sour Rock, or maybe somewhere else. They did kill my brother as well. Yes, we will fight them.” Arvar barely stopped himself laughing at this pathetic excuse for a Berkmer. Too many nobles lived far too easily, they had become soft and they didn’t even see it. At least Hawk had had some determination. Clinart was a puppet asking to be moulded. He did not always get along with him, but at least Arvar knew how to work with him. “That is good to hear. I will begin preparations right away your majesty.” Arvar half bowed and left Clinart on the battlements.

Now Arvar would have to wait a month before he could take any action against the Kordans directly, but he would not be idle in that time. He would plan strategy and ensure the correct supplies were gathered. By bird, he could communicate with all in Valinar lands who had only bowed to Hawk at Arvar’s command. It would have to be a slow trickle of supply movements otherwise Kordan spies may become suspicious. Arvar didn’t want to lose his element of surprise for his invasion. Even though Ava did not like or trust Arvar she would not expect an assault on the capital and Boudain gave trust far too easily.

Perhaps Arvar could wait until the Kordans were distracted and then strike. They had not lost their full force fighting in Sour Rock. Had Ava been wise enough to send a small force or had she expected less resistance? Boudain had not given the order, Arvar had enough spies in court to know most of what went on there. Soon the Kordans would likely fight with the northern lords again. Surely there was too much unsettlement between them now that they would stop fighting. It would be easy to take the capital if the Kordans sent another substantial force north. Then all Arvar would have to do would be to walk through the gates.

## 24. Aftermath - Boudain

Not knowing what to expect from the Stonehearts and Rydels, Boudain read their response. They had agreed to the peace on the condition that the Kordan army support them in defence against the Calvari raids this cycle. Boudain was happy to learn this. He had hoped the outcome of these events would not be war, but with Ava taking such harsh actions the chance of avoiding it had been slim. As Boudain read on he found the terms of the agreement; his forces would be spread through the Rydel and Stoneheart camps to make it more difficult for Boudain to mount an attack. With his men spread like that either side would suffer greatly if one turned on the other. The men would also be sent in small groups instead of Boudain sending the whole army north at once. To these terms he would agree, he had no intention of fighting them and if he didn’t send too great a force he would still be able to defend the capital.

The worst part of the letter was at the end. Badger had died from wounds he had sustained returning to the Core, Ed was now great lord there. The letter said little about what had caused this and Boudain found himself wanting to know more. Their families had not always been on the same side, but Boudain had respected the younger Badger and recently he had become his equal in many ways. Suddenly Badger was gone after escaping Boudain’s own dungeons. He was certain Badger would not have died if he wasn’t pressed to reach the Core. He was a cautious man and without good reason, he would not risk his life. If he had believed he could help his people by getting there before the army then he would have.

While reading the letter Boudain had believed it written by Badger which made the news at the end an even greater surprise. When rereading the letter he found sparks of Ed’s character. Perhaps his optimism when writing the letter was the reason their families were not now at war. Fortunately for Ed his optimism was well placed, Boudain wished to avoid conflict if he could, but he still had much to learn. With a few men in the right places in Stoneheart and Rydel camps, Boudain could quickly end a conflict. Perhaps the men would be watched and guarded, but that would be difficult on such a large scale. Only one or two men had to slip away to kill some lords in their sleep or set some tents alight.

Ava entered Boudain’s quarters; he had released her from the dungeons. Although she had deserved to stay locked away after what she had caused, Boudain could not keep his daughter locked up. It pained him to see her locked away and it would present a bad picture of his family if she stayed there too long. “Farther, what did the letter say? What is the news?” She asked. Undoubtedly she hoped for the opposite response to what they had received. After what she had done it was clear she wished to see the end of the Stonehearts. Maybe she would learn that there were other ways to resolve problems than by force but she had not yet.

“The news is good Ava. It is very good, but you shall be privy to it only when I tell the rest of the court. Please leave me to my business.” She scowled slightly and moved to exit the room, but stopped just before exiting. “What an interesting smell. What is it that you are burning?” She said turning back to face Boudain. Since the shade had left Boudain had been burning moongrass as a deterrent to prevent its return. “You know the smell, Ava. I am sure of that. Do not play games with me or you will come to regret it. Now leave me.” Boudain spoke his anger beginning to rise. His own daughter would threaten him. Farin had said burning the moongrass for some time would prevent the shade from possessing Boudain again. They would often linger in a place until they were certain they could no longer torment someone or any of their family members. Once a shade was certain there was no more harm it could do to that family it would move on. Ava had also been burning moongrass from what Boudain had heard, but if either of them stopped soon there was a chance they could be possessed by the shade.

Ava left quickly due to Boudain’s rising temper. He only wished that Ava made her threats without the intention of acting upon them. He had enough to deal with just between the lords of Mistrun; if his own daughter also plotted against him he feared he would have to make sacrifices if he wished to create the peaceful kingdom he had hoped for. Was the shade right about him being an unfit ruler? At the thought of the shade, Boudain looked around his empty room nervously. After a quick sweep with his eyes, he wasn’t satisfied and began checking cupboards and chests. After Boudain was certain he could find nothing of the shade in his quarters he could still not shake the tense feeling that the shade would come back. He worried he would not be able to stop it again.

# Part 2

## 25. A Girl from Nowhere - Trissa

In a land mostly forgotten by the rest of Mistrun Trissa stood on the edge of the cliff that fell into the void. She looked down into the swirling mists that rushed up toward her sending ripples through her brown hair. Taking a deep breath she closed her eyes. Jumping was the hardest part, after that everything would be natural. A few seconds later she dived into the mists. The cool air bit at her cheeks. Breathing was difficult through the force of the wind at first, but soon she began to adjust. She opened her eyes; the bombardment of air on her face instantly began to dry them. Through the mist, she could not yet see any. That was disappointing, if she fell too far without spotting one it would be a wasted jump.

Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed one much further down. She closed her eyes and focused on where it had been in her mind. Soon she was accelerating slowly to her right and toward the farnoth that she had spotted. Ahead of her, she pointed her spear. When Trissa opened her eyes the farnoth was directly ahead. She gritted her teeth preparing for the impact with the creature. It was a large floating ball of brown fluff with tentacles wiggling beneath it. Other than that the creature had no distinguishable features. Its nose and mouth were beneath the fur and farnoths had no eyes.

Trissa’s spear pierced the farnoth preparing her to land upon it. It bobbed down too far with the impact; Trissa’s bungee cord pulled her back. She held on to her spear with both hands hoping not to lose her catch. The farnoth began to slip off the end of her spear. No. She wouldn’t allow it. She needed this farnoth. With all her capacity she willed the farnoth back on to her spear and toward her. Surely it could not continue to fall. Farnoths bodies naturally floated so, even if it was dead, it could not fall much further.

The descent of the farnoth came to a stop and then it began to move toward Trissa. In a short time, she was stood upon its back. She left the spear protruding from the back of the creature and lay on her belly upon it. With her arms, she stretched to reach around the farnoth and began to rub its sides. When warmed the creatures would rise and when cooled they would sink. They regulated their own body heat so that they could fly off the sides of Mistrun. Farnoths mostly used this ability to eat moss from the cliff edges. Often while Trissa hunted she contemplated what she would do if she had the abilities of these creatures.

The farnoth began to rise. It would probably take up to half an hour to reach the edge of Mistrun again. As the ascent began Trissa felt a twitching in her mind. It had been there during her whole descent, but it was only now that she noticed it. She tried to push it away in her mind; there wasn’t time for her to come down with a headache or further illness. Surprisingly her mental push against the suspect headache caused it to subside, and Trissa continued her ascent in peace.

If Trissa hadn’t have caught the farnoth she would have had to use her bungee cord to pull herself back to the edge of Mistrun. Fortunately, she had found a farnoth providing her with her much favoured method of ascent and her source of income. Trissa was a sky hunter and a good one. She caught more farnoth than any in the lands around Woldstead which was in the north of Burnbury. People would pay reasonable sums for parts of the farnoth to create floating items. After a farnoth died it began to slowly lose its floating capabilities so the floating items were merely trinkets for the rich. Trissa would not waste the rest of the farnoth however, the fur coat could be used for clothing and the tentacles and non-floating parts of the body for food. Providing for Trissa’s two parents and sister required all the money she could scrape together from hunting. Her two brothers had died from a plague that was common in Burnbury and was one of the many reasons few visited the land. With her parents too old and her sister too young it was left to Trissa to look after them all alone.

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After a short time, Trissa reached the edge of Mistrun. As she rose the land of Burnbury was slowly revealed to her. Burnbury was the northwesternmost land in Mistrun and a thin frost coated it. Winter was coming to an end now, but so far north its effects would be felt for the months to come. Underneath the frost Burnbury was a brown, barren and rocky region that had little life. Where there were trees they were spindly and bare, animals were small and scarce and the land was relatively flat causing it to be uninteresting. The only thing that would break the monotony of this dull landscape was its wall of mountains to the east. Mists that rose from the void prevented Trissa from seeing much further than the cliff edge, so she could not currently see the mountains and saw little more than a few frost encased rocks.

On the cliff edge was a net of the farnoth Trissa had caught that day. Using the bungee cord to pull her and the farnoth corpse she rode to the edge and approached the bunch of farnoth. She hopped on to the edge and used her spear, which was still protruding from the creature, to pull the farnoth on to land. She then lifted the corner of the net holding the other farnoth down and pushed her latest catch in with them. Next, she began preparing them for transportation. If the net was tied around them they would float forming a ball within the net, then all Trissa need to do was use a rope to pull them back to her home.

While Trissa was repurposing the net so that she could move the farnoth instead of tying them down a man startled her. He had tapped Trissa on the shoulder, but she had not been aware of his presence. Trissa spun quickly almost letting go of the ball of farnoth and losing her day's work. She quickly gripped back on to the netting around the ball before addressing the man, “Can’t you see I’m working, you just almost lost me five farnoth.” The man was wearing a black hooded cloak and Trissa could barely see his old wrinkled face. He did not speak. Trissa turned back to the ball of farnoth and spoke while securing them to a nearby rock, “Look, if you are here to preach to me about some gods or kings I don’t care. I hunt farnoth to look after my family. I don’t care about petty disagreements or higher purposes.”

The hooded man gave a slight thoughtful grunt, paused a moment and finally spoke, “I am not here to preach child. I think you will find my purpose aligns with yours. You wish to protect your family, but the only way to do that is to combat the many threats to Mistrun. I have been sent by Orson Rydel. He needs mages for the coming raid by the Calvari. Repelling them is in all our best interests.” Trissa scowled at the man, “I said I do not care about your petty wars old man. If you are looking for mages you’ve come to the wrong place, Burnbury is devoid of anything mystical.” She turned and prepared to go.

“So you do not yet know. I watched you jump with a sort of telepathy. Constantly you used your magical abilities to enhance your hunt. Changing direction mid-fall, holding the farnoth on your spear and finally repelling me from watching you. That little headache you had was caused by my telepathic link to you.” Trissa thought about her fall. Surely she hadn’t been using magic. She had just been lucky. Could it be possible? Had magic allowed her to be such a good sky hunter? Even if she had used magic, she wouldn’t be dragged into some war in a far off land. “So you are here to come and find magical talent and drag it away to be wasted in a meaningless war.” Trissa wrapped the rope from the farnoth net around her shoulder a few times and began to walk away. “If you do not wish to help Trissa so be it. You will never truly harness your great power and the kingdom may be left to ruin.

Trissa ignored the man. After she had become good with a spear by practising with her brother's many minor lords had attempted to recruit her. Now she was a well know sky hunter the attention had only increased. They were all the same. When one died another would take their place. She did not care who ruled her as long as her family survived. Perhaps living in Burnbury had saved her, what could have been, more hassle from such lords. Few would venture so far just for an extra fighter. Now she was apparently a mage. That would probably bring more hassle than good. Maybe the old man would return to the Rydel lands and forget about her. He could probably find some other mage. Then she could forget about this encounter and return to hunting.

## 26. Farnoth Stew - Trissa

As the mists dispersed the backdrop of the mountains around Burnbury was revealed. Trissa hauled the heavy ball of farnoth along with her. She lived in a small village just off Woldstead called Pedshaw. It was a humble place with just a handful of houses, a few animal pens and a small inn. Trissa’s home had a large barn like side room where she processed the farnoth. Other houses in the town were small and mainly served the purpose of giving their inhabitants somewhere to sleep. As in most of Burnbury, the inhabitants of Pedshaw had a pale white skin caused by the dull weather. The same dull weather prevented little from growing on the grey rocky land and made it barely worth living in the north of Burnbury. Fortunately for Trissa, most of Burnbury’s trade revolved around selling farnoth since Burnbury was the only place they could be found in Mistrun.

Trissa shoved the floating sack of farnoth into the barn and tightly shut the door; she would prepare them tomorrow. Then she began to make her way inside. As she was entering she could swear she felt an unfamiliar presence in the back of her mind. Before she could question the presence, the thick smell of farnoth stew drew Trissa into her home. Sally, Trissa’s younger sister, and Trissa’s mother, Wolda, were preparing it. In the corner of the room Trissa’s father, Redron, sat grumbling that there weren’t enough carrots. Trissa greeted the room. Sally ran over excited to show Trissa the stew she had helped make. Meanwhile, Redron mumbled a hello and Wolda began fussing about getting some warm clothes for Trissa, apparently, there was frost on her eyebrows. Trissa left her spear by the door.

While Wolda opened a chest to pull out some clothes, Sally grabbed Trissa’s hand and pulled her to the stew, “Here taste it, sis. What do you think? We put felroot in to give it extra flavour.” It was a good thick stew with a hearty taste,

“It’s great Sally. Oh, thanks for the clothes mum. Where did you get the felroot?” Sally looked Trissa dead in the eyes and put a finger to her lips. Returning to the stew Wolda began to speak, “I couldn’t get anything out of her about it either. She went out gathering this morning and came back with half a basket full. Says if she tells us word will get out, then all the root will be taken and won’t grow back.” To this Redron sat up, “Smart I’d say. Can’t have people taking it all, especially with how hard it has been to find over the winter. Best keep your mouth shut Sally or it will be as hard to get hold of as carrots.”

When Trissa was wearing suitably warm clothing and the stew was ready they all sat down at the small wooden bench they used for eating. Trissa began to feel her toes again as the stew warmed her belly. The family conversed about their days. Other than finding the felroot, Sally had gathered some mushrooms. Wolda had spent a good portion of the day on the stew, farnoth tentacles were tough and hard to work with, and Redron had managed to procure a deal with the local trader to sell more farnoth organs. The day had been mostly good for everyone other than Redron’s complaints about the carrots.

There were loud bangs outside, but the family ignored them. Due to the mostly flat terrains, strong winds would uproot small trees and knock down fences frequently. Then there was a scream. The inhabitants of Pedshaw knew how to deal with the strong winds so that startled the family. Yet before they could react a huge foot collapsed the western wall of the house. The foot retracted allowing many smaller grey hunched figures to rush through the hole. Trissa had her spear in her hands before they were across the room. She stood between the creatures and her family. They began leaping at her. Twirling her spear left and right she knocked each monster back. Occasionally she managed to stab one disabling it. Was this the presence she had felt outside?

It seemed she would be able to keep these smaller creatures away from her family as long as they did not begin to come in greater force. Sweat began to trickle down her face as she maintained the fast movements to repel the waves of skinny creatures. They began to scream in frustration at their failed attempts and a larger figure floated into the splintered hole in the wall. It had a commanding presence, eyes red with an insane grin on its too human face. The purple grey skin of the floating figure came off in flaps. These flaps were used like extra limbs by the naked creature. The tentacle like flaps ripped the hole in the wall wider as the floating creature approached. This was the presence Trissa had felt.

As the floating creature entered the small creatures fell into a dreamlike slumber. All of Trissa’s attention was on this looming monster. She looked back at her family who were huddled behind the wooden benches shivering and readied her spear. Striking out at the floating abomination she roared, but every strike was countered by a snaking flap of skin. A headache began to overcome Trissa as she continued her flurry of attacks. Nothing got past the creature’s impenetrable defensive movements. Trissa attempted to fight the headache as she had when she rode the farnoth, but it fought back. The red eyes of the floating creature seemed to glow and its grin deepened.

Angry Trissa screamed attempting to strike the creature’s face. The creature curled a flap of purple skin around the pole of the spear, laughed deeply and launched it out of the hole in the side of the house. Trissa was pushed, by an unseen force, to the opposite side of the room from her family. There she was held to the wall as if she had been tied to it. The smaller creatures then woke and tore her family to pieces. Trissa screamed and struggled attempting to escape the unseen grip. Blood coated the floors and walls. After the creatures were done all that was left of Trissa’s family was a pile of bones.

Next, the floating creature turned to Trissa and almost instantaneously the smaller hunched figures repeated the movement. They began a slow approach towards Trissa. She wriggled, fought and tore at her bonds, but could not escape them. It seemed nothing could stop this purpled figure. Somehow Trissa could tell that the creature savoured every moment of her struggle. It almost fed off pain as the others had fed off flesh. She closed her eyes and prepared to be torn to pieces by this terrible force.

## 27. Power - Trissa

With closed eyes, Trissa heard the snarling of the hunched figures. Her headache became overpowering with the floating figure intensifying its mental attack. Trissa winced at the pain, tears began to form in the corners of her eyes and the padding footsteps of the hunched figures got closer. There was nothing she could do. Any moment she would be eaten as her family had been.

Suddenly Trissa dropped to the floor and her headache eased. Moments later the purple floating man crashed against a still standing wall. The old man from earlier stood in the hole to the wall, cloak flapping and beckoning Trissa to run. She ran toward him the hunched figures attempting to snap and grab at her heels. “I cannot hold an observer for long,” the old man explained as she ran, “We are in very grave danger if they have returned.” They ran east for a long time and said little more. With the terrain growing rockier they found a place to hide out of sight of the village.

The man mumbled through caught breaths, “gner, stragvor and now an observer. This is certainly not good. Not good at all.” Then he looked at Trissa and spoke more directly, “Come with me girl. You cannot fight these creatures yet and in days they will overrun all of the area surrounding Woldstead. If you stay you will surely die.” Trissa considered the man; he seemed genuine, but she had a burning desire to stay and fight these horrible creatures. She channelled her anger into words, “I have to stay. I have to fight. Even if it is hopeless I must try. Don’t you see? They just tore my family to pieces, now you want me to just leave.”

He gave a slight shake to his head and spoke with an almost soothing rattling voice, “If you stay you will surely die dear girl. I wouldn’t last long here with all my knowledge of the cursed. Coming with me would allow you to understand that power of yours. Then perhaps you could fight them. I urge you don’t throw your life away, you will have another chance to stop them.” Trissa, adequately encouraged, just nodded slowly. Then with her shock subsiding began to sob. The man tried to console her and hurriedly led her toward the eastern mountains of Burnbury.

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The road had been quiet on the journey easy. The man, who Trissa had discovered was called Vardon, seemed to understand that Trissa had not wanted to talk. Now she did. “Vardon,” she muttered. The man turned in seeming surprise that she had spoken, “Yes what is it?”

“You said the creatures that attacked were cursed. Do you mean the ones from the Cursed Calamity?” For a moment the old man thought while pulling at his long beard. “Yes, they are the very same creatures. Occasionally small groups of one breed of them have popped up over the years. They usually came in small numbers and were easy to repel. These are different. If there is an observer he can command different breeds to work together. Let us hope that there is only that one observer. Otherwise, humanity may face its end. Even with just one that is still very possible.”

Trissa had heard the tales of the cursed as everyone had. She knew they had been terrible monsters, but had thought them only tales. Every time she had heard about them they had been eviler and more powerful. For so long she had believed something like that couldn’t be real and that it shouldn’t have been possible. Yet now she had seen them and felt their wrath. “Why do they come? What reason did they have to organise the slaughter of Pedshaw and my family?” she asked. The man looked to Trissa a worried look upon his face. “Some of them kill for food, not unlike many other animals. The smaller hunched figures called the gner for example. The observers and those higher than them though, they kill for power control and sometimes even pleasure.”

Accusingly Trissa said, “How do you know so much about them? You had the power of that observer, how do I know you aren’t one?” Vardon lowered his head a little and then smiled a forced smile, “Ah yes. I should perhaps explain myself. Eight hundred and fifty six years ago the Cursed Calamity ended. At that time there were many trained mages but without the necessity of them, fewer and fewer were trained in the years since then. Our council decided that we had to preserve the knowledge of the cursed ones in case they returned. Magic of many including myself has been channelled to allow me to live on far beyond my normal lifespan. This has its consequences though, my magic is far weakened. Pushing that observer away was all I could have done. When trained you will do much more. As for knowing that I’m not an observer you will have to trust me.”

Trissa calmed and they continued to talk for much of the rest of the journey to the mountains. Trissa discovered Vardon had come to find her in hopes she would be able to fight the cursed one day. He would train her while they fought the Calvari and then she would be prepared for the cursed. Soon she began to warm to Vardon. He was wise in an interesting way that allowed a conversation to never grow stale. Those conversations helped take Trissa’s mind off her family temporarily. One day she would come back and stop the cursed. Other families wouldn’t have to continue to suffer the same fate as hers then. She had to ensure that they were stopped.

## 28. The Raids to Come - Edward

Ed stood with Orson on the wooden stake walls around Chillporth the Rydel home town. It was the most northern town in Mistrun and had a large port with access to the Frozen Sea. That was where the Calvari raiders would come from. It was fortunate that when Mistrun joined to Cavar every cycle it joined by sea, otherwise the raids might have been much harsher. The two great lords did not look to the sea though, they looked south down the road to Chillporth. A slow trickle of Kordan soldiers in brown had been approaching for the past few weeks. Today the last of them would arrive. Boudain was still in Hyford and would not be personally joining the raid defence.

Outside of Chillporth was a large camp made of a mingling of Kordan, Stoneheart and Rydel forces. Banners of blue, gold and green all flew above the site. The Stoneheart blue with its grey heart at the centre, the golden sun of the Kordan banner and a black bear at the centre of the Rydel banners of green. Chillporth was too small to keep comfortably all the Rydel men gathered never mind the other soldiers. When the battle began they might all fit within the walls if needed, but there was no need to force the men into such a small place yet. That wouldn’t be their first action. Hiding inside the walls of Chillporth would just allow the raiders to freely traverse the rest of the northern lands.

Chillporth was a small town and although the soldiers there were enough to fill the town, they were far fewer than had been used to fight the raids in previous cycles. The recent battles had considerably weakened both the Kordans and Stonehearts armies. “Will they be enough Orson?” Ed queried as the last of the Kordans were entering the camp. Orson looked at Ed hopefully, his greying bearded giving him an air of wisdom, “Often the numbers in a battle are not as significant as those commanding them believe Ed. We will be ready. To win we must outwit our opponents or overpower them. This cycle we have gathered far earlier than those previous. We have time to prepare.” Orson managed to lighten Ed’s mood a little. His voice was soothing and yet convincing.

Ed had been young during the last raid five years ago. Badger had been close to his own age now and had led the defence against the raids. Orson rarely joined battles. He would send his men to fight with a lord who he trusted instead. Apparently, Orson had never been one to join a battle. He believed he could not lead on the battlefield and allowed his allies to do that instead. Yet what Orson lacked in quick and decisive leading he made up for with long considered actions. He would know exactly what traps and tricks they should lay for the oncoming raids and would know more about each commander in the camp than most soldiers.

“Besides we have weapons our enemies will not expect Ed. Shortly our most powerful tool will arrive.” Ed gave Orson a questioning look, “I could not tell you what it is yet, that would ruin the surprise. You would probably not believe me if I told you without proof anyway Ed.” This was another of one of Orson’s long thought out schemes to achieve his goals. Ed would wait for him to reveal his methods. Ed noted, “Still we may have to worry about the Kordan men. If they were to turn most of the men in that campsite would die in the chaos. Then we would lose all hope of preventing the raids.” Orson nodded.

“I very much doubt we will need to worry about that Ed. I believe we can rely on Boudain, it was not he who failed us.” Orson explained. They then began considering defensive options against the raiders. Orson was right, they would be ready when the Calvari came.

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That evening Ed received a letter from Lady Grey. She wished him the best in the raids but encouraged him not to act like Badger. In the letter, she said he wasn’t the same as Badger and wouldn’t be able to do all the same things. Instead, she told Ed to stay back and let his men do the fighting. At the end of the letter, she did not even include Ed’s title. Now he was a great lord and after years of his mother insisting on calling his brother by title, Ed couldn’t understand why she would not at least use his title.

Ed had been with Mayer discussing Bader when he received the letter. Mayer had come north with Ed hoping to learn more about the cursed ones from Vardon, but he was apparently away somewhere. “I do not understand, Mayer, why does my mother treat me so. Ever since we were young my mother has always considered me lesser than Badger. Now she believes I cannot do his job. I may be a worse great lord than Badger was, but I am not incompetent.” Ed uttered his voice beginning to rise. Mayer looked at Ed empathetically.

Before Ed continued with his rant Mayer spoke, “There is something I should perhaps tell you, Ed. You are the great lord now and should know these things. Do you remember when I told you of the child that was carried through the Blot? The one whose mother died saving him?” Ed nodded and Mayer continued, “That child was you, Ed. Your mother died carrying you through the Blot. We never found out why she chose to take you through that land, but she did. Lady Grey and your father had not been able to have another child. Lady Grey did not want to have a child that was not her own, but your father insisted so they could secure the Stoneheart family. Accepting the reasoning Lady Grey took you in, but could never bring herself to see you in the same way she saw her son.”

Shocked Ed sat silently. He needed to think about this. After a while, he said as much to Mayer and left him. In his quarters Ed considered this revelation. He wasn’t a Stoneheart. Believing he was a Stoneheart had allowed him to have faith in his decisions since Badger had died. Ed was just a random child with no claim to his position. Could he really do what he needed to for his people? Did he need Stoneheart blood to do that? Maybe it wasn’t that important, he had defended Sour Rock. Had that all been Badger’s doing though, his dying contribution to his home? Ed was the great lord now. Maybe he was worthy of his position, maybe he was not. Ed would just have to fight to achieve the best for his people and hope that was enough. He would have to hope that not being of noble birth would not put him at a disadvantage in the courts of lords with generations of birthright.

## 29. The Great Library - Boudain

After receiving confirmation that Arvar had recruited the Flaming Champions instead of just paying them to turn on their previous master, Boudain had grown suspicious of him. Although Boudain had almost felt his loyalty guaranteed, a move like that suggested he would take action. The suspicion caused Boudain to send scouts to spy on Arvar in his lands. In doing so Boudain had just found out that Arvar was gathering supplies and possibly some men in a small town not far from Skypike. Perhaps more worryingly Boudain had received various reports of large creatures that Farin said, after having the creatures described to him, sounded like they may be stragvor. That was confirmation enough that the growing rumours about the cursed might be true.

Boudain had ordered men to continue to watch Arvar. He had kept forces in Hyford and not sent them all to defend against the raids, but if Arvar attacked when Boudain didn’t expect it then Hyford would surely fall. Although the cursed ones could be a great threat in future, they were currently gathered where Skypike met the mainland of Mistrun. That might slow down Arvar’s momentum and prevent an attack on the capital for some time yet. With any hope, Arvar would be delayed long enough for the men to return from the defence in the north. Boudain knew that was unlikely though, Arvar was a formidable opponent and would have some plan to avoid the cursed.

When Rudolf had continuously weakened Varon and the people of Rainsmere maybe he had been right. If Boudain had used a similar tactic against his subjects they wouldn’t have been able to threaten him. Yet if Boudain had weakened them so, the Stonehearts would have been wiped out by Ava and many would be discontent like he had been under Rudolf. Boudain could have talked this through with Layal. He missed his advisor but knew it was right for him to stay in Varon.

Now Hyford had been restored it was important to provide aid to the Kordan homeland. They had been neglected for too long and when fighting to be king Boudain had always said he would support them. As a result, Boudain had urged Layal to stay and rule in Varon so he could help the people there. Even so, it would not be easy to replace Layal, perhaps Boudain never would. Then even if Boudain could find a replacement with Ava around it would be difficult to solidify their position.

Boudain had much to consider about the cursed ones and Arvar. If all went well in the north hopefully the tension between the Kordans and the northern lords would be resolved. That would allow Boudain to focus more on the more direct threats of Arvar and the cursed. For now, there was little Boudain could do. He had to keep the men that he had sent to Chillporth there to stop the raids and would keep the rest of his men in Hyford. Spies on Arvar would hopefully inform Boudain of any developments in Valinar lands. The only other issue that was left was how they would fight the cursed.

In the libraries in Hyford, there were many ancient books. Boudain had asked Farin if any were related to the cursed ones to which Farin had eagerly encouraged him to come and look. They were now entering the library. “It’s just over this way your highness, there are plenty of books on the topic. Now it may be difficult to determine the usefulness of each book, but we can probably work it out.” Farin rumbled comfortably as they walked through the vast dark library. Above his head, Farin held a small candlestick which seemed the only light in the huge library of Cragtop keep. Large webs caught Boudain as he walked behind the much smaller Farin.

Soon they reached the section of the library that Farin had been anticipating. “I know the cursed are a great issue, but I had wanted an excuse to read some of these old books.” Farin said as he blew dust from the cover of one, “They are just so intriguing. All the cursed ones are very different with unusual abilities. Oh look this other book has been read recently, there is no dust. Hmm, there’s a page maker. Oh, shades.” Boudain, with a sudden surge of interest, moved to Farin’s side. “What does the book say, perhaps we can judge some of the book's usefulness by my recent experience with the shade.”

“Well, it certainly sounds similar. Moongrass is mentioned as a deterrent here. Apparently, the Shades manifest to those they possess as something that will make the host guilty.” Farin read.

“Yes. That makes sense. I saw Rudolf again and again until I began fighting the shade and then I saw this formless dark creature.” Boudain explained. Farin continued to read the book and they found many of the symptoms from the book met Boudain’s experience. “Surely this is where Ava discovered the use of moongrass. Maybe she knows more about the cursed than we know.” Farin said adding the book to a small satchel he had brought. They repeated a similar process to determine which other books might be useful. After finding the pages about shades they would compare them to Boudain’s experience and see how the book matched up. If there was a good match they added the book to Farin’s bag. When the bag was full Boudain picked up a few extra books and they left the great library.

After leaving Farin Boudain took the extra books to his quarters intent on studying them. However, when he got back to his room he found himself drawn to the sections relating to shades. While reading he discovered shades feed of their host’s life force to survive and that they could be mentally repelled by the host if the host’s will was strong enough. The moongrass weekend the shade making it easier for a host to mentally fight against the shade. To those who weren’t possessed by a shade, all that was visible was an occasional shimmer of light near to the host. The true form of a shade could only be seen when they were dead. This form was almost skeletal in nature.

Boudain continued to read all he could about shades finding himself less worried about the return of the one which had possessed him. With the new information he had discovered and his past experience he felt he could stop the shade again. He would continue to burn the moongrass though, it would be stupid to invite the shade to return. In reading about the shades though, Boudain couldn’t help feeling that he was wasting time that could have been spent learning about other cursed. A wider knowledge of them would allow them to be more prepared and understanding the stragvor would be wise since they had been seen. Farin would surely research them, wouldn’t he?

## 30. Shifting Sands in Varon - Layal

Layal walked through the dusty streets of Varon. Small market stalls lay in front of many of the sandstone buildings. Some of the stalls were laid on rugs while others had wooden stands. Few stalls had little of any value to offer and almost none sold food. The people of Rainsmere mostly had darker skin tones to those from the west of north. However, the higher nobility here mostly originated from other lands. The Kordans for example had a slightly tanned look after their family had lived in the region and occasionally married with local nobility. They had brought a union to Rainsmere after much turmoil in the land. After the Cursed Calamity, many had tried to expand into abandoned lands quickly and there had been no official ownership of these lands. In Rainsmere there had been a war in attempts to secure and maintain power. This had all ended when the Kordans, minor nobles at the time, had been gifted the lands by the king.

The Kordans brought order by creating treaties and agreements, marrying into claims and occasionally suppressing these factions. After they had secured the land it had become one of the most prosperous in Mistrun. That lasted until Rudolf had begun to suppress the land. The streets of Varon were dull now when they had once been draped in colourful cloths and people had flocked to the markets when they had been open. Now it seemed the markets opened out of habit for they appeared to get little custom. Layal had grown up in these streets and felt a sadness for how they had lost their majesty.

It would be difficult to restore Varon but hopefully, with some effort from Boudain, it would see some of its glory return. If that didn’t happen Varon might rebel again far sooner than Boudain might expect. These people had seen little help since they had supported Boudain believing after his victory Varon and Rainsmere would become great once again. Since the siege of Hyford Boudain hadn’t had the chance to restore Varon. Now was probably the best time to support the town and what had become the homeland of the Kordans.

Layal was now approaching the palace. It was a much larger sandstone building at the centre of the city, but other than being bigger than the rest of the buildings it looked much the same. Without the colourful banners and cloths, the palace looked rather simple. Inside Layal entered the study to find a letter from Boudain. In the letter, Boudain confirmed that he would like Layal to stay in Varon. Now he knew about Ava’s betrayal, Boudain believed he could manage her. Although he still regretted being apart from Layal, he stated that Varon needed his advisor more. In a few weeks, Layal would receive some funds and resources from the capital, but Boudain explained he could give little more for some time. With the raids in the north, Arvar and Ava Boudain was stretched thin and needed to keep hold of the throne and capital. Boudain encouraged Layal to be wise with the resources.

With this decision, Layal could really start to work on Varon. Since he had been there he had been trying to help but hadn’t created a good foothold yet. Now he knew he was staying he could commit to his plans. Although Layal wished he was by Boudain’s side, he knew that this was probably the best place for him for now. Preventing resentment of the king in his own homeland would certainly cut off the chance of rebellion, and stopping a rebellion before it started was the best way.

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Recently there had been reports of gner picking on travellers and traders in the dunes near Varon. It seemed more and more evidence was mounting to support Badger’s belief that they should prepare to stop the cursed. Varon needed these small groups of gner gone before they could prepare for anything. With few traders travelling and even fewer reaching the capital Varon would starve if the gner were not stopped. Unfortunately, the guards were too scared of the cursed ones and their captain refused to send them. Layal knew that in small groups gner posed little threat to armed men and had heard that the Stonehearts had made short work of one on their return to the Core from Hyford after the siege last year. After explaining this to the captain of the guard he still refused to send his men and he wouldn’t take a bribe either.

With such stubborn men, Layal found the only way to convince them was often blackmail. Of course, he hadn’t wanted to resort to blackmail, but he needed the captain of the guard to do as he said otherwise Varon would have no order and little chance of recovery. It hadn’t been hard to find enough information about captain Geran so that Layal would be able to make him do as required for some time. Hopefully, after the current batch of information dried up, Layal would be able to convince Geran by other means, but if not he was sure he could find more. Most of the information Layal had was relatively common for men like Geran, he was corrupt, took easy bribes, wasn’t faithful to his wife and exploited his position for personal matters among other things.

Layal had considered replacing Geran, but he had too much respect from his men. It would take too long for a new guard captain to have proper control of the men. Geran’s corruption would just provide Layal with greater means to control him for now. Later down the line, Geran would inevitably be replaced but that would take time and for now, he would serve Layal’s purpose. Layal entered a small tavern which Geran frequented. The guard captain was in the middle of a game of dice. Perhaps this was a chance for Layal to show Geran how he intended to run Varon.

Layal sat opposite Geran causing some other guards to leave. They didn’t want to be seen gambling when they were supposed to be on duty. Geran didn’t care. “Wadda you want. Lousy excuse for a leader you are. His majesty don’t know how to pick an advisor.” Geran slurred.

“How about a game of dice Geran?” Layal suggested. With some sleight of hand, Layal knew a few cheap tricks that could guarantee a draw at least if his opponent didn’t pay him too much attention. “Dice? With you? Thought you didn’t like us comin’ here. Ay, where you going? Sit back down. Don’t mean a can’t beat you.” The captain tossed the dice rolling four threes. Layal wouldn’t perform any tricks yet. That would give the game away. With two twos, a four and a five Layal just beat Geran. “You may have won that round, but your lucks gone now. Everyone knows ya should stop after thirteen. Ha told you!” Geran had just rolled a six, two fives, and a three. Layal looked him dead in the eyes and rolled three sixes and a five with his little trick. “I ain’t playing with you anymore. What you here for anyway?” Geran grumbled.

At this point, all of the other guards who had remained began to leave. They had enjoyed the show but gave them some privacy. “Send your men out to fight the cursed. You know they can stop the gner. Rainsmere will be better off.”

“An what do I get? What do they get for fighting? Nothing more.” Layal leaned in closer to the drunken Guard.

“It isn’t about what you gain. It is what you will lose. How would your wife feel about those affairs that you try to keep secret?” Layal said calmly. For a moment Geran was dumbstruck. Then he spoke in a confused fashion. “Alright, I get it. You have your wish this time. You won’t last long here though. The right hand of the king,” He laughed, “You’ve been cut off you have. The severed hand.” Layal pressed his lips got up and left. While he did so he gave Geran another look. The man nodded, he would send some men to stop the gner.

## 31. The Path of Madness - Trissa

“It is insane to travel through the Path of Madness. Why would we go that way? You said I should not throw my life away and yet you want me to travel into those mountains.” Trissa exclaimed after discovering that Vardon intended to take them to Rydel lands through the Path of Madness. It was widely known that those that travelled the path rarely returned and when they did they were never the same as when they had left. It was a path that ran through the misty portion of the mountains in the northeast of Burnbury. Due to the mountains being close to the northern edge of Mistrun some were always clouded in a thick mist. It was said there were thousands of trails and routes on the Path of Madness and that travellers would get turned around and lose their way in the mist. Even if you didn’t lose your way you didn’t know what you would find in those mists.

“When you know the route the path is not so scary, dear. It is just a maze with none of the creatures and madmen that the tales speak of. It is also the only way we can reach Chillporth in time to help repel the raids there.” Vardon explained as he continued to walk steadily toward the mountains. Now rooted in place Trissa said, “And you know this way?”

“If you are going to live a thousand years you might as well learn a few secrets along the way.” He turned to look at Trissa, “You never know when they might come in handy. Now come on, otherwise, it won’t matter which route we take to Chillporth.” Trissa sighed but soon caught up to Vardon. Now they were steadily making their way to the mountains Vardon said, “I wouldn’t take you through the path unless I was certain we would be safe, my dear. When I arrived in Burnbury I came by this path. Before we do enter though there is one thing I must warn you of. Whatever you do, do not stray from me. At all times keep me in sight. Whatever may draw you away must be ignored.” Trissa gave a slight nod.

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Trissa entered the Path close behind Vardon. Other than Vardon, Trissa could see the two craggy rock walls they walked between. The way was narrow and currently, they could only travel single file. As they walked Vardon explained the way they went saying things like, “The path opens up soon,” or, “We have to take the leftmost path now.” The paths changed gradually sometimes being much wider or sometimes requiring the two to crawl through small gaps in the rock. In some places, there were many branching paths but in others, there were only one or two options to take. For so long they travelled that Trissa began to lose her wariness of the path. The old man had been right. There was nothing to worry about if you had the right guide.

After a while, Trissa paid less close attention to Vardon and observed her surroundings more. The mists were so thick that she could see less than a few feet ahead at any time, but often they passed very close to the rock walls of the valleys they traversed. As they did she analysed the rock. When they came to a group of different routes, and Vardon had to decide which to take, Trissa’s eye would linger on the ways they did not go. What was down there? Would it hurt so much for them to just have a look? She knew it was stupid. She tried to draw herself away from those temptations. They would just get her lost and then she would never be able to fight the cursed ones.

Instead, she focused back on Vardon’s cloak. It looked very old, but yet still well kept. It had been mended many times, but one could only tell if they looked very closely. A quick glance over Trissa’s shoulder presented the ever more tempting mists. Vardon still talked of the way they went softly and calmingly. Perhaps Trissa could focus on his words. For a long time she did, but as the day went on that became monotonous. All life seemed to be sapped from the old man’s voice.

It grew darker and soon Trissa couldn’t even see her own hand if she held it out in front of her. They stopped and set up a camp for the night. Vardon had bedrolls and food in a small pack that he carried. The sheets on the bedrolls were thin, but they protected slightly against the damp of the mist. It was only now the Trissa realised they were both soaked through. The damp of the mist had sodden them as they had travelled through it for the whole day. Trissa slept little that night; she couldn’t tell how Vardon slept, but he did not seem to stir.

As Trissa drifted in and out of sleep the mists spoke to her. Little whispers echoed through the mountains. They seemed to be right next to Trissa, but when she felt out there was nothing there. The whispers wanted her. They asked her to join them. She undid her bedroll and got up. The mists could take her if they wanted to. She could not think of anything more enticing. To be free in these mountains, to never have to worry again. Soon Trissa was walking away from the small camp. Vardon’s snoring could no longer be heard. Trissa felt something release inside of her. She had been holding back her freedom all of this time. Now she could just be.

A hand on her shoulders ripped that freedom away. She flailed her arms at the tyrant that would stop her, but he managed to detain her weak effort. “I just want to go. Why won’t you let me be free?” Trissa asked the man.

“You must come back to yourself, dear. This will do you no good. Yes, you may be free from the problems of the world, but you will not survive long here. Do you want to die Trissa?” It was Vardon. He had come to stop Trissa.

“I’m so sorry Vardon. I shouldn’t have left, but the voices and the mists they were so alluring. It felt like I had to go.” She focused on Vardon’s face which had to be very close for her to see it. The dawn sunlight allowed her to see a little further now though. “We cannot linger here. I had hoped this would not happen. Make sure you keep focus on me and do not let go of my hand. We will move right away.”

In a short time, Vardon was hurrying them through the Path of Madness. The voices intensified as if they knew Trissa was trying to escape them. Trissa tried not to look at anything apart from Vardon, but she still could not help the occasional glance. Sometimes she would be intrigued by the mist again and loosen her grip on Vardon’s hand, but he would squeeze her hand and she would refocus. This seemed to happen more and more frequently as Vardon pushed them on toward the exit. The mists were beginning to thin now and Trissa could see much further. Almost with the mist, her temptation began to clear. Until she looked back toward the path they had travelled.

The voices were stronger now than ever. She had to go into the mists. The path was the only way. She had to be there. The voices took hold of her and they would not let her go. Why should they? They were right. The voices were right. Trissa slipped out of Vardon’s grip and ran. She looked back and she couldn’t see the man. She was free. She cried with glee. He would never know. He couldn’t; the mists would protect her from him. There was a deep chanting. That wasn’t like the voices. They questioned it. A beam of light came from the direction Trissa had run. It cut through the mist and the voices screamed in pain. Trissa screamed in pain. She had been cut from them when she was so close to being one with them. The light cleared the mist and Vardon was at its epicentre. He had killed the voices.

Trissa suddenly realised how stupid she had been. She picked herself up from the ground where what she had thought had been pain had struck her. “That was a last attempt of the mists to keep you, dear girl. From here they have no power. Come now. We are almost in Rydel lands. The going will be much easier now.” She looked at the old man and allowed him to take her hand and guide her. “Thank you.” She said quietly as they dismounted the mountain range. Almost she had given up her life, the mists had taken hold of her. It was scary how little control she had just had and yet now her mind felt clearer than it ever had.

## 32. The Courage of the Calvari - Edward

Ed stood on the muddy shore of the Frozen Sea. He and his men shivered with the cold as they waited for the oncoming attack. Some of the small boats Orson used to scout the sea had reported the approach of the first raid. The mists travelled easily across the sea, and although they were thinner here scouts were needed to be truly ready for an attack. The Kordan, Rydel and Stoneheart soldiers lined the shore in preparation for the attack. In previous cycles, the Calvari would land in lots of groups in attempts to get some men behind their lines so they were spread as far as they reasonably could be. Orson had readied his traps, but his surprise aid had not yet arrived.

Slowly Calvari ships began to emerge from the mists. The ships were so long that they seemed to continue to come out of the mists for an eternity. They came with a great speed given by the wind that came out of the void. Each of the ships had hundreds of soldiers with very little clothing covering their golden yellow skin. These men were much larger than those from Mistrun with close to a few feet of height on any Mistrun man. They began to chant and roar as they approached the shore. Soon they would be frenzied so that when they landed they would try to sweep through the Mistrun men. An aggressive wild force that would be unrelenting until the last man was slain.

It was now that Ed doubted his ability. Seeing this force with the eye for battle he had now, he knew this would be a difficult battle. A battle that was one of many raids. Perhaps he couldn’t stop them, he didn’t have the lineage to be a commander like Badger had been. Ed wasn’t related to Edward the Mighty or any of his great decedents. He focused his mind. What mattered now was the battle. If he won or lost then he had to have given a good fight.

“Raise!” He shouted as the Calvari boats drew close to the shore. A metallic clanking sound began as two cogs secured either side of where the boats approached were turned. As they came a large metal chain rose from the water dripping. The first few Calvari boats had no time to react and the next few didn’t turn in time. They were torn to pieces by the suspended chain throwing the men they harboured about on the deck. Some began to sink while others were held in place by the chain. The archers on the shore behind the main line of soldiers rained arrows on the trapped men. They were stuck and their only option was to run or swim at the men on the shore. Most were shot down before they even reached the shoreline, but the rest were chopped down before they could do damage to the Mistrun force.

As they had been fighting the first wave of raiders, Ed hadn’t noticed the new approaching ships. They had huge crossbows mounted on their bows. Just as Ed noticed one loosed a huge bolt at the sea door of Chillporth; which was an entrance for boats into the city. The bolt just hit the door and was wedge there. For a moment it seemed it would do nothing, but attached to the crossbow bolt was a barrel with a short fuse. It burst into a ball of flame throwing splinters of wood from the door and the bolt. Other similar bolts began to rain upon the rest of Chillporth, but the most important blow had been dealt. Soon the Calvari ships that were left were all heading for the breach in the wooden walls.

“To the breach! To the Breach!” Ed shouted, “We cannot let them into the town. Get archers on either side to shoot as they enter.” They rushed with a large portion of the Mistrun force. Able to get some volleys of arrows in they did some damage to the Calvari before they entered Chillporth, but not enough. The raiders were soon landing inside the walls and the Mistrun men couldn’t get inside quick enough to respond. Those who had already been inside were swept through by the Calvari and it seemed they may claim Chillporth with its defenders still outside.

Some of the explosive crossbow bolts were still bombarding the shore where Ed and the main force were left. “I need some men ready to grab one of those bolts before it explodes. If we get one close to the wall we can use the bolt to make a new entrance and take them by surprise as they did us.” Some men close by who wore a variety of colours were all willing to do as Ed said. The first bolt that landed exploded before the men could get close, but the second worked. The men heaved it out of the damp dirt and tossed it toward the wall. All went quiet as they waited hopefully for the bolt to explode. It did. Men swarmed into an area of the city the Calvari had not yet captured.

Soon the men had that area well defended and pushed slowly through the narrow streets of Chillporth. The Calvari battered against their defences, but the Mistrun men repelled them. The Calvari were a storm, but Ed and his men were rooted like mountains and could not be toppled. As they began to recapture Chillporth some of the Calvari men lost the frenzy in their eyes and fled to their boats, but others held their ground. They were the most aggressive blinded by rage. With their height, they jumped over the shields of the Mistrun soldiers knocking down many before they could be stopped. A single Calvari was a force of nature and even alone was not easily stopped. In a more direct battle, many more Mistrun men would have been lost. However, as the Calvari remnants dwindled the Mistrun men began to cheer cries of victory.

The atmosphere invigorated Ed and he joined the applause. They had won and Ed had played his part. The Stoneheart birthright did not matter. What mattered was the leadership and wit of a lord and Ed would strive for those things. Ed rushed up a tower and began shouting, “Today we have defended Mistrun. Today we have defended our home. It was not an easy fight and there will be more, but we will be ready. Every wave of Calvari will be silenced like the last and we will be the saviours of Mistrun.” With that cheers of agreement echoed through the streets of Chillporth. Some men even chanted a song that was often played in Taverns about Edward the Mighty saviour of Mistrun.

Deep down Ed knew that if there were many more raids like that Chillporth might fall. Many had been lost on both sides, but this was just a preliminary Calvari force. Perhaps Orson’s secret weapon could turn the tides of this defence. They would have to be ready on the next attack and the trick with the chain would likely not work again. Ed hoped that Orson had other similar traps to trip up and weaken their attackers. Without such things, Chillporth would most certainly fall and the Calvari would have a stronghold in Mistrun.

## 33. To Take a Kingdom - Arvar

Arvar was organising his dominion of Mistrun. With a few of his trusted generals, he stood by a large carved wooden map table of Mistrun. Soon Skypike would meet the mainland now and then Arvar and a large portion of his army would be let loose upon Mistrun. Unfortunately, they had recently had a major setback, Boudain had kept too large a force in Hyford. He no longer trusted Arvar which meant that he had lost his element of surprise. Fortunately, Arvar was still excellent at his craft. They would have no issue outsmarting their opponents.

“Why have you delayed our attack? I need to be in Hyford before the cursed gain any more numbers. Have you heard, the different types are now working together? Whatever will we do?” wined Clinart as he stumbled into the meeting. He had grown more and more demanding since Arvar had agreed to make him king but in a weak way. He just disturbed Arvar and tried to direct him without knowing the least about what he ordered. Yet Arvar had to at least pretend to treat Clinart with some respect; at least until he could force him to do as he wished. “I have a new plan now Clinart, the capital will be ours with a fraction of the effort. We must wait before we can act though.” Arvar tried to explain.

Clinart just frowned as if this didn’t make the least bit of sense to him. Arvar could already tell Clinart would give some unbearable and stupid response. “We need to go now. What do we gain by waiting for an attack? Surely if they know our intention we should just invade.”

“It is not so simple your majesty. Hyford will be hard to take from even a small force if they are prepared. You saw how hard the fight was to take your brother’s throne. From this book, I discovered how we will fight them while barely raising a sword.” He presented a book with the title: On the Nature of the Cursed Ones. “With growing rumours of the cursed, I swiped this from the Hyford library when I visited. I believe it will be rather useful. You see old Boudain’s ailment of the mind was brought on by a shade or so my spies told me. It seems moongrass is now burnt by the king to dispel it. Yet I have found an almost indistinguishable substitute that does not have the same effects on a shade. Replacing the king’s deterrent will allow the shade to return and us to strike.”

As Arvar had been talking Clinart nodded, but when he finished Clinart still waited expecting more. Then he seemed to realise that was all Arvar was going to say without further prompting. “But how do we replace Boudain’s moongrass and how will this make taking Hyford so much easier that we must wait?” At this point, Arvar was beginning to lose patience with Clinart. Didn’t he have enough information to put the puzzle together yet? “An informant will tip Ava anonymously of the moongrass replacement. It is open knowledge that she was willing to exploit her father’s weakness and she will again. When the shade strikes Ava will then be queen regent once again. Then we wait for our moment. She will make some move that exposes the Kordans to attack, and if she does not in good time it would be much easier to invade a Hyford guarded by her than her father. She is no military planner.”

Now that the understanding had finally seemed to present itself to Clinart he seemed shocked by the brilliance of Arvar’s plan. If Clinart had left it there Arvar would have been happy. Although he clawed at Arvar’s patience, Arvar could understand Clinart’s questions sometimes. He was just a simpler man. However, Clinart continued, “I will accept this as long as we do not wait too long for Ava to expose herself. We need to be in Hyford before the cursed threat becomes too great.” Arvar nodded and tried to bite his lip, but he couldn’t help responding, “Don’t you understand you fool. We should avoid losing our men in any way we can. The more we do so the greater an advantage we will gain over both our enemies and the cursed. The easier it is to take Hyford the better your chance is to fight those creatures and the more you will gain.”

Again Clinart knew not what to say, but instead of thinking and continuing he left. Arvar let out a great sigh and turned to his generals who quickly began talking about their plans focusing Arvar back on his task. It would be a good idea to cool off and find Clinart at a more favourable time to talk. Although the man had little backbone, that did not mean he could not push back when he felt badly treated.

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After Arvar had finished planning his attack he found Clinart watching a joust. The man saw Arvar approach and looked away in an attempt to dismiss him. Arvar sat next to the Berkmer anyway. Clinart now focused more intently on the joust and tried to ignore Arvar further. “I apologise for my outburst earlier your majesty. I am just very passionate about our plans and want to ensure the best for you. Do you understand?” Clinart resisted, but then finally looked to Arvar. His expression was still harsh. “You do not treat me as a king should be. Claiming you want me to rule you do all the planning while I sit and wait for you. Why do you even want my help?”

“I’m just more suited for our current task your majesty. As a general and veteran of numerous battles, I should lead your forces. The true ruling will come when you are sat on the throne, but sometimes that requires delegating tasks to those who know the most about them.” Arvar said attempting not to sound condescending. Now Clinart’s expression had begun to cool he spoke more softly, “Perhaps you are right. You should be the one to lead our armies and I can do the real leading. That makes sense.”

After the issue seemed settled the two focused their attention back upon the joust. A man in black had just been knocked from his horse by a man in blue. “No no no.” Clinart shouted down, “I wanted the black knight to win. That’s how it always goes in the tales. Do it again. Do it now.” After the outburst, Arvar was almost embarrassed. Why did he support such a pathetic spoilt man? Was there no one else who could do his job? Maybe he could just take the throne himself, Boudain had. No the populous of Mistrun would surely be unsettled by another usurper. Boudain seemed to be liked far better than old Rudolf had been.

## 34. Serving a Shade - Ava

Strolling around Hyford admiring everything she had power over, Ava was happy. People feared her and moved out of her way, they avoided meeting her eye and would question nothing she did. Regularly, since she had been set free, she would do this. When she went out and saw the impact she had had she knew she was destined to rule. When people saw her father they would cheer and run up and burden him with enquiries and questions. A king didn’t have time for that and should have been feared like Ava was. That was the only way to keep one’s subjects inline.

On her stroll, Ava came across a small force leaving Hyford, her father watching as they left. “Where are those men going? Why haven’t you told me about this?” Ava snapped. Boudain turned slowly and nodded. “Yes, I will tell you, Ava. I know I said I would tell you with the rest of the court, but I couldn’t have you jeopardising this. I am sending a few trusted generals and a letter to the lords of the north. You may have noticed a thinning of the guard recently. They have been sent to Chillporth to help counter the raids upon Mistrun and those men are the last help I will send. The northern lords believe they have received all I can offer, but a few good tacticians can go a long way. The letter wishes the lords well and states our hope to renew the bonds between the nobility of Mistrun.”

“How could you not tell me,” Ava erupted, “I am your daughter and heir. You would have the entire court know your plans before me. The Stonehearts and Rydels are weak and will surely not honour any arrangement you have. What a foolish king you are.” Ava turned to storm away from her father. “Wait!” Boudain beckoned, “There is one more thing that I am sure you will want to hear.” Ava stopped hesitantly. “Badger died. He sustained grave wounds on his journey back to Sour Rock when he escaped. He died not long after your attack. I know you will be happy about this, but you shouldn’t be. Badger was a good man and luckily his brother is too otherwise we may have suffered greatly from your foolishness. Consider not allowing Ed to inherit your distaste for the Stonehearts.”

For a moment Ava waited to look at her father. “If Badger is dead you should attack the Stonehearts now. Ed is nothing and the Stonehearts still deserve to be extinguished.” Ava said maliciously. Boudain sighed and turned back to watch the men heading north. “One day, Ava, you will learn. Do not let that day be too late.” Ava scowled and left. Perhaps her father would never understand that they had to remove their enemies completely. Treaties could never last and eventually, they would attack the Kordans as the Berkmer always had. At least Badger was dead, that had been Ava’s doing. She had successfully weakened her enemies. If only she was still queen she could now finish the job.

On Ava’s way back to Cragtop keep she felt her anger with her father’s approach rise. Why wouldn’t he just stop the Stonehearts? They had fought so much in the past and now the Kordans were the ruling nobility they had a chance to end that. A figure approached hooded and hunched from the shadows of a back street. “Stay back. Do you know who I am?” Ava screamed.

“Ah, dear princess. I think you will be happy to have met me.” The hooded figure chuckled revealing some moongrass. Ava had a vast supply of the stuff, what did this man think he was offering? “Stay away. I don’t need any moongrass.” Ava said as she continued to walk. “This isn’t no moongrass my dear, but I think the similarities will be appealing to you. It is shadowgrass. With all the same properties as moongrass, but it will not repel a shade.” Ava turned and snatched the grass from her pursuer’s hands. “What do you want?” she asked. The man smiled a sly smile. “I want the same as you. A Kordan queen to replace a poor king. Won’t this allow that? Take it. You won’t see me again princess.”

Ava took a moment to look at the shadowgrass. When she looked up the hooded man was gone. She knew what had to be done. Now she knew the people believed in her, wanted her to rule instead of her father, she had to act. Quickly she rushed back to the keep. There she found Farin’s study deserted and quickly replaced his supply of moongrass with the shadowgrass. The shade would return and Ava would have her chance to combat those lords in the north. Her army was already there now she just had to use it.

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Ava watched as Farin entered Boudain’s quarters to burn the grass as he did every day in the evening. When Farin left Ava entered expecting to see the results of her cunning. “Hello, daughter. Have you revised your opinions on the Stoneh…” he began to shake. The moongrass had to be renewed every day or the shade would be able to strike, Ava had already burnt hers. There was a slight fragmentation in the light near her father. Boudain began shouting about a foul beast and how he would slay it. He dropped to his side, off the chair and on to the floor. It had worked. Ava would be queen regent once again, she had to be convincing now though.

Running Ava cried out about her father. Soon she reached Farin’s study. “I, I don’t know. What has happened? Boudain is raving. I think he’s been possessed again.” Farin frowned and then began to hurriedly gather supplies. “I used the same dose I always use. Could it have adapted? No that can’t be it.” After getting his things Farin hobbled quickly out of his study.

It was all in place. If Farin did not suspect Ava then no one would have any evidence against her. His word would be final on matters to do with the shade. Not knowing how long it would take Farin to discover the shadowgrass, Ava acted quickly. She wrote a letter commanding the Kordan’s to fight the Stonehearts and Rydels and sent it by a bird to Chillporth. Then she wrote another letter to send to Layal. If the king’s madness lasted then it would be best Layal heard of his sickness from Ava. That way Layal might trust her leadership. She told him that the king had been poisoned. Ava tried to seem upset and encouraged Layal to stay in Varon. In the end, she said she would do all she could for her father and that Layal could help the king best by supporting the people of Varon.

Ava had done all she could. Now she just had to wait to see the beauty of what she had set in motion. The Stonehearts and Rydels would surely stand no chance when taken by surprise. If they did when the then raiders could finish them off. Ava could continue to rule well for a while. It may not last long, but she would show the people again that she was a better ruler than her father. No one in Mistrun would doubt her again and all the provinces of the land would bow to her. Then when her father did recover they would cast him down and raise her the true Kordan ruler back to the throne. They could not stop her now.

## 35. Return of the Darkness - Boudain

One moment Boudain was in his quarters the next he was in an oozing black world. He began to sink slowly into the dark liquid beneath him as tendrils reached out toward him. As Boudain uselessly tried to bat the tentacles away a larger creature approached. “Stay back fowl beast. I will not suffer this!” Boudain shouted feeling for his mental weapon almost instinctively. It was as Boudain feared, the shade had returned. In his search for the mental weapon, he found another barrier. It was as if the darkness was blocking his way to the weapon. He could not get it.

No. He pushed harder through the darkness in his mind to reach for the weapon. Just as the pit of tar was about to swallow him Boudain found the weapon. Cutting all the tentacles in half in one arcing swipe Boudain rose again from the liquid. Now he faced the Great twisted beast that seemed to almost be formed from the oozing ground. They passed liquid between each other as if the ground and the beast were one. Slowly the beast prowled around Boudain and he turned with it.

Eventually, Boudain roared and charged the great creature raising his weapon. When he reached the creature it was smoke and when Boudain emerged from that smoke he was no longer in the dark hell. The sun shined brightly as he looked out from his balcony on to Hyford. Spring was here and the town seemed abuzz with life. Boudain sighed a deep sigh of relief. This time he had been able to fight the shade. This time he hadn’t had to face the seemingly endless torments.

There was a knock at Boudain’s door. “Enter.” Boudain roared heartily. Unexpectedly Layal entered the room. Stunned Boudain gave Layal a look of confusion. “Ah, my king. You wonder why I have returned so soon. Varon is cured, the town thrives. I would say I may have done an even better job than you have done here.” Boudain smiled a deep smile. “Let us not worry ourselves with the details, it is great to see you, my dear friend. I have some Calvari wine I was going to drink before all this started. Care for a drink?” Boudain laughed. His advisor welcomingly accepted.

After pouring the vintage wine into two fine glasses Boudain presented one to Layal. “Never has there been a time more deserving of a good vintage.” Layal began, “With the victories in the north and Arvar and the cursed ones practically wiping each other out you have true control over your kingdom.” Boudain couldn’t believe his luck; all of his issues resolved in one day. “There couldn’t be a better person to bring me the news Layal. My daughter still won’t be happy though.” Layal looked confused seeming like he was trying to solve a complex problem, “What daughter?” he said.

With that Boudain knew something was off. He looked more closely at the wine. The label was all wrong, the Calvari designs looked nothing like that. He smelt the air and it smelt of nothing. Finally, he looked at Layal again finding his facial features were just a bit wrong. This was all still the work of the shade. He had read that if they could not beat someone by force they would lull them into security and then feed on them much more slowly. “You are no advisor of mine and I will not stand these pretences,” Boudain shouted rising from his seat. His weapon was already drawn. With it, he struck down his friend who then lay on his floor dead.

Suddenly Boudain felt a doubt overcome him. He had been wrong, this was no dream. He had just killed Layal. Shedding a tear Boudain forced himself to look more closely at the man he had struck in two. The face resembled Layal even less now; this couldn’t be real. He had just used the mental weapon. That wouldn’t work in the real world. No, it had to be the shade’s doing. He was still in the shade’s world it just had a different form.

All Boudain had to do was destroy this world with his weapon, but when it resembled everything he loved so closely that was hard. Now he began waving his weapon at everything he could. The walls, the doors, the palace servants, anything. It was fatiguing especially without the aid of the moongrass smoke. The world didn’t fight back making the whole thing feel pointless, but Boudain knew that this was the way to fight the shade. This was the way out, he just had to commit to it. Eventually, he would stop the shade even without the moongrass. The shade had resorted to this tactic because it knew it couldn’t beat Boudain by force. Boudain had the advantage, it was just a matter of time before he won.

## 36. Chillporth Training - Trissa

Trissa and Vardon approached the weathered town of Chillporth. With partially mended walls and hordes of men outside, the town looked poor. Like it could no longer fully serve its purpose. Many men looked wounded as if there had been in a recent battle. “It may not look like much, but this town has protected Mistrun from Calvari raids since the Cursed Calamity. Its lord, Orson, is also far shrewder than you might expect.” Vardon said while gesturing in a grand manner in the direction of the town. “I don’t care for shrewd lords if they do not care for their people. This town deserves more.”

“You will see dear. This man cares more for his people than most, but the raids take their toll. Orson is here because he wishes to protect and that is why he sent me to find you.” Trissa was uncertain. Lords never had a clear motive and only cared about personal gain in her experience. She bit her tongue remembering that Vardon had spent hundreds of years ensuring Mistrun could be saved from the cursed ones. He must have chosen to support Orson for a reason, maybe this lord was one who could defend the kingdom from those creatures.

Trissa was led to Orson’s quarters inside the cramped town of Chillporth. Seeing the varying banner colours of the troops around Chillporth did restore a little of her faith in the nobility. She hadn’t thought them capable of stopping squabbling for long enough to create such a united force. As they entered the town hall of Chillporth Trissa respected that it was little different from the other wooden houses around the town. It had seen many repairs like the other buildings but was no more lavish or expensive. The inside was relatively bland and Orson’s quarters were humble when Vardon led Trissa to them.

Once inside the quarters, Orson looked up above his glasses at the two who had entered allowing Vardon to speak. “This is Trissa, my lord. Soon to be a powerful mage I am sure. She is already adept at using her mind to propel her body; in Burnbury she used that to hunt farnoth with ease.” Vardon explained excitedly. Orson removed his glasses and looked more closely at Trissa. “Ah, we’ll have you ready in no time. As you can see we’re a bit bruised from the most recent raid, but it’s nothing we can’t patch up. You might be able to help stop that in the next raid maybe. If you need anything don’t hesitate to ask. We are quite stretched at the moment though so I can’t promise anything. Vardon will get you set up and prepared.” Orson said calmly, but before Trissa could finish mumbling a thank you Vardon rushed her back out.

“You have so much to learn and we have so much to do, dear,” he said when Trissa gave him a disapproving look, “Come, I’ll show you where you’re staying and then we can start with training. We needed to be prepared, a raid could happen at any time.” Returning to Chillporth seemed to have renewed the man’s energy, Trissa had to walk briskly to keep pace with him as they headed toward her accommodation. As they went he pointed out landmarks which seemed just as patchwork as the rest of Chillporth.

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Trissa had barely had time to look at her room before Vardon had rushed her to where they would be training. Now Trissa was attempting to use the powers that Vardon insisted she had. On the floor, there was a small pile of splintered wood that looked like it had been gathered from the broken walls of the recent raid. Vardon wanted Trissa to light that wood on fire with nothing, but her mind. She tried to concentrate on the wood being hot. It seemed ridiculous, if she could light wood on fire why had she never done it before. Surely this wasn’t even possible.

“You have to believe, dear girl. No mage will use any power without belief.” Vardon counselled. Trying to believe Trissa suppressed her doubts and replaced them with mental encouragement. Nothing Happened. “This isn’t going to work Vardon. I can’t do it.” Trissa sighed. Vardon moved over to the pile of wood touching it. “Come, quick.” He said, “Place your hand on the wood. Do you feel that? The wood is warm and you heated it Trissa. Very good progress, now let’s move on to something you’re more familiar with.”

In a short time, Trissa was stood looking down at Vardon from a nearby balcony. He wanted her to jump off and push herself upwards with her mind to cushion her fall. Knowing now that Trissa had been pushing and pulling her body with her mind when she hunted the farnoth, she was confident that she would be able to do this. She leapt from the balcony without a second thought willing herself upwards and expecting to land smoothly. She didn’t. Why hadn’t she touched the ground? Looking down she realised that she was floating just above the ground.

“Excellent. It would take many mages years of training to actively float above the ground. You make it look easy, dear.” Vardon congratulated her. Trissa released her focus and fell the short distance left. “I can float? That’s incredible. If I did that over a long distance I could make great jumps. I could try jumping from house to house.” Trissa said excited by this discovery. “Slow down girl. The mind is a muscle that you use to control your powers. If you overexert then you will find yourself powerless for a time. It also uses your energy reserves to power it. Doing what you say will leave you exhausted if you don’t have proper energy. Now you can restore your energy by eating, but there is another way for a mage to recover energy more quickly.” Vardon explained.

He took her to a little store cupboard in a shack close to where they had been training. There he pulled out some small blue stones. “These can be charged to store energy for a mage to use. Here take one. Okay now feel the energy flow from it into your arm and then the rest of your body.” Trissa focused on the stone trying to pull the energy from it. A refreshing coolness moved up her arm and then through the rest of her body. “Let me see the stone dear. Ah, yes. Do you see how it is now less shiny? You have drained the energy from the stone. A mage needs to be able to do this to ensure they never run out of energy when in trouble.”

Trissa felt more awake than she had in a long time. She wanted to use the energy she had just gained. It was as if lightning was trapped inside her. “Tomorrow I’ll show you how to charge the stones,” Vardon continued, “then we will be able to ensure you never run short of energy when you need it.” Vardon was about to continue when the house behind him exploded throwing him toward Trissa. She just caught him before he fell. “What is happening?” asked Trissa. “You are not yet prepared for this dear girl, but you will have to work with what you have. This is undoubtedly a Calvari raid.”

Before Trissa could understand what was happening a small force of barely clothed golden skinned men, seemingly the size of trees, surrounded them. Vardon and Trissa were back to back facing them. Trissa had her fists up and Vardon his palms stretched out toward the men. With a mixture of adrenaline and energy, Trissa felt she had all the power needed to stop these men. She lunged out toward the closest man with incredible speed. Before he even noticed that Trissa had moved he was on the ground with Trissa pummelling his face. Her power provided speed complimented the self-defence she had learnt living in Burnbury.

Vardon moved far more slowly and methodically. Swirling Balls of fire appeared around him and circled until a Calvari got too close. With Trissa darting around the small courtyard picking off the giants and Vardon burning any that got close to him they had soon thinned the numbers of nearby raiders. When none were left standing Trissa caught her breath that was surprisingly heavy. Her brain had a numb ache similar to what she had often felt pushing herself toward the farnoth. She had used this same power to hunt them.

“I fear they will return in greater numbers. I can do little more with my abilities. Take this.” Vardon breathed throwing another blue stone to Trissa. She drained the energy from it quickly and seemingly right away they were again surrounded by twice the number of Calvari. Vardon created fireballs again, but they were far smaller and fewer. He had said is magic had been weakened when his life was extended. With Vardon still managing to hold the men off Trissa returned to the same tactic she had used before. Speeding around she was able to avoid any of the slow attacks of the hulking brutes that now seemed incredibly angry. Some seemed to grow more frustrated with every movement of Trissa or Vardon.

With that rage, they began to charge roaring a warcry. One ran straight through Vardon’s shield of fireballs throwing him across the courtyard and to the ground. The old man didn’t get up and seemed not to even move. The enraged men beat their chests and roared with the joy of success in battle. There were too many for Trissa to handle. She rushed toward one and started attacking, but another knocked her from behind. Although they were slow they were everywhere. Whenever Trissa moved to attack one man another seemed to be there to lunge at her. She retreated standing over Vardon’s body and breathing deeply in hopes to protect him as he had her in the mountains. Yet it felt she could do nothing. The men were all around her. She had so little space that she began to feel claustrophobic. She screamed a scream of defeat, but let out a shockwave all around her. All the men in the square were flung back collapsing to the ground. Trissa had willed them away and had forced them back. She stood for just long enough to understand what had happened before collapsing to the ground.

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Trissa awoke in the town hall on a makeshift medical bed. Vardon looked down over her. “I don’t know how you managed it, dear, but you may well have saved our lives. I woke up to find you lay by me and all the Calvari around us dead. You have incredible power.” Trissa gave a slight nod from her bed. She had not the energy to speak. Vardon gave her some soup explaining that food was a more filling but slower energy than the blue gems.

“You may well be the strongest mage I have seen in generations Trissa. You may yet turn the tides here and could definitely fight the cursed one day. These magics were birthed to fight them so with everything you learn you gain a new tool against the cursed.” Vardon explained not really expecting a response. Trissa lay there listening, but not really seeing how she could be as useful as Vardon explained. Yes, she could take down more men than an average person, but surely there was little she could really do. There was no way she could stop the observer that had pinned her helplessly against the wall in her home town of Pedshaw.

Vardon must have seen the doubt in Trissa’s face. “Ah, you will see dear. Using your powers in the right way you could turn the tides of any battle or infiltrate any counsel. A good mage is smart as well as powerful. Only then will they achieve their full potential. You can do that.” In a short time, Trissa had drifted back into sleep. She had not the energy to sustain consciousness.

## 37. Light Shines over Varon - Layal

It was a scorching day in Varon, it would be like this through all of spring, summer, and autumn now. The clear skied desert of Rainsmere was prone to unmatched heat, but its people knew how to deal with it. With guards now patrolling the land around Varon the supply chains had picked up and the markets seemed to have a renewed bustle. Although not quite as full and busy as Layal remembered, the streets of Varon now resembled the town he used to know. As soon as cloths started coming in again he would line these streets with the colour they deserved. That would restore life fully here.

Layal had made it a habit of walking the same way through the streets each week. It gave him time to think and ensured the people saw him. He would talk to those he passed by and encourage them. The people here needed to have their faith restored and seeing the person making changes assisted that. Today Layal was leaning towards thinking over speaking on his walk. He had received letters from Ava explaining that Boudain had been poisoned and could not decide if he should trust them or not.

In the letters, Ava seemed to be genuinely upset about the harm that had come to her father, but perhaps uncharacteristically so. In the first letter she explained that Boudain had lost his mind like when the shade had first possessed him, but he was still using moongrass. As a result, she believed that her father had been poisoned. However, she urged Layal to stay in Varon, believing Boudain would soon recover and saying that Layal was needed where he was. In the past, Ava had rarely agreed with choices made by her father so perhaps she had matured. Could she have realised what she had done in the past and now be trying to help her father?

A few weeks later a second letter had arrived stating that Boudain was still quite mad, but Ava believed she had found the poisoner. After Ava dealt with this poisoner who had been consistently poisoning the king Boudain would recover and rule once again. Yet Ava believed the poisoner was Farin. He had been the one who with Layal had worked to save the king from the shade using moongrass. What reason would he have to poison the king? Surely he wouldn’t. Yet if anyone had access to poisons and the king it was Farin. In that same letter, Ava worried about the king’s mind. She was upset that he may never truly recover and that she could not rule as well as her father.

Layal believed Ava. She wasn’t this good a lying even in a letter. Layal sympathised with what she said and knew that the king would still want him in Varon if he believed he would recover quickly. So Layal was decided, he would wait here and continue his work. There was no need for a rescue mission for his beloved king. Layal just wished that Boudain would recover quickly. The thought of his friend struggling again as he had with the shade saddened him. Yet there was little he was able to do to help. Staying and helping Varon would be of the greatest aid to his king in the long run.

On his walk, Layal was now approaching the end of Market Street. Seemingly coming from nowhere a small peasant girl was tugging on Layal’s pants. This brought Layal back from his thoughts to the street he strolled through. “Sir, thank you,” she said, “Before I had to steal, but now Jilan has taken me back as an apprentice. Thanks to you I can eat again.” Layal knelt down to look the girl in the eyes. “All I have given is what you should have had little one. Be happy, but do not thank me. This is what you deserve” Layal said calmly.

The street had grown quiet and many had turned to watch as Layal spoke. A hunched man carrying crates began a chant, “Lord Layal the light of Varon.” At first, the people just looked at him, but then a few others began to join in. Layal tried to interrupt them, but they paid no notice. Soon the whole street was chanting for the advisor. He had not wanted to be revered he just wanted to help his home town. All he had done was free up the supply routes, the people here must have been more desperate than he had believed.

Initially, Layal wanted to shy away from the praise, but if the city needed a saviour then he would be that for them. As a figurehead, he would have more sway and could even encourage the people to believe in their glory once again. There would be those who didn’t like it, Geran for example, but this could be a real turning point for the city and maybe even the region. Layal waved his arms to motion silence and his words echoed through the silent streets, “I will see this town and Rainsmere be the hubs of Mistrun they once were. The people here deserve all and they will receive it. You saved this country from the tyranny of the Berkmer and now you will find your grand reward. It is waiting for you. Will you claim it with me?”

A resounding cheer of agreement rose up through the streets. Layal had secured his power in Varon. Maybe now he even had the respect to replace Geran with a new captain of the guard. These people seemed to almost want to be moulded and given purpose. This was exactly what Layal need to help this desert town. The unwavering support of a people would give Layal all that Boudain could not do with the limited supplies he had sent. When his king recovered he would see his homeland restored and in full support of him once again. Layal could ensure that at least.

## 38. Broken Promises - Edward

Ed sat with Orson in his humble quarters in the Chillporth town hall. He had seen Trissa and her magic in the most recent raid and eagerly questioned Orson about her. With her power in the right place, it seemed she might take on all of the Calvari herself. “Her display was incredible. I only saw a glimpse of her fighting before she sent out the shockwave, but that alone showed her ability. There must have been over a hundred raiders dead in that square and she fought them alone. Imagine what she would be like with proper support working with the soldiers.” Ed exclaimed.

Orson thought deeply before saying anything. “Yes she will be a great power, but she still had much to learn from what Vardon tells me. I want you to work with her though. As you say she needs to know how to fight by your side. She is vital to both this defence and stopping the cursed ones so ensure your men protect her.” He then motioned to a guard who opened a side door from which Trissa entered the room. “Hello Trissa, I hope you have recovered well from your wounds.” He said soothingly and Trissa nodded slightly uncomfortably. Then Orson continued, “This is Edward Stoneheart, I want you to learn to work with the army and him. This man may become one of the greatest leaders Mistrun has ever seen, but to lead he needs support and you will give him that.”

Trissa gave a slightly disapproving look. “Speak your mind Trissa. We will not fault you for your opinions.” Orson said. For a moment Trissa didn’t speak, but then she seemed to find the words, “I will not be a puppet to a lord who has no love for Mistrun and only seeks power. Until Edward has proven to me he is not a lord like all the others I will work with him only to the extent that I see the benefit of the country. I’ll happily learn to fight raiders, but I won’t go fighting any people of Mistrun when there is no need. He may have my support, but only with the raids for now.”

“Understandably you wouldn’t want to fight your own people,” Orson said, “For now help with the raids is all we ask as Vardon explained to you I am sure.” Trissa nodded again. Ed was happy for the chance to speak to Trissa he had only caught the sight of her fighting in the last raid briefly and had wanted to speak to her since. “Your fighting in the last raid was amazing Trissa. It will be a pleasure to work with you, I can assure you that my goals are aligned with yours. For now, all I wish to do is stop these raids and later I will return my focus to the cursed as my brother did.”

Hearing of Ed’s intentions Trissa’s mood seemed to lighten. She looked at Ed less harshly than she had before. Clearly wanting to say more Trissa began to speak, but before she could say anything an alarm bell began to ring. “Another raid already?” Orson questioned, “It cannot be, it is too soon surely.” Ed and Trissa ran out on to the balcony to find a group of Kordan men wearing brown and gold fighting the Rydels and Stonehearts in the main hall below. Orson was right. This was no raid, but the Kordans turning on the other noble families once again. Ed turned to see the harsh look had returned to Tissa’s face, this was the exactly the sort of fight she hadn’t wanted to be involved in.

Ed jumped from the balcony drew his sword and sliced and unsuspecting Kordan man down the back before he could turn. Few Kordans were in the town hall and the Rydel and Stoneheart numbers were much greater. They surrounded the limited Kordans bringing the chaos that had erupted under control. Within a short time, the Kordan men in the town hall were taken down and a few men search for others in the other wings of the building. Ed looked to Trissa who had remained on the balcony, “We need you now Trissa. If you do not help we will take great losses with Kordan forces spread throughout our army.”

“I will not take part in these petty games played by nobles. Why should I favour you over them?” Trissa questioned with anger in her eyes. Ed didn’t know what to say. He knew that the fewer people who died here the better chances they would have against the continuing raids, but it seemed Trissa was too upset to care for that answer right now. Instead, he said, “I would appreciate any help you can give. I cannot linger here, I must regroup the men and try to reduce our losses.” Then he walked out on to the streets of Chillporth with the men who had been in the town hall.

The scene was chaotic. Men in brown, blue and green were scattered throughout the street. The men were unorganised and unprepared. Some had grabbed makeshift weapons after being taken by surprise and others brawled with their fists. Many of the Kordan men seemed as confused as the Rydel and Stoneheart soldiers. The streets pulsed with combat. Clashes rang through the street drowning the cries of those slaughtered in the unexpected attack. Many soldiers seemed distracted as if they didn’t know if they should be fighting their recent allies.

Ed rallied the nearby men. “To me. Create a circle. In this mess, we do not want to be attacked from behind.” Soon a ring of green and blue was formed in the street outside the town hall. A few Kordan men tried to stop them, but they weren’t organised enough to do any real damage. Now that most of the Rydel and Stoneheart men near the town hall were gathered together Kordans began to run at the circle. A few of Ed’s men fell, but many more Kordans were repelled. The men who were left in brown on the street ran as Ed’s formation moved gathering strength as it went.

With Ed’s men using their current formation and such spread Kordan forces, two swords would hit any man that approached before they could bring down their own weapon. Like this Ed moved through Chillporth with little difficulty. Both Rydel and Stoneheart men died, but more were found to replace them and many more Kordan men were slain. A few Kordan men began to catch on and tried to group into a line to attack Ed’s growing number, but they were too late now. Too few Kordans were left in the streets to gather a large enough number. They now barely affected Ed’s force.

With that Ed had secured most of the inside of the walls of Chillporth, but he knew the real losses would come in the camps outside. He called men to gather Rydel and Stoneheart flags to raise upon the walls. They blew horns and made noise to signal to the soldiers bellow that Chillporth would be a haven for Rydels and Stonehearts. All of the camps seemed to empty as forces of all colours stampeded towards the gates. Kordans pursuing the fleeing Rydels and Stonehearts. With bows, the men on the walls tried to pick off the Kordans at first, but many of their own men were shot instead. Ed ordered the bows be put down and all the men who could to gather in the inner side of the gate.

The gates were opened and those inside gathered before the approaching wave. “Let our own men through, but try to pick off any Kordans who approach. We cannot allow them past.” Ed shouted to the front line of men as the trampling of approaching feet grew ever louder. In seconds the wave was upon them. The men pushed against the great current gasping for air as they did so. Separating the Kordans from the rest was like trying to remove dye from water. The men of all colours flowed as one and many Kordans slipped through while Rydels or Stonehearts were trampled. After a great number of men had passed through the gates they were forced shut by all those inside. Men who were left on the other side continued to try and squeeze through until the gates were firmly shut.

Now the small town of Chillporth was flooded. A sea of heads was all that could be perceived from the ground. No colour could be recognised on any man. The fighting continued, but more frantically. Every movement became a battle for survival. Ed struggled to breathe in the crush of men and weapons. He tripped on something hard and fell below the surface of men. His arms went up looking for any handhold to pull himself back from the trampling depths. He found something and pulled with all his might, but it resisted. It was another man trying to stay afloat. He pushed Ed down seemingly further.

Ed crawled trying to avoid the crushing boots unsuccessfully. He found a wall. Something unmoving in this torrent. He used it to support himself. Pushing up against it he raised his head once again above the surface. Glimpsing the streets for merely seconds he saw now that the men no longer tried to fight. They just wanted to escape this hell of bodies. The gates wouldn’t open; they swung inward and there was no space. Men pushed those who tried to climb on to the outer walls of the city back down. Everything was dark again. Someone scrambling to be in the same position as Ed had pulled him below the surface again.

Suddenly men began to fall spilling toward the sea gate. Ed was flung in that direction trying to keep up above the crush. He got around a corner far enough to briefly see what had happened. A fence around the port within the sea gate had snapped. Bodies spilt through the new gap into the sea below. Someone on the wall had the wits to raise the sea gate and men who had only recently rushed into Chillporth now rushed out. Ed supported himself against a building and tried to stop as many Rydel and Stoneheart men from rushing outside the walls as he could.

Soon it was possible to stand upright once again in Chillporth, but Ed found he had many more wounds than he had had in any battle in the past. His head spun and ached. A pressure had released, but another had replaced it. Breathing deeply Ed tried to maintain consciousness. It took might but he held himself steady while the world spun. Many Stoneheart and Rydel men had fled through the newly repaired sea gate with the Kordans, but a good number of their armies had remained at Ed’s command. With one last deep Breath, Ed pushed himself on. “Close the Sea gate, Close it before they regroup.” He shouted as loud as his breathless lungs would allow. At first, no one heard but Ed shouted again and the soldiers passed the message from one to the next. Soon the gates were closed once again.

After scrambling back up on to the wall Ed saw that the vast majority of those outside were now Kordans. He needed to secure Chillporth once again before they returned for a second attack. A good number of Kordans would have remained, confused in the chaos. He ordered a portion of men to stay on the wall in case of an attack and then began gathering the disoriented men in the streets. “Group together Rydels and Stonehearts. We need to purge this town of Kordan wickedness. Sweep through the streets in your numbers and stop any stragglers before they can do further harm.” He said to those who could hear him.

Many small groups moved in different directions through the ramshackled streets of Chillporth gathering numbers as they went. Ed headed with one force back toward the town hall. They met little resistance until they reached the main street on which the hall was built. There a large number of Kordans had gathered. Trissa stood in the doorway of the hall pushing back any who approached without touching them, but their numbers were growing and the mage began to look weary. Ed was just thankful she had helped and Orson was likely safe inside.

Trissa screamed angrily as the Kordan men began to get closer to her before she could repel them. One man got within stabbing distance of the girl. He lunged and glanced Trissa side. She screamed louder than before; her long brown hair stood up perfectly straight. Then one by one moving out from where Trissa had been standing the Kordan men turned to dust and drifted down to the ground. Trissa breathed a deep sigh and collapsed in the town hall doorway. A few Kordans who had been outside the blast rushed to attack Trissa while she was weak.

Rallying his men Ed rushed to the door chopping the arm off the closest man to Trissa. “We cannot let the mage die. She is the key to these raids now more than ever.” He called to the men who had accompanied him. They made short work of the remaining Kordan soldiers and as the last fell cheers seemed to rise up throughout Chillporth. The Kordans had been expelled from the town for now. Ed cheered a few times but found it difficult. Already dizzied and now exhausted Ed let unconsciousness take him falling down by Trissa’s side.

## 39. Mending – Trissa

Trissa awoke dazed and exhausted. She had decided to aid Orson who had been left with little defence when the Kordans turned and Ed left with the men. Although she didn’t want to fight people of Mistrun, she knew that if she didn’t take a side many more could have died. If someone like Orson died perhaps there would be no lords left who cared about stopping the cursed ones and raids. To stop people dying needlessly Trissa knew the country needed those defences. So begrudgingly she had taken the side of the Rydels and Stonehearts. They seemed to have goodwill, but Trissa couldn’t tell their true intentions yet.

Now she was beginning to awake fully she observed the room around her. She was in the recovery beds in the Townhall once again, in the bed closest was Edward the great lord of the Stonehearts and all around were Rydel and Stoneheart soldiers. Some were dreadfully wounded and looked barely likely to survive. Ed stirred and looked to Trissa, “You’re awake, how are you? Those Kordans were getting pretty close when we turned up. How long did you hold them off?” Trissa tried to think back to the details of the battle.

“I’m alive. The magic it is so draining. I only began to understand it a few weeks ago when I met Vardon. I feel exhausted, but I should recover I think. After the crush in the streets stopped the Kordans grouped up to attack the town hall. That was when I started to fight properly.” Ed nodded trying to understand what Trissa had said. Her head spun again and it felt like a decade before Ed spoke further. “I know you don’t want to fight people of Mistrun, and neither do I. I’ve been drawn into this war with the Kordans. Boudain’s daughter had a deep hatred for the northern lords; I just want peace, but I must protect my people.”

Trissa wanted to ask Ed about why this war was happening, but knew in her state she wouldn’t properly understand. Instead, she said, “I understand Ed. After being drawn into that battle I understand you don’t always have a choice to fight. I will stand by you and Orson. We needed to be united to stop these raids and then the cursed.” Now she felt she could trust Ed. Somehow the way he had spoken removed doubt from Trissa. She was certain he was not trying to deceive her.

It wasn’t long before Vardon was by Trissa’s side, or it could have been days. Time seemed to fuzz as Trissa’s brain rung. “I told you not to overexert yourself, dear. I have some soup that should fill you and restore your energy. If you keep fighting like that you will be needing more of these.” He handed her some dull blue stones. “Wistern Stones, I never told you the name did I? Anyway I’ll show you how to charge them later.” Another old man accompanied Vardon wearing dark blue colours. Ed seemed very eager to speak to him.

“Mayer, what has happened with the Kordans outside the wall, have there been many losses?” He asked. Mayer chuckled. “Take your time Ed. You are starting to sound like Badger, worrying too much when you should be recovering. Unfortunately, both sides have taken considerable losses. I think we may both now have just over half our previous numbers. Yet a small Kordan force just arrived. A few of Boudain’s generals accompanied them and claim he did not order this. Ava has taken over again and sent a letter by bird ordering the attack, but they do not wish to do her bidding and continue fighting us.” Ed seemed happy to hear the news about the Kordan generals.

Before either could speak Trissa urged, “We must trust them. Without them will we be able to fight the raiders and cursed ones?” The two old men looked deep in thought, but Ed looked to have already made a decision. “I doubt Boudain would have ordered this with how the men were spread through the camps. Boudain has too great an understanding of military tactics to have let this happen. We should trust them, but keep their camp separate. Our men will stay inside Chillporth until the next raid. Then we can ensure their intentions are good.” Both the old men seemed happy with this decision. The Stoneheart old man, Mayer, began talking about how Vardon had given him lots of information about the cursed, but Trissa could no longer concentrate on the conversation. She drifted back into sleep.

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Trissa was back in Vardon’s courtyard Training again. She was still tired from the battle, but she was well enough. It seemed there could be an attack at any time and Trissa wanted to be ready now. Vardon held out a wistern stone in the palm of his hand. It was dull and looked little more than a small bluish pebble without charge. “To charge a stone can take weeks normally. You keep the stone close and transfer a small amount of your energy to it constantly until it is full. Then the energy can be drawn from it all at once when needed. Take out a stone.” Trissa drew a stone from her pocket that Vardon had given her when she was resting in the town hall.

“Now, dear you need to make a transfer link to store energy. It is much like how you drew energy from a stone but in reverse.” She tried to push energy into the stone. Nothing happened and then she believed her energy was flowing into the stone. Vardon had said magic requires belief. She felt a light sucking from inside herself in the direction of the stone. “Do you feel the stone drawing energy, dear?” Trissa nodded eagerly, “A light sucking?” Trissa nodded again. “Excellent, now you can increase or decrease the amount of energy being transferred to the stone by willing more or less energy into it, but for now keep it how it is. You have probably unknowingly set it to drain the right amount of energy to not hinder your activities. You will continue to transfer energy from now. When a stone is full you will know, dear, and then you must start filling another.”

With the stone draining her energy Trissa felt slightly weaker, but she knew this wouldn’t affect her day to day activities. Although she would have to stop if she found herself fighting again. “Now then, the other way to charge these stones is to leave them out in a storm. They will attract lighting which would have struck very far away if empty. This will fully charge any stone, but be careful if your stones are not full you must cast them away to reclaim later if you are caught in such a storm.” Now Trissa had a way to have more energy when she needed it she felt she would be able to sustain herself in battle now.

Yet seemingly reading Trissa’s mind Vardon said, “Even with wistern stones you must not overexert yourself in battle as you have been. The stones should be a last resort and you must be more precise with your power.” Trissa didn’t know how to fight many men in great battles. She knew self-defence, but how was she supposed to be more precise. “How do I do it, Vardon? When surrounded by attackers the fight becomes a scramble.”

Vardon nodded in thought. “Hmmm, yes you are right. Positioning is key. In those scenarios, there is little you can do but fight as well as you can. Yet if you managed to put yourself behind allied soldiers or sneak up on an enemy you will find your magic can be used far more effectively. Let us practice. Come along, dear.” Vardon led Trissa out of Chillporth and to a craggy rock face that looked out on to the deep blue Frozen Sea. The rocks were white with frost but looked as if the top layer could tumble if they were disturbed.

“You have a great ability to move both objects and yourself with your mind Trissa. Powers are like muscles. The more you use one type of magic the stronger it will become for you. It will also require less energy for you to use that power. I want you to pull down the rocks from the cliff.” Vardon pointed to a rock face across an inlet of water from where they stood. Trissa nodded and began to concentrate on the rocks. They seemed to shudder but did not tumble. Trissa concentrated harder, but it was no use.

“I could push many men away in battle. Why can’t I bring these rocks down?” Trissa uttered through gritted teeth.

“In the heat of battle, one will draw on energy reserves they did not know they had to cast magic they knew not possible. You must train yourself so that you become less exhausted and you must use magic wisely when you have done so. Keep trying. Will the rocks into the sea, dear.” Trissa concentrated ever harder. Her brain began to ache. It almost felt like it was being squashed under a great pressure. These rocks would fall, Trissa screamed forcing her will into the movement of the rocks. One fell. It looked feeble from such a distance at first, but it broke away other rocks below. As a result, a cascade of rocks began to roll from the cliff face. A great wave of rocks rushed into the freezing waters below disturbing them. Great splashes from the previously calm water rose up covering the cliff.

“See how a small use of magic can have a great impact dear. If you had focused on that single rock all along the magic would have been much easier to perform and you would have had the same result. Look for ways to make a wall collapse without removing every brick or a fleet sink without burning every boat and you will succeed.” Trissa was tired, she breathed deeply, but understood the lesson. She had to pick her targets and then she could be much more effective. Now she just had to hope she could find the right target in the heat of battle, and that she would have the support so that she did not have to worry as much about other enemies while she worked on her target.

## 40. Wishful Leadership - Ava

Today was the day Ava consolidated her rule. No one would be able to speak out against her. No one would discover the shadowgrass without Farin that pesky sage around. She exited on to a balcony that overlooked a courtyard where a large crowd were gathered below. She needed the people to see this, to believe that Farin was wrong. People always turned up to public executions, but Ava had needed to be sure there would be enough. She had sent a royal order that all in the upper quarters of Hyford were required to attend. Most of what was left of the guards in Hyford, after Boudain sent many men north, gathered around the outside of the square. They would make sure no one left early. Her plan was perfect, she would become a great ruler and this was the day that would be remembered.

The crowd parted as the guards made a route to escort Farin through to the pyre. As he was pushed feebly forward he stumbled and hobbled. He was barely able to keep pace with the guards. The crowd threw various foods and waste at the old sage. One object hit him in the face blinding him as it smeared its juices across his eyes. He fell. Rightfully a guard hauled him to his feet and forced him onward. Thrust up to the wood and tied into position Farin did not struggle. He did not even try to speak out. What a pitiful man to allow his own execution so easily.

A silence was brought upon the masses by threatening guards and Ava’s presence. She began to speak, “Today we will see this traitor that was once our trusted royal sage disposed of for his crimes. He has been found guilty of poisoning our great king Boudain.” The crowd began to boo at hearing harm come to Boudain, “Farin’s poison has weakened Boudain’s mind and now he is in a condition where he may never be able to rule again. The death of one such as this is not punishment enough for such a crime, but there is little more I can do.”

Ava rose her arms above her head and then cast them toward the pyre, the signal to light it, and the treated wood burst into flame. Farin had great discomfort on his face but tried not to cry out at first, yet as the flame grew hotter and his clothes began to light he could not resist. He screamed out as the flame took him and the crowd cheered as it happened. Farin had been a good sage sometimes, but Ava needed to ensure no one would discover that moongrass was no longer burnt for the king. Without Farin, it would certainly be very difficult for anyone to notice. Ava left the balcony without saying anything else to her people, they would have to stay in the square until the fire went out.

People would believe the poisoning instead of the return of the shade; Boudain had begun attacking people and was far different from when he was first possessed by the shade. Unfortunately, it appeared his mind had broken; with too much contact with a shade, it could happen. Many people would think the different symptoms had to be caused by something else so Ava was almost certain she was safe now. This was the price Ava had to pay for the crown. Now more than ever she knew it had been worth it. Mistrun needed someone like her.

The only issue now were Boudain’s occasional bouts of lucidity. Somehow he must have been fighting the shade. He was able to hold it off for long enough to occasionally appear normal now. One day he had walked straight into court and even acted normally. For now, Ava had combatted that by telling those around that Boudain was very mad from the poisoning. He could appear normal for a time, but the more freedom he was given the greater the possibility he could have an outburst in the wrong place. With guards posted on the old king's door, he was no longer able to escape his quarters which would reduce the number of people he could convince he was sane. The guards believed the king was truly insane now so certainly they would not be turned.

Somehow Ava had convinced Layal completely of Boudian’s madness and even Farin’s betrayal. He had always trusted Farin and yet accepted that he must have poisoned the king. In Layal’s letter, he had said that he would trust Ava’s judgment now believing she was doing the right thing for the Kordan family. Ava had expected Layal to be the hardest to convince, he was always good at predicting others yet maybe he was distracted by Varon or Ava had appeared honest in her letters to him. Either way that was something Ava didn’t have to worry about for now.

The only issue that Ava had had during her ruler so far was that the Kordan soldiers in the north had not yet reported back. They should have said something by now. It had been too long. Ava would have to send more north, maybe both sides had been wiped out and that was why her birds never returned. That day she sent half of the remaining force left in Hyford north and they were only a fraction of what had been a great number of Kordan soldiers. If Ava had been queen longer she would have had many more men trained already. Her father had been weak.

Soon all Ava’s issues would be solved and she wouldn’t have to worry about that. She would be able to do as she wished with the kingdom. Now if only she could get rid of those in court who hadn’t believed in Farin’s betrayal. There were too many for her liking. Those in court should have been loyal to the ruler and never opposed then. That should not be too difficult for Ava to fix. If she could convince Layal and remove Farin this would be trivial.

## 41. Lucidity returns – Boudain

Everything had been cloven in two. Not a thing in sight could Boudain see that he had not cut through. Yet his task still seemed hopeless this shadow world would not let him go. Would he have to cut through the very land beneath him before the shade would loosen its grip? It seemed so. Occasionally the shade had let Boudain out of this world of mimicry, but Boudain hadn’t been sure if the world he had been in was real. Had the shade gone? Surely Boudain could not have wrecked the world he had longed to return to. No that could not be. It would not be.

Raising his weapon above his head Boudain roared angry with the continued pretence of this foul shade. He speared the ground deep with the weapon using all the strength he could muster. Straining he slashed the weapon through the earth beneath his feet. Bringing the weapon up from the ground nothing happened. It was useless as every other swing of his mighty weapon had seemed. Boudain sighed. He had been defeated, and yet as he relaxed the world began to split between his two feet. It was as if his weapon had extended to the length of the world. He had just cut through all of the shade’s version of Mistrun with one large stroke. This would surely stop the shade.

Around Boudain, the illusion began to crumble. The world phased from the Mistrun he had torn apart to the black nothing of the shade’s realm. The phasing was slow at first but grew quicker and quicker until it stopped. For a moment Boudain was in a limbo world of all white. He breathed slowly expecting a last attack from the shade but instead, he heard an ear-piercing cry. That cry echoed through all of the shade’s worlds and then Boudain was finally released to his quarters. The shade had abdicated his dwindling reign. Boudain had usurped its power in its own world as he had Rudolf in his own Kingdom. He was certain that he would not have to fear this creature again.

Boudain regained his bearings within his quarters. At first, he stumbled on legs that felt foreign. Then he cast open the curtains and allowed the light that shone in to fill him. Somehow this light seemed to rejuvenate him. Then he went to dress but on the opening of his cupboard, a withered monster fell upon him. Incredibly light Boudain tossed it across the room. There the wicked corpse lay. Recollecting his readings this had to be the shade that had possessed him. It looked almost skeletal with such a thin skin that looked as if it was touched it would crumble. Unable to leach energy from Boudain this thing must have used its last power in attempts to regain control and stay alive. A shiver ran down Boudain’s spine. He wished not to look upon the thing that had tormented him for so long.

Unfortunately, Boudain knew he could not leave his quarters. In his previous bouts of lucidity, the guards had grown stricter with him. It seemed Ava did not want him to escape and perhaps intended for Boudain never to recover. During the whole time he had been held by the shade, no moongrass smoke had aided him. That had to be his daughter’s doing. It upset him that his own daughter would resort to such measures to hold on to the throne, but he knew now he would never willingly allow her to rule. With the capital so distrustful of him, Boudain was certain the court would not accept him as they had last time. He was a prisoner in king’s clothes. If he took a single step outside his door the guards would send him back with force.

Now he was truly free of that wretched creature maybe there was a way he could stop his daughter from ruining this kingdom. First, he would need to venture far from the capital. He would need support. Layal. He was Boudain’s best hope. Hopefully, Varon had fared well with Layal in charge. To him, Boudain would go and with luck, Layal would help him stop his deluded daughter. Yes, it would work.

The hardest tasks now would be to escape the prison of his own quarters and then to leave Hyford so he could save it. Fortunately, in Boudain’s time occupying Cragtop Keep, he had learnt its many ways and passages. Both the keep and Hyford were littered with ways of escape. That must have been how Badger had escaped his daughter not so long ago. The king’s quarters had a hatch hidden beneath a rug in the washroom that led to a great storage room. Boudain had found that a great pleasure when he had grown peckish in the night, but that would be his way around his door guards now.

Before leaving his quarters Boudain found a sword he had stashed in a chest in his dressing area, although he hoped he would not need it. Descending the ladder Boudain coughed on the dust. This place was real. The shade had not been able to conjure little details like dust or smell. Boudain couldn’t quite remember the way to the main exit of the storage room at first and took a few wrong turns. In doing so he stumbled upon a clothes store. Yes, this would do him well. Changing quickly into lesser clothes he was sure the guards would not notice him. He had lost much weight while the monster of a shade had him. With his different stature and unusual clothes, most would barely recognise him, although his characteristic bushy beard was still on full show. When changed he quickly found his way out and walked confidently out of the keep and town without a second look. Fortune had shone upon him in his escape.

The road to Varon was a long one, but not so long as the route to the Core and Sour Rock. Badger’s journey had been much harder than Boudain’s and Boudain knew this way well. He could only imagine the journey Badger had taken that it had killed him, and yet he knew Badger’s journeys beginnings were not so different from his own. Sad for the death of a great ally and the untrustworthy nature of his daughter, Boudain set out on the sombre journey to his homeland. He could fend for himself and knew the way but had much to ponder on his travels.

## 42. Quick Conquest - Arvar

Arvar and Clinart approached Mistrun with Arvar’s army following behind. Arvar was incredibly pleased with himself. The wait had paid off. During the time they had waited for Ava to slip up after using the shadowgrass on her father the cursed had also wandered north. With few cursed ones near Skypike, they had easily marched to Hyford. Ava’s slip up had also been grave. She had sent many of her soldiers away and had decreased her reputation in court. After pulling a few strings with the lords in court, almost all of which resented Ava, they had agreed to have the guard stand down. If the guard had not stood down then taking of Hyford would have been trivial, but now even Clinart could have done it himself.

“Why do we have to ride so quickly? My thighs are beginning to rub.” Clinart complained. He really had no understanding of anything. Arvar decided not to answer; for the whole journey, Clinart had been complaining like a child. “Surely if they are just going to stand down it doesn’t matter how long we take to get there?” Clinart continued. Arvar had had to ride by Clinart for the whole journey and this was really wearing on him now. “We need to get to the capital quickly before the nobles change their mind or any Kordan forces return.” Arvar sighed, “We can’t forfeit this now.” Clinart already knew all of this of course and just nodded.

It wasn’t long before the Valinar force bolstered by the Flaming Champions, who now also wore Valinar purple, were marching through the gates of Hyford. The few guards on the wall did nothing other than watch in surprise at the size of the force. As they made their way up to the keep Arvar laughed. He had manoeuvred things masterfully. Without the loss of a single man, he had removed two of his greatest opponents with the northern lords occupied.

In the courtyard before Cragtop Clinart and Arvar dismounted. Ava stormed out of the keep. “What is the meaning of this? Why wasn’t I informed that this excuse for a lord was coming? Someone kill him and the waste of space Berkmer he has brought with him.” Ava command clearly overconfident. No one moved. “I said someone kill them!” She screamed. Still no one other than Arvar moved. He stepped forward arms wide. “Ava will you not greet an old friend of the family? I wasn’t sure what to do with you, but since you would so quickly kill me perhaps I should reciprocate.” A look of shock moved over Ava’s face as Kordan and Valinar men moved toward her. “Traitors. You can’t kill me. I am the queen.” She wailed.

“Kill her,” Arvar commanded. The men who had encircled Ava began to stab her. She fell to the ground, but the stabbing continued. Some of the Valinar men moved away, but the few Kordan men continued to stab Ava for a long time. All else was quiet in the Courtyard. Arvar allowed this to continue for a little while then he said, “Stop. Stop now that is enough. We need her recognisable.” Then he turned to Clinart and dragged him to the centre of the courtyard not far from Ava’s body and raised his arm. “Your new and rightful king, Clinart Berkmer,” Arvar announced and the crowd of soldiers and nobles cheered. There must have been a deep hatred for the girl who had just died since many knew Clinart as weak and few here knew him at all.

It wasn’t too long before Arvar and Clinart were on the balcony above the courtyard with a large proportion of the population of Hyford gathered below. With little prompting, they had gathered wanting to know more about the change in leadership. Ava was strung up on a wooden stand before the door of the keep below where Arvar and Clinart stood so that all could see her. The public needed to be certain she was dead. “A terrible ruler has been disposed of this day.” Arvar began as Clinart stood beside him silently. The crowd cheered at the talk of Ava’s death. “She deceived us all spinning lies and falsehoods to achieve her position. It seems her father has been killed. Boudain is nowhere to be found in Hyford, and it is upsetting, but I believe the girl you see before you killed him.” To this the people booed. They had loved Boudain; Arvar would have to be careful about how he mentioned him. “Now we will replace the usurper before you with a rightful ruler of Berkmer blood. This man will succeed his brother Rudolf as well as Boudain did. Clinart Berkmer will rule fairly and will be as great a king as any.” The people of Hyford applauded and cheered again.

Then Clinart spoke his few lines that Arvar had given him. “I stand before you today willing to take the burden of kingship. I will do all I can to ensure prosperity in our time.” Arvar smiled to himself. This had all gone perfectly and it was all his work. To finish Arvar shouted, “Long live the king, he is our saviour.” The people echoed Arvar’s call. All of Hyford assented to this change in leadership. Arvar had practically won. Later he sent a message by a bird to recall the soldiers Ava had sent north. With Clinart as king, they would serve them and bolster their army.

## 43. The Final Raid - Trissa

Raiding ships emerged from the mist, their slow pace seemed menacing. This would be the final raid of the cycle. Mistrun only made contact with Cavar for a few months each cycle so this was the raider’s last attempt to get a foothold in Mistrun. Orson had said that they would use the greatest force in this final raid as they always did. This would certainly be the most difficult battle yet. Trissa stood with Ed and many Stoneheart and Rydel men on the wall of Chillporth. The Kordan soldiers lined the shore outside the wall holding true to their promise of aid.

Ed had agreed to use his men to protect Trissa as she targeted the incoming Calvari. All Trissa had to do was find the right target. She focused on each detail of the sea and the incoming raiders. The boats weren’t close enough that fire would spread through the fleet. No that wouldn’t work. Maybe Trissa could create a huge wave. That would take too much energy, no. What about the ice floating in the sea? She could fling it at the front ships which may cause the ships behind to crash. Trissa focused her mind. The ice would hit the ships. It would skim the water and tear them apart.

Opening her eyes, which she had closed while imagining what would happen, Trissa witnessed what she had envisioned. The ice crushed the hull of one of the closest boats and caused serious damage to two others. They all began to sink at varying speeds. A few other boats behind couldn’t stop in time and crashed into the sinking wrecks. Trissa understood Vardon’s lesson now. She had just done great damage with little effort. Yet Calvari ships did not cease to come from the mists. They flowed with the sea which rose slowly up the shore. Would they only depart when the tide stopped rising?

“Well done Trissa. Excellent, a few more hits like that and you could stop the entire fleet.” Ed encouraged Trissa. She had been successful, but she had to keep going if she wanted to make a real impact here. She continued to fling small icebergs into the incoming ships, but the icebergs close to the shore were few and the bigger bergs would strain Trissa. Tens of ships must have sunk from the will of Trissa alone, but they just kept coming. The ice ran out, but the raiders did not. Trissa tried to reach out to some of the greater icebergs or to further ice, but it was too far or too big. She would use too much energy even with the wistern stone she had charged.

Trissa turned to Ed, “Can you get me down to the shore? There is little more I can do from up here.” Trissa asked. Ed nodded, “Follow me. You men there, come with us. We need a force to protect Trissa. Do not let any raiders close to her.” They ran through the streets of Chillporth and to the shore of the Frozen Sea. On the shore the battle was chaotic. Many raiders from sunken ships wadded to the shore and a few boats had landed. The Kordan lines were in disarray. Ed’s force cut a hole through the disorganised battle until they stood at the lapping sea. Encircling Trissa Ed’s men held the raiders on the shore back.

Again Trissa began to fire the smaller ice that she could reach, at oncoming boats; there was little more she could reach from this vantage point and soon this ice was exhausted too. A large front wave of ships got closer and closer to the shore as Trissa scrambled for another way to stop them. She couldn’t see anything. She couldn’t think of anything. Raiders were all around. Ed’s men were holding them off, but how long could they do that for? No, soon they would be overwhelmed. Turning back to the sea she saw a huge iceberg level with the incoming ships. It was her only option.

She focused on the berg. It took a great might, but the berg began to slowly move toward the oncoming ships. Trissa screamed as she exerted her energy to push the great mountain of ice. It crashed through the sides of four great ships splintering them and stopped in the way of two more. Many other ships crashed again into those that were sinking. Trissa had stopped them from being overwhelmed, but she felt light on her feet. She drew her charged wistern stone from her pocket to find all of its charge had been drawn. The stone was dull. She looked back to the sea witnessing the damaged she had done. Splintered wood and flotsam bobbed as great ships sunk slowly down. Trissa sat down on the muddy shore inside the ring of Stoneheart soldiers. She tried to resist unconsciousness, but her blinks grew longer. She breathed a deep breath and her head hit the muddy floor. Ed called something to his men and everything was black.

## 44. Ending the Raids - Edward

Witnessing the majority of the Calvari fleet torn through by one huge iceberg Ed was shocked. With Trissa’s magic, she had made short work of a fleet that otherwise would have been too large for the forces in Chillporth to repel. Scattered across the sea wooden boats sunk and planks bobbed. Men scrambled to escape the wreckage, and what was left of the Kordan soldiers on the shore tried to stop the enraged Calvari that charge around killing anything in their path. What had not yet sunk of the fleet now turned to make its way back north to Cavar. Had they just won?

Trissa fell to the ground inside their circle. “We need to get her back into the city walls. You two pick her up, we have done what was needed.” Ed ordered. The two men quickly picked up Trissa and Ed’s small force began to work its way back through the chaotic shore. Three hulking Calvari charged toward them anger seeping from their every movement. The charge broke the circle knocking back many of Ed’s guard. They were right next to Trissa now. Ed stepped between them dropping one Calvari with a well-aimed thrust of his sword.

The others did not fall so easily. One of Ed’s men swung his sword at the back of one of the two berserkers that remained, but the sword just seemed to bounce off. The Calvari man turned and crushed the soldier’s skull by bringing his great fists down upon his head. The other swung around wildly knocking many men over. Ed rolled out of the way of one of the second man’s swings and motioned for the two carrying Trissa to move on with a few men without them. Ed wanted to accompany her, but he couldn’t leave his men alone.

He managed to regroup with three of his other men and they approached the Calvari giants with shields raised. One punched right through the shield of the man next to Ed knocking him to the ground. Ed and the others moved inward to fill the gap. The rightmost man of the line swung his sword, but again it seemed to do little against the tough skin of these men. It appeared slashing would do little good and they would have to stab these two men to bring them down. That was what Ed had done to stop the first. He brought his sword up thrusting it through the chin of another of the Calvari causing him to limply collapse to the ground.

Other Stoneheart men were back on their feet now and the final Calvari was surrounded. Yet with one sweep of his huge arm, he threw back four men. Through the gap he made he charged to fight some Kordan men. “To the town,” Ed called as his men recovered. He did not want to lose any more soldiers and fighting the brutish Calvari on such open land gave them an advantage. The remaining Stoneheart force rushed to the gate catching the men carrying Trissa. It wasn’t long before they were inside Chillporth and safe from the charge of another Calvari.

Many of the remaining Kordan’s retreated as Ed had toward Chillporth. Ed called the guards to allow their entry. They had fulfilled their promise. With the Kordan numbers so thinned they took up a fraction of the space they had last time they had crammed into the town. Without weapons from their Ships, the Calvari could do little against the walls of Chillporth. Arrows from the men of the walls dropped the swarm of men as they ran toward the wall in a disorganised fashion. With little plan and nothing to break in the Calvari’s attempts were useless but in their rage, they continued until the last man fell. Cheers rose through streets of Chillporth once more, this time they had no more raids to worry about.

Ed who still stood on the wall, spoke out, “This is a great achievement. We people have come from all over Mistrun and set aside our differences to stop a great threat to us all. I only hope that when we return to our homes we do not forget this victory. We cannot allow our country to continue to be divided. Our victory was not guaranteed. In fact, I am almost certain we would have lost if Trissa the mage had not been at our sides. Let us unite our nation so that any further threat can be repelled, so the raids next cycle will not come so close to succeeding, and so that we can be safe. Today is a day of victory and a step towards these things. Let us celebrate.”

Through the streets, cheers of Edward the Mighty rose up from everyone. Ed had forgotten in these recent weeks his worries about his lineage and his worthiness to lead. It seemed those things truly didn’t matter. This victory was partially down to him and these people believed in him. They believed he was as great as the most remembered Stoneheart in history. Birthright hadn’t caused this. No this was Ed’s doing. It didn’t matter what Lady Grey thought or if she didn’t treat him like Badger. Ed just had to fight for the good of his people.

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It had been a few days since the victory against the Calvari. Trissa had still not woken even with Vardon tending to her. Ed sat with Orson, Mayer, Vardon and the main Kordan general Boudain had sent, Roston. Together they discussed their plans now. Mayer and Vardon had been researching the cursed ones. They were apparently organised within the mountain walls of Burnbury. There an observer or observers, powerful cursed, organised the different types of cursed into a great union that was gathering force. In the lands that had once again become warring stragvor, large cursed ones that walked on four legs were gaining numbers. It appeared the tribes there worshipped the cursed and believed them related to the old gods.

Fortunately, in Rainsmere many of the cursed ones had been killed recently and there were few in the King’s land close to the capital. In addition, not many cursed had made their way to the core or Rydel lands. Many worried about Ava’s instability. She was the greatest threat now if Mistrun wished to have a united force against the cursed. Not willing to be attacked from behind by Ava they all agreed to march on the believed ill defended capital. Roston was particularly in favour of this and wanted to see Boudain back in his rightful position. It seemed the cursed ones would mostly stay in Burnbury for a while so this seemed their best option. Ed set out that day with what remained of the soldiers of all banners that were left in Chillporth, the sages, Trissa who was still unconscious and Roston. Orson stayed to think and gather resources to fight the cursed.

## 45. A Meeting of Old Friends - Layal

Layal was pleased with his progress in Varon. After people had cheered him as the light of Varon he’d used that to influence the people. Geran had been easy to replace now Layal had gained the respect of the guards. The new captain was far more loyal and wouldn’t take the bribes or schemes Geran had. People in the town had helped add colour back to Varon, banners now hung and people bustled around the streets. Layal had organised trade from other nations to get steady food into the desert region of Rainsmere. With that, the people had rejoiced once again. The people had done most of the work other than that. They had repaired their shops, renewed their agreements, reacquainted themselves with taverns and had become more willing to venture out of town. All of Rainsmere prospered as it never had in Rudolf’s reign and all Layal had done was give it a little push. These people had wanted to be saved.

On one of his strolls around the town, Layal observed all this. People cheered him or praised him as he passed, but this was really their doing. They had rebuilt this town and made it the commercial hub of the east once again. Yet these people needed a figurehead still. They wanted someone to look to. So as Layal went he accepted the praise and encouraged those working hard. That was all he really had to do to maintain the people’s enthusiasm.

While Layal congratulated a market stall owner on his varied supply of fish a guard rushed down the street. Layal apologised to the stall owner for interrupting him and ask the guard, “What’s wrong. You look worried. Are we under attack? We could probably withstand a siege with all this food.” The guard looked confused and shuck his head swiftly. “Sir. It’s the king. He was sighted alone and approaching the town. Isn’t he unwell? What should we do?” Layal didn’t know. This was the last thing he had expected. He couldn’t risk an outburst. Ava had explained that the king was quite mad. The best option would be for Layal to meet him alone. That would surely be the best way to talk him down if he did become enraged, and if not Boudain would be happier to see a friend than a group of soldiers. “I will meet him alone. Prepare a horse for me at the gates.” Layal decided. The guard nodded and rushed off toward the gate.

Layal wasn’t far behind the young soldier. How had Boudain got here? Ava had him locked down with guards. How mad was he? Surely if he was as mad as Ava had said he would have found it difficult to get here. What were his intentions? Did he mean any harm or was he coming to meet a friend? Layal would have to encourage him to return to the capital. Whatever Boudain had done he was acting against what was best for him. Staying and resting could have allowed him to recover from his insanity. Layal felt deep guilt. He had left his king, his friend, alone. Perhaps if Layal had been in the capital he could have stopped the poisoning. Maybe he would have seen Farin’s plot. Yet now he would see the consequences of the King’s poisoning. He worried for he did not know the man that he would meet.

After acquiring his horse Layal rode hard across the dunes of Rainsmere to the reported location of Boudain. The slopes swept up and down as Layal skated across them unhindered. Night crept in and a great wind began to bellow. Curling and whistling the wind rose and with it so did the sands of the hills. A storm was beginning and it would use the coarse sand to bolster its might. Riding with great speed into the wind the sand stung Layal’s face. His focus was entirely on Boudain; both worried and hopeful. What had become of his greatest friend? What was he here for?

The storm was not yet so thick with sand that Layal could not see, and mounting a dune he caught sight of a cloaked man fighting the storm and heading toward him and Varon. The figure of the man was the right height to be Boudain, but it was much thinner. Layal spurred his horse on toward the man. They stopped in shouting distance of the man and Layal dismounted. “It is good to see you Boudain. How I have wanted to and yet I worry that you will not be the man I expect.” Boudain drew back the hood of his cloak. He looked weary. “What a wonder it is to see you in reality Layal. I had thought I would never witness the true you or Mistrun ever again.” He said with his hearty voice.

Layal could not allow himself to be tricked. Although Boudain may seem sane he was not. Ava was right about this. “Why are you here my king?” Layal asked cautiously while keeping his distance. Boudain attempted to approach, but Layal stepped away. “Ava she had me captive. The shade returned and she has taken the capital. I had to leave. I hoped you could help me. What is wrong?” Boudain said seemingly confused by Layal’s actions. “My king you will always be, but you have lost your way. Ava was caring for you. Please go back. You will be treated well. You will recover. Boudain I can take you.” A look of anger swept over Boudain’s face. Layal was right his friend was mad.

“I will not be a prisoner in a king’s clothes Layal.” Boudain roared and then more quietly said, “Has my daughter truly convinced you? I see the doubt in your eyes. You don’t believe me.”

“Come peacefully Boudain. We can work this all out in Varon.” The king shook his head and drew a sword that had been concealed beneath his cloak. “I will not stand for this,” he roared. “You can’t make me go back.” He took a slow two handed swing down upon Layal who quickly drew his own weapon blocking the attack. “If even you, I cannot bring to my side all hope is lost.” Boudain cried as he swung again hopelessly. Layal blocked this again easily. The king’s swings were slow and didn’t have heart behind them, maybe it was his madness or maybe he didn’t want to hurt Layal. Making a few weak counters of his own that Boudain easily blocked the combat slowly became more advanced.

Soon Layal and Boudain were having a spar. The combat became more skilled and the two both knew they would come to no harm. They stopped speaking or trying to convince each other and just allowed the moment to happen. As they did the sandstorm worsened around them, but they ignored it. All they could see through the sand was each other. All of their focus was on their fighting partner. A glint of light was in Boudain’s eye and Layal couldn’t help but grin. This was like old times. Like before the war, before Boudain was even king. They both knew and neither wanted it to end, but then a tear rolled down Boudain’s face.

“I know this cannot last. I will not convince you Layal, not like this.” Boudain said as their swords continued to clash. “I am sorry my friend,” Layal said bowing his head slightly. At that moment Boudain dropped his sword allowing a simple lunge from Layal to pierce his chest. The king fell to the ground and so did Layal’s sword as he rushed to Boudain’s side. Knowing he could not win Boudain had let himself lose. “I’m so sorry Boudain. I see now your sanity. Let me help.” Layal hurriedly spoke. Boudain feebly held up his hand. “No. I will die. There is no need. Stop Ava, don’t let her…” Boudain gasped. Letting out a last breath his eyes closed and his head fell to the side.

Now Layal knew he was wrong. Only the true Boudain would have known he could convince Layal this way. Boudain had no pulse. Huddling over his dear friend Layal cried, but the dry sand seemed to rub the tears away. The sand consumed everything that was not Boudain. So Layal sat there beside him looking into his lifeless face. He must have cried for hours. He stayed until the storm stopped and then longer until a patrol found them.

They took them back to Varon and Layal said little. He knew now that the only way forward was to stop Ava. He would use the power he had here to avenge his friend. To do all that Boudain could not after his reign was cut short. That brat did not deserve the throne or the Kordan name. No, she deserved to be usurped as Rudolf had been. Varon would once again send forth its strength to the capital of Mistrun. Ava’s will would be crushed. She had done this, she had killed Boudain and Layal would see she received the just punishment.

## 46. The Journey South - Edward

Since setting out from Chillporth the united force of Kordans, Stonehearts and Rydels had made good time. They were now approaching the Novarin as Hawk Novar had called it. Now it was once again a warring land. It seemed after Arvar had killed Hawk he had left much of the warring lands to return to their former tribal owners. Now this land was little different than it had been before Boudain had begun his reign. Yet Ed could not tell from where he rode. The beauty of the land with its huge flowers tricked the observer into thinking the land was peaceful and serene. He made sure the men held their guard. Although the quiet beauty of this land could lull one into a false security, Ed would not allow that to be their downfall. Tribe’s people would be watching. They watched any who travelled through their lands and if they saw an opportunity they would strike.

Up to this point, the journey had not been difficult. Passing the gap between the Fell Sea and the mountain wall of Burnbury they had been cautious. They all worried about what terrible creatures and cursed would be gathering in the land through that pass. They had not known if when passing by they would find a host of the monsters making their way from the barren land of Burnbury, but they had not. The men had been disturbed and uneasy at that time, but nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Now they had passed what they had considered to be the greatest threat the men had become more relaxed. It was hard to keep them as aware as they had been passing Burnbury.

Mayer and Vardon discussed the cursed. “They are growing more powerful. I worry we will not be able to face them if we leave them to gather strength any longer.” Vardon said. Mayer laughed, “There is more heart in the people here than you think. We can match the cursed ones if Mistrun is united against them.” Ed hoped Mayer was right. The tales told of such great and horrible creatures and yet they had been of little issue to them yet. Their power was growing still though and it was a certainty that they would pose a threat in the future.

Making their way through the forest of flowers of pinks and blues the company caught sight of a herd of Stragvor. It was the first time Ed had ever seen one. Such large creatures he had thought did not exist. Each step they took seemed to shake the very earth beneath them. Their four large legs as thick as tree trunks protruded from their bodies at unnatural angles. They seemed to curl around the body the wrong way. This lead to an almost clumsy looking walk. The creature had joints halfway down their legs allowing the legs to bend outward. By doing this the creatures could reach the ground with their body which their mouth and eyes were attached with no head. Yet even with all the Stragvor’s oddness they still looked too human. The limbs and joints had a similar shape to a human.

Ed called a quick stop to the men. Within the cover of the flowers, they would be hard to spot by the beasts who towered above. Not far behind tribe’s people, both ticklon and human rode fluffy two legged creatures with bushy tails that Ed knew as riptors. They were known to be quick creatures and could likely outrun the large stragvor. The tribe’s people seemed to be using this to their advantage. By surrounding the backside of the heard and moving frantically they mostly avoided the stomping of the huge creatures and pushed them onward. However, occasionally one stragvor would crush a tribe person and their riptor with one stomp. The tribes had managed to harness the cursed, but they paid a cost to keep them.

Where they were going or what they were using the stragvor for Ed didn’t know. At the moment he just wanted to avoid them. He didn’t know how to fight the stragvor and didn’t want to risk losing men he might need to take back the capital. Fortunately, it wasn’t long before the herd passed and they were able to continue on their way toward Hyford.

After leaving the warring lands the troop set up camp by the river Ildin not far from the border of the king’s land around Hyford. It was far enough away that Ed felt they were safe from the tribes of the warring lands. There he was happier to allow his men to relax. He went to see Trissa who had been recovering recently but hadn’t been able to stay conscious for considerable lengths of time yet. To Ed’s surprise, she was awake. “Hello, Trissa, how are you? Is your head any better? Last time I saw you it seemed you thought the whole world spinning.”

“Yes, I’m much better. Vardon thinks I should be up and mostly better within a few days. I channelled too much of my bodies energy reserves into moving that iceberg. Where are we though?” Trissa said with a slight croak. Ed looked around and said, “We aren’t far from Hyford now. You stopped the raids and now we intend to take the capital back from Ava. Don’t look at me like that. I know you don’t want to fight your own people, but we can’t risk being attacked by Ava again when we are fighting the cursed ones.”

“What if many of our people die again? Will there even be enough to fight the cursed at this rate. We should have stayed in Chillporth or headed to your stronghold on the Core and prepared. That would have been enough, wouldn’t it? If I had been awake I wouldn’t have chosen this course.” She said with an irritation in her voice. Ed nodded. He understood that Trissa hadn’t wanted to go down this path, but it had seemed their only option when they were in Chillporth. “I will try to treat with Ava first Trissa, but I doubt she will accept any arrangement. She is the sort of noble you would hate. The ones who take all they can for themselves and care little for their people. Power is what Ava craves and anything that will take that away from her she will combat with great will.” Ed said showing his distaste for the girl who had caused his brother’s death. “Please try,” Trissa said as she drifted back into recovery sleep. Ed would do all he could.

## 47. A Warm Welcome - Edward

As they had entered the king’s land Ed’s men had begun to notice scouts watching them. These scouts had been very cautious and none of Ed’s scouts had been able to intercept them yet. It had been noted that these men did not wear the Kordan brown or gold, but scouts rarely wore the colour of their loyalty. That could make them much easier to spot. The numbers of scouts were worrying though. Something was being planned. They were gathering more information than they needed if they planned just to hold off a siege. Mayer, who was not often shaken, seemed particularly worried by this tactic. Somehow Ed knew this was not Ava’s doing. She was formidable, but not with military matters.

Along their route, they came across a wall of toppled trees forcing them to follow a longer path through a wood so they could get the carts and horses through. This path was much rougher and delayed the journey by days at least. Following this new way the mud was much deeper and the land uneven. Each day the men found themselves more tired than on any other part of their journey. Before finding their way out of the wood they were diverted by many more fallen trees and other unpassable terrains. Ed had considered turning back, but they were in the trap now. Whatever army had made this single way through the wood could beat Ed’s army to either end. If they tried to climb over the walls they could be easily picked off. No, they had to continue on.

“We have been caught in this trap, I am afraid. That does not mean we have lost. We are a great united army, together we will be a creature you do not want to trap. One that when you open the cage fights back with such force you regret ever deciding to lay such a trap. We have defended Mistrun now we must claim it.” Ed announced to the army. They were worried and did not cheer or shout, but there was a silent approval. They would face this threat together.

Making their way out of the wood they faced a gradual upward slope. On both sides were tree lines with walls of felled trees and at the top of the incline the frontline of the army they faced. The line wore purple, Arvar’s colours, and Ed’s heart sunk. Arvar was an incredible tactician. Already in his trap, Ed had little choice now but to fight him. Now manoeuvred into a position where he would be at a disadvantage, Ed worried what other tricks Arvar might have waiting. There would be more to this battle.

Ed began to hurriedly organise his soldiers. Arvar might attack at any time now and Ed needed his line in the best position he could get it. Vardon and Mayer had begun to access the situation but came up with little of use. This just made Ed tenser so he left them to debate. Instead, Ed positioned his archers as best he could with their uphill disadvantage. The more he prepared his men the more Ed realised how hopeless this battle seemed. All the While the Valinar men seemed to boast in their expensive purple coats. They stood perfectly still at the peak of the hill waiting.

It wasn’t long before Ed had organised his men as best he could. He breathed deeply. This battle would be difficult. Perhaps they would all die. Yet they would die fighting instead of running he would ensure at least that. Thinking there was little else to be done Ed joined the line of cavalry ready to charge when the time was right. Yet Trissa rode up by his side. “Did you forget about me in your organisation spree?” She asked. Ed let out a nervous laugh.

“I didn’t think you would be well enough. You have been resting for so long.” Ed said as they looked toward their captors upon the hill. “Neither did I, but I have to fight. I fear that you and Orson are the best hopes for this kingdom and here both of your armies stand. I have no charged wistern stones, but I have restored my energy reserves. I will fight by you, but I won’t be moving any icebergs.”

Ed laughed at that. The thought of Icebergs in the now summer sun of the south seemed ridiculous and he was happy to have Trissa by his side. She had proved an incredible aid against the raiders. Although more confident Ed still did not see how they could win this fight. As they had been preparing a dark cloud had formed above and now a dreadful rain began to tumble from the sky. It crashed down upon them each droplet as large as an acorn. It clanged against the metal helms of the soldiers and rattled the leaves of the surrounding trees. Washing down the hill toward them a great sodden puddle began to form beneath Ed’s army’s feet. Had Arvar expected this weather? It was certainly to his advantage. A charge up the hill would be slowed now. Ed’s men would be exposed in such a charge.

# Part 3

## 48. An Uphill Battle - Trissa

The Valinar soldiers atop the hill seemed to wait for Ed’s army to charge. It was all they could do in the position they had found themselves, but Trissa saw a way she could help. “Ed, I think I can make this muddy ground more traversable for the troops. I may be able to solidify the ground so the climb isn’t so harsh. Vardon, can you help?” Trissa called.

“That’s a sound idea, dear.” Vardon said, “I believe that is something that I can certainly help with.” The two began to focus on the ground. The change wasn’t particularly visible, but when it was ready they nodded to Ed so he knew to send his men forward. “Charge!” He shouted. Cavalry ran first with infantry with raised shields slowly advancing behind. Arrows rained from the Valinar troops above, but none of the Mistrun men were slowed by the mud. Many fell in the advance and almost the whole front line of horses was down before they reached the top of the hill. Ed charged in the middle of the horses somewhere.

Although Trissa had stayed with Vardon to concentrate her magic, she saw the wave of horses break the front Valinar line. The infantry not too far behind began to slowly breach this hole. Archers who had remained at the bottom of the hill slowly made their way up unable to reach the Valinars at the top. It seemed the battle wouldn’t be as hard as they had expected against Arvar, but then Valinar heads began to pop up from behind the fallen trees at either side of the battlefield. These Valinar men were armed with bows and began to shoot the infantry from behind their shield wall and pick off unsuspecting archers.

The backline of infantry turned attempting to block this rain of arrows, but too many fell. Archers tried to get behind this new line but were caught in the open on the hill. With arrows from both sides, they had nowhere to go and few survived. The infantry who had been attacking the Valinar front line began to move back. They formed a circle on the slope of the hill around the few archers who had survived. Few of the horses survived the retreat. Ed’s was suddenly visible galloping over the crest of the hill, but his horse was pierced with a Valinar spear throwing Ed forward from the horse. He rolled down, arrows just missing him as he fell. Recovering not too far from where his army now gathered he stumbled making his way within the shield wall.

Arrows from all sides came down upon the men but with their formation, many arrows were blocked by the outer shields. Atop the hill, Arvar rose and pointed his sword to the force on the slope. Many Valinar men began to charge down to the circle of Mistrun men. “We need to soften the mud by the top half of the hill again Vardon,” Trissa said to the old man. “Yes,” He replied, “But after that my magic will be spent. Don’t forget your reserves are short too.” They stopped hardening the mud and let the still heavy southern rain take the top of the hill. Valinar men tripped and stumbled on their way down the hill. The front line was easily dispatched by the Mistrun soldiers. Some of the further back Valinar men regained their footing, but their formation had been lost. Mistrun arrows helped thin their numbers.

Arvar sent another wave of men who this time advanced far more slowly upon the Mistrun force. Trissa toppled trees from either side of the clearing down on the men at the outer sides of the force. However, Trissa soon began to feel exhausted. Having not long recovered, her energy was low. She stopped using her magic holding her very last reserve in case it was vitally needed. Arvar’s men were much greater in number than the Mistrun army and his arrows still rained from the sides and the top of the hill.

All Trissa could do now was watch as the Valinar force descended upon the other Mistrun men. It wasn’t long before Ed’s soldiers were almost entirely surrounded. They pushed back against their Valinar attackers and held them off valiantly. Each of Ed’s men killed many Valinar soldiers, but it was not enough. The Valinar army was so large that they could take such losses. They spread slowly but surely reducing Ed’s force. It seemed there was no way the Valinar army could lose. Arvar just sat on his horse at the top of the hill. Trissa couldn’t make out his features fully but was almost certain he had a smug grin upon his face. Next to him sat a rather weedy looking man. That was likely Clinart who Trissa had heard Arvar was supporting.

With Ed’s men quickly dropping Trissa searched for some way she could help. She had her small reserve of energy. Vardon and Mayer sat worriedly chatting on a cart not far away. They could likely do little now and neither could any of the squires and servants left with the supplies at the bottom of the hill. Trissa thought about throwing trees or pushing Valinar men back, but she had too little energy to make an impact that way unless she was willing to pass out. Anything Trissa could do would leave her exposed and would only marginally help the soldiers falling before her.

She spied Ed in the middle of his men. Shouting orders frantically. Somehow they still fought on. They had not given up hope yet. Those who were left were covered in blood and breathed deeply. Arrows peppered their shields. Many had wounds, but they fought on. Yet even with their resolve, they would not last. They had hope, but the situation was doomed. Arvar would surely win. Trissa dropped to her knees in the mud. All hope was lost. They would not stop the cursed. Mistrun would surely fall. This was the end of the world and neither side would stop it. Even if they survived there would be so few men a battle against the cursed ones would be surely futile. Yet as Trissa gave up a horn sounded on the hill. A force in gold and brown had arrived with sun banners. Could it be another Kordan force?

## 49. Taking a Side - Layal

Layal and the Varon army had been marching on Hyford, intending to fight Ava, when a large force in Arvar’s colours had been scouted leaving the capital. Layal had his scouts watch this force and they had found that Arvar’s army was fighting an army composed of Rydel, Stoneheart and even some Kordan troops. At first, Layal had been unsure what to make of this. Why was Arvar in the capital? Was Ava still ruling? Why was Arvar fighting against so many other armies from Mistrun? It seemed Varon had not received as much information as it should. For once Layal felt ill informed about current affairs. Cut off from the capital he had heard little of the politics of Mistrun.

It appeared the united force fighting Arvar had been trapped and were taking heavy losses. Ed fought with them and was apparently leading the losing army. Layal cared little for Arvar, but he knew the Stonehearts. Badger had been a good man and if Ed wasn’t saved now Layal’s freeing of Badger would have helped little. Boudain would have wanted to save the Stonehearts and Rydels. Yet if those soldiers wearing the same colours as his own were Ava’s then perhaps he should favour Arvar. No, he had to save them.

Not being much of a fighter Layal let his general lead the assault after they reached the top of the hill that Arvar attacked from. Sat on his horse he watched the fight. The Varon cavalry in their Kordan colours of gold and brown rode camels and horses down toward the main Valinar army. Before they could turn their attack many Valinar soldiers were trampled or cut down. The Valinar soldiers were squashed from both sides by the Varon men and Ed’s army. This caused them to spread to the two sides of the clearing by the fallen trees. There they stood their ground archers mounted on the trunks behind them.

The Varon general gave a nod to Ed which he returned. Together the armies pushed out toward Arvar’s men who were now heavily outnumbered. Soon they were slowly whittling down the numbers of the men in purple. However, the Varon cavalry were now much less manoeuvrable than they had been on their initial charge. The mud was deep where the battle had been the hottest. Fortunately, the rain was now clearing. As the Valinar men were pushed, some began to retreat over the logs. This exposed them for an attack, but it seemed their loyalty was now broken.

Arvar’s troops no longer cared for victory, just survival. On the same hill as Layal, Arvar sat with a small force around him. There was clear frustration on the man’s face. He had rarely lost a battle in the past. He looked as if he also considered retreat. Wanting to know his motives and prevent further fighting with such a tactician. Layal led the force that had remained with him to block Arvar’s retreat. Arvar having few mounted soldiers moved much more slowly than Layal’s almost entirely mounted force. They quickly intercepted the Valinar men running through many on their first pass.

They continued repeatedly to round on Arvar’s men who were not equipped with spears and didn’t have many archers. As a result, Arvar had little to combat such an attack. It wasn’t long before a handful of men stood between Layal and Arvar. Worried Arvar and Clinart who had remained by him spurred their horses forward. A few Varon men gave chase. One threw a javelin it missed. A second man threw another. This impaled Arvar in the centre of the back throwing him from his horse into Clinart. Clinart’s horse bucked throwing him back off his saddle and then ran leaving Clinart rolling in the mud by Arvar’s unmoving body.

With Arvar’s runaway band dispatched Layal approached Clinart and Arvar’s body. He checked Arvar while Clinart squirmed terrified. Arvar was dead. “I was hoping to work out what this battle had been for from Arvar, but it looks like I’ll have to ask you Clinart.” Layal said calmly, “Why did you attack that army below and why were they marching to the capital?” For a moment Clinart hesitated to look to Arvar’s body like he expected it to suddenly come back to life and save him. Then he stuttered, “I… I was. We came to stop them. Arvar said no one could stop us. If we stopped them then there was no substantial army in Mistrun to oppose us. Av… Ava, she had the Kordan’s. The ones in the north attack the others. Arvar thought they were coming to stop her.”

Layal considered this. Arvar was trying to dominate Mistrun. Had he been working with Ava or had he taken over? Was Ava still alive? Layal asked Clinart, “So Arvar was working with Ava then? He sided with her against the Stonehearts and Rydels?”

“Nnn… no. Arvar he, he took the capital not long ago. He wanted revenge for the Kordan aid to Hawk Novar. He said I could be king. The position was rightfully mine. Ava is dead.” That was a relief. Layal had wanted to make right his dear friend and king Boudain’s death, but he hadn’t really wanted to kill his friend’s daughter. Knowing someone else had done it helped. It also seemed Layal had taken the right side. He had no wish to see Arvar ruling with Clinart as a puppet king. Clinart began to grovel, “Ppp… please don’t kill me.” Layal didn’t even have his sword drawn. “Shut up!” he said, “I’m not going to kill you. Get up out of the dirt. You two make sure he doesn’t escape.”

## 50. On the Way to the Capital - Layal

Down the hill, the remnants of the Valinar soldiers were being cleared. The battle had been won. Ed rode up to greet Layal with a woman by his side and Mayer and Vardon were not far behind. “I thank you for the aid king’s man. If it were not for your troops we would surely have lost against Arvar. He took us by surprise, I don’t even know what the attack was for.” Ed said as he approached.

“I believe aiding your band of varying allegiances was the better option, Ed. It seems Arvar had intentions of dominating Mistrun. He would have had Clinart over there as a puppet king.” Layal said cordially. Ed nodded his understanding and then asked, “So has Boudain regained control of the capital. Is that why you’re here? Some of these Kordan men turned on us due to Ava’s orders at Chillporth.”

No Boudain had not regained control, but Layal wished he had. If only Layal had listened to him. Then maybe now Boudain would ride with them. They would have stopped the last major political threat in the kingdom and may have regained the capital for the Kordans. Now Layal had fought against Arvar and his victory felt empty. What had he really won? Layal had caused this. He had killed Boudain and now his life would remain empty. A doubtful sadness passed over Layal.

He barely held his tone while he spoke, “No Boudain is dead. I killed him believing he was mad, but Ava had deceived me. She had control of the capital and crown as you know, but Arvar had taken the crown from her along with her life. Now no one rules it seems. Sorry, excuse me.” Layal rode to a group of his men who were making preparations. “What is wrong sir?” one man asked. Layal just shook his head as his sorrow began to flood over him. His guilt for the death of his friend. “How worthy am I? I have no right to lead you. You shouldn’t even trust me. I killed your king.”

“You are the light of Varon. You guided our people when we most needed a leader. For that, you have the faith of much of Rainsmere. The king lost his way. He forgot about us and we understand you didn’t cause his death.” The men around the speaker nodded giving grunts of approval. Layal said, “Thank you. You are all too kind to a reluctant leader. I just wish things could have been different.” Layal pretended to look happy. Knowing his people believed in him helped, but it wasn’t enough.

The armies were soon packed up and heading for Hyford. Ed wanted to discuss the increasing cursed threat there now the significant military conflicts of Mistrun had been resolved. Yet Layal found he had little investment in such ideas. Such planning and union seemed pointless without Boudain. For so long he had wanted to unite Mistrun and now what remained of the major families were uniting it seemed hollow to Layal. Boudain had missed his goal, but if only Layal hadn’t killed him he would have achieved it. Now Layal was forced to watch as Boudain’s dream played out without him.

Clinart caught up to Layal as they rode back to the capital. He had been under close watch but hadn’t tried to escape or attack anyone so had been allowed to ride his own horse. No one expected much of the Berkmer. “Thank you,” Clinart said. Layal just looked at him, “Arvar he was limiting me. He was trying to take too much control.” Layal still said nothing. He cared little for the relationship between Arvar and Clinart. Clinart continued, “Although he had been useful, he managed to get Ava to replace Boudain’s moongrass with shadowgrass or something like that. Anyway, that allowed the shade to return. Seems like Ava had that sage, Farin, killed claiming he had Poisoned Boudain rather than the shade returning.” Layal gritted his teeth. He breathed deeply and then he snapped, “Can you just leave me in peace Clinart. If you don’t you’ll wish I killed you.”

Layal couldn’t believe it. He had been played by Ava. He had always thought her incapable of moving court in such a way. While in Hyford he had always been able to predict Ava. In Varon, and so separated from the information of the court, he had missed so much. Not only had he trusted Ava over Boudain he had trusted her over Farin. Boudain hadn’t been driven mad by poison it had been the shade returning and somehow he had fought it off and came to Varon. Boudain had the faith that Layal would help but instead, he had killed him. Layal had been a fool. He had restored Rainsmere but at a great cost.

Ava and Arvar may have been the ones manipulating the court in attempts to control Mistrun. They may have been held the reigns, but Layal had let himself be steered. A tool for Ava and perhaps by extension Arvar, Layal had slain Boudain. In doing so he had betrayed his greatest friend and the man who could have been Mistrun’s best king. Layal had allowed his belief to falter and it had cost him his leader. Who would he fight for now? Who could he believe in? What use were Varon and Rainsmere if they could not help Boudain? That was why Layal had been helping them to begin with. Everything he had done had been to aid his king, but now he was gone.

## 51. Expecting the Cursed - Edward

Gathered in the great hall of Cragtop keep were Layal, Ed, Trissa, Mayer, Vardon, Clinart and Roston the Kordan general. Ed had called the meeting to discuss how to deal with the growing threat of the cursed ones. Since much of the conflict between the people of Mistrun now seemed resolved, Ed saw this as the most pressing matter. It likely should have been addressed more directly earlier than this even. However, Roston believed they needed to decide on a new sovereign before any decisions could be made. “I like you Ed, but before you start making decisions I need to know who’s in charge.” He said.

Trissa was visibly irritated by this, “Why should we have to decide on a king when we’ve all agreed on our course already? We need to fight the cursed! You haven’t seen what they can do!” Trissa’s voice echoed through the hall. Vardon and Mayer gave their agreement. “We do not have time to decide on a king,” Vardon said, “I fear we may have given the Cursed too long to gather already. We can’t risk another war before we stop them.”

Clinart looked worried at the idea of the cursed growing in numbers. It appeared he may have even been shaking. “Yes, I think at this stage the cursed ones should be dealt with. You don’t need to appoint me as your king yet.” Clinart received a few confused or angry looks from that comment. It seemed he hadn’t realised how low his chances of coming out of this on top were yet.

“I don’t know about you lot, but I like to know who’s giving the orders. It’s always best to know where your allegiances lie.” Roston continued. He seemed to be set on this idea of a new king. Ed looked to Layal to hear his opinion, but he looked utterly fed up. It seemed he cared little for the outcome of this conversation so Ed said, “How about this Roston? Your allegiance is to the kingdom of Mistrun. You will do all you can to aid your country. Then when a new king is appointed you can swear to them.”

“Sounds reasonable to me,” Roston grumbled. Then they surveyed the men they had. In Hyford they were stretched thin. The capital was just too big after the losses that had been taken in the recent battles. Although Hyford had some of the best defences in Mistrun, it was not suited to having a small force defending it. They decided they would have to move to another town as a stronghold against possible cursed attack. Skypike was too far from Mistrun now and Vardon believed the cursed would attack before Skypike returned so they decided Sour Rock was their best hope. Void’s Crossing was useable as it was still summer so it wouldn’t take too long to reach. It had also been the place that had defended the people of Mistrun in the Cursed Calamity.

Birds were sent to all in Mistrun that Sour Rock would be a stronghold against the growing cursed threat, and that anyone who could travel should go to the Core immediately. Ed wanted to save as much of Mistrun as he could. He did worry that some would have to travel a long way to reach the crossing on to the Core. Hopefully, there would be time for them to arrive before the cursed began their attack.

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After the meeting, Ed approached Layal who still looked miserable. “I would like to thank you again for saving me and those with me Layal. Without you, Arvar surely would have won. I don’t know what’s wrong, but we need you again. Your people may be the difference between a cursed world and a normal one. Boudain would have done all he could to fight such a threat.” Ed said siting by Layal’s side. He sat on a bench in one of the halls of Cragtop. Men rushed around preparing to leave.

“That’s the problem. Boudain would have. Now he cannot and I am to blame.” Layal said hanging his head. Ed patted the man on the back unsure how to console him. He had known little about Layal other than that he had advised Boudain. It had always seemed Layal was a cold spying type to Ed, but now it seemed he had truly cared for Boudain.

“No matter how hopeless he was or what he had lost Boudain would fight for what he believed in. So should you. If you do not those that you have brought from Rainsmere will be lost. In giving up you also forsake them. Even if you will not fight for yourself fight for them.” Layal raised his head looking as if something Ed had said had resonated with him. “You are right Boudain wouldn’t stop fighting no matter what he lost. I fear I will have to carry my guilt, but I will fight by your side Stoneheart.” Ed didn’t know fully what he had expected from this conversation, but this seemed as good a result as he could have hoped for.

Vardon rushed up to the two. “Lords, it appears the cursed are leaving Burnbury. Many have arrived fleeing their masses. It is worse than we feared, my friends.” Ed had hoped for some time to prepare Sour Rock. He had even expected that they would strike first. Perhaps thin the cursed forces before they reached the defence. That no longer seemed possible now. “Have everyone ready within the hour. We ride for Sour Rock.” Ed commanded to all within earshot. Those who had been preparing quickened their pace and others rushed off to attend to what was needed.

Ed walked with Vardon. “You fought the cursed ones in the Calamity, didn’t you? Do they have any weaknesses? There must be a way to counter them.” Ed asked. Vardon looked fearful. “Yes, each type of cursed has a weakness. Gner are easily killed and have very weak skin for example, but they compensate with numbers, lord. Yet if they are attacking the observer has gathered many species of cursed. Our methods for fighting one type may strengthen another. I can brief you all on the weaknesses of common cursed as we travel, but there is little more I can do than that.”

That didn’t sound good to Ed. If there were so many types of cursed they would constantly have to adapt tactics. How did you fight an army like that? At the end of the corridor, he split off from Vardon and began preparing people for the journey. The more information Ed gained the more pressing and worrying the issue became. It seemed now even the letters sent by bird weren’t sent soon enough. If the cursed were leaving Burnbury many in the north and west would never reach the Southern Bridge Lands. Perhaps they were too late, perhaps they had thought too little of the threat of the cursed. Yet what choice had Ed had? Was there any way he could have avoided the conflict he had found himself in? Could Mistrun be more prepared and have a greater army for fighting the cursed?

## 52. Looming Threat - Trissa

Trissa walked with Vardon as they headed to Sour Rock. The caravan moved slowly with much of Hyford’s population accompanying them. After giving her horse to some weary people who had been lagging behind Trissa had been walking. She had been charging her wistern stones since the battle with Arvar. Now she had one which was almost fully charged. It seemed more important than ever for Trissa to charge the stones now. With such limited time, Trissa still worried she wouldn’t have enough energy. She had been storing extra in the stones to increase the speed they charged and it still didn’t feel like they charged quick enough.

“You have learnt well dear. The way you fought against Arvar meant you didn’t expend all of your energy reserves. I know we would have lost if Layal hadn’t turned up, but even with the last of your energy I doubt that could have been changed.” Vardon said in his reassuring way. Trissa was happy to have learnt from him. She did feel much better about her abilities. It seemed she was still limited to being useful with certain types of magic though. Whenever she was useful she used magic that required her to push or pull things. Movement magic she was strong with, but she had yet to build her strength in other forms of magic.

“Thank you, Vardon. I feel like I have far more control of my abilities now, although I would like to learn some other forms of magic like the fire you often use.” Trissa said as they walked. Vardon nodded, “Yes that will come. For a long time, I focused on water based magics, but now my speciality is heat. You have to build a skill like that slowly. For now, let us just get through this.” Trissa looked forward to the day when she could experiment with her magic. When she was free to use it how she wished instead of learning to combat the constant threat of the cursed.

The united band of Mistrun armies and people from Hyford weren’t far from the Southern Bridge Lands now. They had entered the mist and it swirled around coolly. Everyone was anxious to cross the bridge. They felt exposed and the nervousness in the air gave the feeling the cursed could attack at any time. That worry seemed contagious; the group seemed to grow tenser the further they went.

High pitch squeals and growls were heard in the distance and then the padding of hundreds of footsteps growing close and closer from the west. The soldiers moved in the direction of the sounds trying to make a formation, but the panic of the people disrupted their movement. Gner and other cursed that Trissa didn’t recognise leapt from the mist on to the front line or those who had not got behind it. The first cursed that emerged from the mist pounced on Roston tearing at his throat and dropping him to the ground. He tried to fight before he fell but he was overwhelmed and soon cursed were rushing past his fallen body.

These creatures were skinny with little in the way of protection and were easily chopped down, yet they were great in number. It was as if the very mist created them. Like they would continue to come from the white grey depths that surrounded them for an eternity. How could you combat such a mass of evil and twisted creatures? Yet the Mistrun army tried; soon a good line was made and the cursed ones were falling quickly.

There were two other types of cursed as well as the gner all of a similar build. They were all skinny; so much so that the bone could be seen beneath the skin. Unlike the gner that often used their front arms as legs, the other two seemed to be entirely bipedal. For one this was due to a lack of arms, but the other had great ferocious claws that tore through the armour of the soldiers. The one with no arms had knees that had an almost fixed point just above the waist and the other had arms that looked unnaturally high.

All were very quick which overwhelmed the soldiers as the cursed crashed against the frontline of men. They couldn’t keep their focus on their targets. Unable to see anything to use to her advantage through the mist Trissa didn’t know what to do. She used her power to throw a few cursed away from the soldiers, but they were quickly replaced and Trissa’s efforts seemed to help little. Instead, she grabbed a fallen sword and remembering her combat training ran out and began to swing fluidly.

Ahead of the frontline, she didn’t have to worry about injuring any of her allies there. She used her power to balance the weight of the sword as she swung it in huge strokes around her body cutting down the gner and other cursed as they approached. She could almost feel the presence of each cursed before it came allowing her to position her blade. Soon a pile of cursed bodies lay around her, but they still came. The frontline of soldiers had been breached at either side of her, but she had not been overwhelmed.

Eventually, the numbers of cursed seemed to thin. Trissa slowed the dance of her blade and as the last cursed fell she dropped her sword. Breathing deeply she regained her breath. Then worried she checked her wistern stone. Had she used the energy up? No, it still glowed. She hadn’t used as much energy as she had expected.

Scrambling over the bodies of the creatures that surrounded her, Trissa witnessed the chaos the cursed had caused. All types of people from the caravan were muddled. Cursed had got behind the main force and lay throughout the bustle along with many bodies of the people of Mistrun. Much more cursed had died than Mistrun people yet every man or woman was a huge loss. It felt this was only a fraction of what the cursed had to offer. Vardon was saying as much when Trissa reached Ed and the others who were discussing the situation, “I fear this was just a scouting force, Ed. Do you see how gner, degrun, the armless ones, and scappers, the ones with the vicious claws, were the only cursed in this force? They are all quick cursed ones that an observer might use for such a task.”

“I fear if such a large force was used for scouting, then the cursed army must be very large in number indeed.” Vardon shook his voice going shrill at the end. The party had a grim look after the word from Vardon. “If this is just a scouting force many more cursed will be coming. Let’s try to be in Sour Rock before that happens. Another attack in the open like this will leave us exposed and could result in heavy losses.” Ed said and then began getting people up and moving toward Void’s Crossing. The others moved to their respective groups doing the same.

After regrouping and beginning to move again the losses were truly seen. The force was smaller. It didn’t feel the same. The feeling in the air was much worse. People had been nervous before, but now they were scared, terrified even. Soldiers who had seen many battles recently shuck at the horrors from the battle they had just fought. For many, this was the first time they had truly seen cursed and for all, it was the first time the monsters had been seen in such large numbers.

## 53. Crossing the Void - Edward

They had taken great losses already. Ed worried how long Mistrun could hold against these cursed. If what Vardon said about there being varying weaknesses was true then direct combat with the cursed would be very difficult. The scouting force that had attacked hadn’t been too difficult to fight since all the cursed that had made up that force moved and fought in similar ways. When all the different cursed fought together they wouldn’t have the same advantage. Even fighting that force they had taken heavy losses. What would happen against a greater force with varying cursed?

Ed had discussed some of the weaknesses of the cursed with Vardon and Mayer, but there were too many to remember all at once. Trying to adapt tactics to that or train the men in ways to fight these threats would be near impossible. Even informing the soldiers of the weaknesses would do little good if they couldn’t coordinate with others around them. The best hope was that the defences of Sour Rock held for long enough for them to substantially weaken the cursed army. It had held against them before and had an outer wall, inner wall and a keep allowing for various stages of retreat and regroup.

Fortunately, Void’s Crossing was now in sight. Ed was relieved to see the entrance to his homeland. Hopefully, the void around the core would slow the cursed enough for them to reach Sour Rock. Ed had mentioned to Vardon that they may be safe on the core due to the surrounding void, but Vardon had believed this unlikely. Apparently, many of the cursed were good climbers and came from the chasms and caves beneath Mistrun. They had ways of travelling beneath the land that Vardon did not even understand. They would be able to cross the void even though the distance between the core and the rest of Mistrun was large in most places. Then the large cursed would be able to make their way through the Blot. Vardon did believe that the crossing would slow the cursed though. Maybe that would give some time to prepare.

The first people were now stepping up on to the crossing. It seemed for a moment they would reach Sour Rock without any further disturbance, but then the howls of gner, degrun and scappers began. This time the panic of the people was quicker and more directed. They ran up and across the bridge to the Core. Ed ordered, “Everyone who cannot fight get across the bridge.” To those who hadn’t begun crossing and then, “Create a formation. We want to block as many cursed as we can from crossing this bridge.” Just as the shield wall had been created the cursed crashed against it. They battered heavily, but this time there was no way around the defence.

“Slowly move back. We need to reach the central lock and unhook it. Then we should be able to leave these cursed on the other side.” Ed shouted. The men slowly began to back up. They stabbed out at cursed who got too close and arrows flew over their heads at the approaching enemies. Vardon and Trissa were talking with an archer captain behind the lines and created a bubble of cleared mist around them. This allowed them to see the oncoming cursed improving the aim of the archers and allowing the defence to be more directed.

As the force got closer to the lock the battering of the cursed became more intense. Some points of the frontline began to falter and it was almost breached a few times. Cursed ones leapt over the line cutting down many soldiers before they were stopped. The right hand side of the line was breached and many cursed pushed through. They had just crossed the threshold where the bridge would part when unlocked. Someone had undone the left lock, but the cursed blocked the way to the right one.

The sheer mass of cursed resisted any attempts to push them back. Some ran on toward the civilians while others got behind the line. The bubble of clearance from the mist shrunk as Trissa seemed to focus on the lock. It rattled and then lifted behind the cursed. The bridge began to slowly part. Cursed fell into the void flailing, but then others began to jump the gap. The mist bubble completely disappeared as both Trissa and Vardon pushed the other bridge away. It swung around to the right with cursed attempting to leap the gap or risk falling due to the sheer volume of other cursed pushing behind them.

As the distance increased between the two sides of the bridge more and more cursed fell into the deep abyss until the other side of the bridge was out of sight. That last group of cursed that had managed to cross the gap fought ferociously but were cut down. Some still had to be caught that were attacking the civilians that had run ahead. Fortunately, the losses had not been too great. It wasn’t long between the breach of the shield wall and the unlocking of the bridge, but if the cursed had been able to attack for moments longer they surely would have been overwhelmed.

No other bridge from the Core to the mainland of Mistrun would now be connected. Many people would be stranded and left to fight the cursed themselves. It seemed they were safe for now. What cost had the rest of Mistrun paid for their safety? After the Mistrun people regrouped they moved with greater haste. Although they were likely safer than they had been before crossing the bridge, the people were worried. That gave them a newfound speed. Vardon and Mayer both believed they were likely safe until they reached Sour Rock now, but warned that they should be cautious still. Ed kept scouts out to ensure they knew of any further attacks from the cursed, but after leaving the mist it seemed another attack soon was less likely.

The rest of the way to Sour Rock was unhindered and along the way, people from other villages and towns of the Core were collected. Some could fight, but many would rely on Sour Rock as a defence as they would in other invasions of the Core. Beneath the keep of Sour Rock was a large cave and tunnel system some of which and been built and the rest was natural. This was used to protect and hold people during an attack. Once inside there was no other way out. Meaning if an attack on the city was lost all inside would be trapped. That had never been an issue in the past since Sour Rock hadn’t been breached. It seemed more likely than ever that it could happen now though.

With the walls of Sour Rock in sight, many were overjoyed. This had always been a bastion of safety for people of the Core. The pace sped up again as the gates opened and people rushed in. The civilians took lots of space when inside, but the soldiers were far fewer than Ed had hoped to have when fighting the cursed. All the people here relied on so few defenders. What hope did they have? Maybe they would be enough; it didn’t seem likely to Ed though. After what he had seen he didn’t know how they would fight this. Maybe they could put swords in the hands of all who could lift them. Hope that they could bolster the defences enough to repel the cursed. Without that and probably much more Ed didn’t see an outcome where they could win. He had always been the more hopeful brother. Would Badger be able to see a way through this?

## 54. The Situation - Edward

Ed went into Sour Rock keep to talk to Lady Grey; he still didn’t know what to think about Lady Grey not truly being his mother as Mayer had said. After the raids had started Ed had had little time to think about it and it had seemed a struggle for every moment. Grey rushed to embrace Ed when he entered the library where she had been reading. “I was worried, Ed. I haven’t heard from you for months. I’ve heard rumours and bits of news here and there, but please tell me what has happened.” Ed had wanted to confront Grey about his parentage, but now he realised that Grey was his mother and that didn’t really matter. Maybe Ed had been treated differently than Badger, but Grey had always cared so Ed set the idea aside.

She explained that Orson had sent news of the success with the raids and had explained where Ed headed, and other than that rumours had been carried about a large army making its way south and increasing cursed numbers. Ed filled his mother in on the rest. He told her of the raids, of Trissa’s aid, the battle with Arvar and the now serious threat of the cursed. After the explanation, Lady Grey smiled squeezed Ed’s arm and said, “I’m glad your back Ed. Things are getting harsh and it is good to know you are safe. After losing Badger we only have each other.” They hugged and Ed realised he didn’t need Grey to be formal with him all the time as she had been with Badger.

Ed began preparing the defences after he had visited his mother. The oil in the traps at the gates was topped up, the blades and shields on the walls were armed, and their mechanisms were checked and every sword or bow in the town was given to somebody. To find people for the last few weapons they had to equip many who were still not tall enough to see over the battlements or women who were not traditionally trained to fight in Mistrun, although many more women had begun to partake in fighting professions recently. They had lost so many good soldiers already it was worrying to see maids, innkeepers and children ready for war. The recent battles had taken their toll and now it seemed they would be an ending this period of turmoil. It was yet to be determined who would rule Mistrun, but before long either the cursed ones or the people of Mistrun would come out on top.

A man ran up to Ed with a scrawled note as Ed oversaw the preparations. “You need to read this sir. Just came by bird.” Ed accepted the letter and began to read. The note was from Orson and read:

*They have breached the gates. I doubt we will survive. The shelled ones breathe fire. Chillporth stood no chance with its walls of wood. We have been overrun. Bodies litter the streets and it is surely a matter of moments before they are inside the hall. The cursed have swarmed Mistrun Ed. Save as many as you can. Those defences in Sour Rock were designed for cursed. Use them. My men are dying downstairs. I fear I have run out of time. Goodbye.*

Orson and the Rydels had been great allies for the Stonehearts. The two had fought by each other’s sides and now all that remained of the Rydel’s were the men Orson had sent with Ed. Each of those men would count. Ed had to make sure of that. Unfortunately, it now seemed there would be no further aid for Sour Rock. Ed’s allies were dead, the bridges were out and the only land that could be used to reach the core now was the Blot. No, they could not hope for aid. It would not come. Could not.

Messages had already been sent to all the people of the Core and they had flocked to the home town of the Stonehearts. What more could they do now? The only aid they could realistically wish for now was favourable weather conditions for the battle. Rain would weaken the effectiveness of the traps they had around Sour Rock. The mechanisms were much harder to work when wet, burning the oil would become more difficult and archers may slip when drawing a wet bow. The cursed ones had always used their bodies to fight. They had no weapons to drop so their only disadvantage in the rain would be slipping on the rock faces that Sour Rock was built upon. Ed quietly hoped for dry weather.

Hoping for such simple things Ed realised how lost their cause was. It seemed huge masses of cursed swarmed the land. If they had overwhelmed Orson and had forces coming toward the southern bridge where Ed had escaped them then they must have had a substantial force. In Burnbury their number had swollen and now they burst from the mountains and raved across the mainland of Mistrun. No there was little hope left for people now it seemed. It wouldn’t be long before those on the Core were the last alive. Perhaps any hope was already lost. They were all that was left. No one was coming.

## 55. Enchanting Sour Rock - Trissa

People moved weapons and armour around Sour Rock, some prepared traps and other helped civilians to the caves beneath the keep. Trissa was on her way to Vardon who had an idea of how they could improve the defence. Yet after seeing what they had left to fight the cursed, Trissa didn’t know how they could win. They had lost too much fighting other people of Mistrun. Why couldn’t they have united? This defence would have been far more substantial if only Mistrun had been united. Now the scraps of the major houses were left. They should have been better. If anyone survived this Trissa would ensure they didn’t fall back into the ways of nobles constantly warring. Mistrun should always have been united.

Trissa found Vardon crouched next to one of the gates casting some magic upon it. He saw her and beckoned for her to come, “Come, come Trissa dear. We have work to do.” He said. Trissa made her way over to the old man and was about to begin complaining about the state of things, but Vardon started talking first, “Like storing energy in out wistern stones there are other ways we can use our reserves of energy now to help us later. How many stones have you charged?” Trissa presented one fully glowing wistern stone and another that was about half charged. Vardon continued, “Good, good. You should have two ready at least by the time they come. Anyway as I was saying, dear, runes and other enchantments can be cast upon objects. These will cost you more energy than directly casting a spell, but can be triggered at a later time. I have just enchanted this door so that all who pass through will be slowed. That should allow our archers to do some damage. I’ll show you how.”

Vardon led Trissa to another gate and had Trissa hold her hand against the door. He made her will an effect upon the door. Something that would happen when opened, but not something dangerous. He then opened the door to show how the enchantment worked. A cloud of mist formed around the entrance. Vardon laughed, “Excellent. Now on to runes. They work in the same way but are cast upon surfaces. When touched they will be triggered, dear.” Trissa did the same with a rune and walked upon it to find herself hidden in a cloud of mist. Vardon then showed that both runes and enchantments could be cast to only affect certain things if the caster willed so. This wasn’t too difficult so they began making runes and enchantments around the town that would only affect cursed.

Trissa cast many enchantments that would push cursed on the outside of a door back when it was opened or runes that would push cursed back down roads they came up. Since Trissa was more proficient at the magic that moved things these types of enchantments and runes were easier and made up the bulk of those that she cast. However, she also attempted a few fire and shock based runes, as these were what Vardon was casting. They applied these on choke points in the streets where large numbers of attackers would gather.

While creating these traps Trissa couldn’t shake the feeling that all of it would have been more worthwhile if so many weren’t already dead. “Why did we have to lose so many. If those petty leaders had put their differences aside we would have so much more to fight with.” Trissa said to Vardon as he was crouched casting a rune on the street. He looked up from his work, “We can’t dwell on that now. If we win we can rebuild the political structure of Mistrun but for now, we must survive. All that we have here is what we can use to fight the cursed. We can have no more soldiers and that is something we can’t change. No dear, but there is something we can change and that is our attitude toward this fight. It will take all we have and when we give that we might stand a chance. Don’t worry about what got us here dear, think about how we might escape this situation now.”

“How can we escape if we lack what it takes to fight them? It seems they are too great. That we could not hope to hold out against them.” Trissa said sorrowfully. Vardon made his way over to Trissa and lifted her hung chin. “You dear, are how we can win. I believe that observer we fought may be the only one. The cursed fight in too united a way for there to be many observers. If we can stop it. Kill the observer. Then we have a chance. Without it, the cursed will return to their primal ways and the different species will fight amongst themselves. Their attempts upon Sour Rock will likely halt entirely.”

Trissa felt a glimmer of hope. Although fleeting that hope was a chance. There was something Trissa could do that would have a serious impact on that outcome of this inevitable attack. She realised now that her lack of faith was down to her belief that there was no way she could make a difference, but now she had a goal. She had to kill the observer when it presented itself. That was how they could win. Then they could stop the infighting that swallowed Mistrun.

Trissa smiled at Vardon. There was a way. After that, they continued preparing their magical traps for the cursed, but Trissa found her heart was now more invested in the defence. She experimented with runes and enchantments finding she could create ones to briefly paralyse her foes or to blind them by forcing their eyes closed. These still used the movement based magic she was already more adept in, but just required more imagination on her end. It would take time to trap all of Sour Rock and they would use all they could. Every trap could bring them closer to the observer. There was the possibility that one may even stop the observer and the cursed along with it.

Vardon was impressed with Trissa’s quick understanding of runes and enchantments and believed that one day Trissa would rival some of the best mages to have passed. That made Trissa proud. In all of this chaos and disruption at least she had gained something. She had become someone. With her position, she could make a real difference in both this fight against the cursed ones and hopefully in the political situation after. It would never make up for the brutal deaths of her mother, father and sister, but she could at least follow a path that they would have encouraged. Fight for what they would have believed in and for people like them. Then maybe one day Mistrun would be juster.

## 56. No One to Advise - Layal

Reports were now coming in about the smaller cursed ones crawling from the void and over the edges of the Core. It seemed they would come from all sides. Their horde must have been huge to allow them to be spread so far. Vardon had said large ones would yet come across the Blot. How could they combat that? Boudain would have known how to fight them. He should have been here. If only Layal hadn’t killed his king the situation would surely be better.

Although Ed had encouraged Layal to fight, he still knew Boudain would be better suited to his position. It fell upon him to lead those from Varon and Rainsmere who had so much faith in him and yet he did not know how. He was no fighter, he would spar occasionally but he knew not how to command more than a hunting party. Yet the people of Rainsmere now called him the Light of Varon. They had more faith in him than anybody. He had to at least appear to live up to that otherwise they would begin to lose hope as he had.

With all the bustle and chaos of preparation, Layal had been forgotten for a moment, but it wasn’t long before the new captain he had appointed was before him. “Sir, Edward has prepared the traps around Mistrun and has prepared the people as best he can. Do you have any orders for the soldiers of Rainsmere? We can fall in line with the soldiers of the Core, but if you have any commands we would be happy to hear them.” This was the faith these people had in Layal. They would go out of their way to ask his stance on a fight when a far more seasoned commander, Edward, was around. Perhaps that faith was unfounded, yet Layal had gained it. He had worked hard to improve the situation for them while he was in Varon.

“Keep the archers back on the buildings behind the main wall. They should still be able to hit those outside the wall from there, but I also have a few ideas for them. Get everyone else to follow Ed’s orders. He will know how to guard his own town best.” Under pressure, Layal had had an idea of how to use his archers. It was a little like the sly tricks he would use to win at dice, but it would only matter if the cursed breached the wall. Unfalteringly the captain nodded and said, “Of course Light of Varon. You will guide us through these dark times.” Then he ran off to attend to the orders Layal had given.

Maybe their faith wasn’t entirely unfounded. The more Layal thought about his little plan, to lure cursed through the small alleys and paths and have his men fire upon them, the more it sounded like it may actually work. He was better than he gave himself credit for; he had lead Varon alone and he wasn’t entirely useless. He had saved the Stonehearts on multiple occasions now. Maybe if they won this he would have to rethink his stance. With everything that had happened, he was practically a great lord now. He could return to Varon when this was all over and make it the place that Boudain always believed it should be. He had wanted Rainsmere to prosper, that had been his whole motive for the initial war against Rudolf.

Even with this sliver of belief in himself, he was not filled with certainty. Yet it was enough. He could muster a front and appear as a great lord would. With that, the people would have hope. Someone they could believe in and fight with. All Layal could hope for was that it was enough. Enough to give his people the will to fight. The certainty that they were fighting for good and that there was still something to fight for. Without that people would crumble even if they were the most courageous of people usually. Layal pushed himself outside to organise his archers.

He set them up on the rooves around the gates mostly, but also on some other rooves not too far from the walls. After that, he gathered a few swordsmen ready on the streets. They would be ready if the cursed ones breached the outer wall. It was possible that wouldn’t happen. It hadn’t before, but yet it seemed likely somehow. People had a quiet determination about them. Even if they believed they might pull through they knew that a victory would be hard fought.

The archers he had commanded positioned themselves exactly as Layal had wanted. Now he just had to see if his plan actually worked. Boudain would have been happy with this, wouldn’t he? Layal had made the best of his position and that was all he could do for now. He would attempt to look determined while checking on the archers he had prepared. They saluted him as he passed. They were ready for this fight and happy to follow Layal into whatever fate they may face. Perhaps they hoped for a good outcome but in their eyes, Layal saw that they would fight until the last man. This was a battle for people. It would stop humans from being wiped from Mistrun. If they did not fight no one would. Then Mistrun would be left with the cursed ones as its host.

After his men were ready he went to see Ed. To inform him of his plans and to see what he thought of the situation. How a Stoneheart judged the battle to come. Hopefully, there was something that Layal had missed that Ed believed would swing the battle in their favour. Yet Layal doubted Ed had a hidden master weapon. It wasn’t that Ed wasn’t a strong or worthy leader, it was just that you couldn’t plan for something like this. This was the last chance for the people of Mistrun and Layal realised that fully now. His only option was to put all he could into this; if he didn’t he would still have nothing left to give if they didn’t pull through. This would mean the end of Mistrun if the cursed ones were not stopped. It was a country they had all squabbled over not long ago believing nothing like this could ever happen. Now the bedtime stories to scare children or men had come to life. They would do their best to fight them.

## 57. Unexpected Visitors - Edward

Called to the wall by an archer Ed ran up to see the disturbance. People were confused and worried. Looking over the battlements Ed discovered the issue. A huge blackened rock was creeping very slowly toward Sour Rock. It was already surprisingly close to the city and unless watching it was hard to even tell the rock moved. The men on the walls must only have noticed the movement when the bolder, which was the size of a small village, had got particularly close. What was it? Could it be some huge cursed here to destroy the town? If that was the case it seemed they stood no chance. A cursed one so large would surely outmatch the walls of Sour Rock.

The men around Ed whispered in anticipation; trying to understand what they saw. Some thought it could be a warning from the gods while others were certain it was a cursed, but none expected what happened next. When it was just down the road from the gates of Sour Rock many archers had their bows set upon what they believed was a great beast. The great mass had no intention of attack though, at least not yet, instead, it lifted revealing many small stilts beneath it. A small walkway lowered and people with a grey ash coloured skin came fourth.

A party of about ten approached the gate. Ed went out to greet the visitors with a party of similar size. “Hello,” Ed began unsure what to say or what the people wanted, “welcome to Sour Rock. We are sorry to have set our bows upon you, but we are expecting a grave attack. Who are you and what are your intentions here?” The leader of the other party smiled as Ed apologised, “We are the dard’nah and I am their leader Ust’lik. I understand your worry, good man, for we flee the same threat that you face. The Blot has kept us safe from the wars and other threats of Mistrun for centuries, but now the enemy marches through the very lands that once kept us safe. We helped a man, Badger I believe, we hoped that maybe he could help us now. He owned land in these parts. Do you know him?”

These people knew Badger. Had they got him through the Blot? If they had Ed could not refuse to aid them and if they wanted to fight the cursed both sides would benefit. Ed explained, “I am Edward Stoneheart, now the great lord of these lands, Badger was my brother and was lord before me. Badger travelled through the Blot and in doing so saved my people. If you helped him reach the Core I would be willing to aid the dard’nah in any way I can, but if you wish for aid against the cursed ones I urge you to fight with us.”

Ust’lik gave a surveying glance at the people and town before him and the looked back to Ed. “Edward of the Stonehearts we wish for the same thing. A united fight against the cursed is what we will need. Your army looks barely old enough to raise a sword and my people can fight, but we are few. Together we may have a chance. We will fight alongside you coldlanders.” After that, it seemed both parties were in agreement.

The dard’nah were escorted into Sour Rock and their rock home was left outside the gates for now. It seemed Ust’lik believed that they may be able to use the rock in a way to their advantage, but he believed they had time to discuss this later. First, they got the bulk of his people into Sour Rock. Those that could not fight were escorted to the caves and the rest mounted walls and were quickly in effective positions.

Before they discussed planning or tactics Ust’lik began talking far more casually now an agreement had been made, “Those damn cursed. They are very cheeky my man. With tentacles and extreme heat resistance, they swam beneath our rock. Then pop pop pop, they’re coming up in the middle of our home,” He pointed to the rock, “You look confused coldlander. See we have a large hole in the centre of the Rustaln, the rock there, which we use to harvest resources from the lava. Anyway since our usual fire based weapons were no use we tried to use slings on the cheeky ones, but they just bounced off the hard shell. Someone managed to chop one of their slimy tentacles off and then we found their squishy underbelly was the key to killing them.”

That was another type of cursed that Ed hadn’t heard of before. Even Vardon hadn’t mentioned anything like them. “We’ve mostly been up against gner, degrun and scappers up to now which are the more skinny, but quick cursed. Other than that Stragvor which are the giant ones which can cause serious destruction have been seen, but we have fought few of them yet.” Ed informed Ust’lik of the cursed. He laughed, “Ah yes the big boys. I have seen the stragvor, as you call them, and some other large cursed. They chased us through the Blot, but the only ones who managed to reach us properly were the wiggly tentacle creatures. Before them, we were just quicker than the horde and continued as usual, but now we must fight.”

Ed and Ust’lik met Vardon who explained that the tentacle cursed with shells were called Telvek. “I like that,” Ust’lik said, “Teeel vek.” He spat the last part of the word then continued, “The tel fits their cute looks, but vek fits their slaughterous nature.” Vardon looked as if he wished to explain the true meaning of the word, but decided not to as Ust’lik began wiggling his fingers on one had to imitate tentacles. He then began stabbing the tentacle hand with a finger from the other hand. Everyone looked at him seeming concerned and he said, “That’s what they deserve good men. Sorry if I like to express my passion.”

After they had a greater understanding of the coming cursed and Ust’lik had been introduced to a few more people they went to discuss tactics. Ed was still unsure how well this would go. Ust’lik had seemed a perfectly normal and capable leader when treating with Ed before the gate, but now his character had begun to show. Would he return to his formal state while they discussed tactics? How compatible would the dard’nah tactics be with those of the other soldiers from Mistrun? If there was a way they could all fight together, Ed worried it would be difficult to get from the carefree seeming Ust’lik and the dard’nah people.

## 58. Tactical Considerations - Edward

Trissa, Layal, Lady Grey, Vardon, Mayer, Ed and Ust’lik gathered in the keep of Sour Rock. Clinart had asked to join but had been encouraged to stay in the caves beneath Mistrun. In the keep, they began to discuss how they would even attempt this fight. First Ed asked, “How do the dard’nah fight? Will you be able to fight alongside our soldiers or will we need different groups?” Ust’lik laughed at this, “Oh no coldlander we can fight with you. The fire shots we use, take up similar space to your bows and my soldiers can use a sling in a small space. We will follow your command when the fighting begins.” It seemed Ust’lik had struck a balance between his formal and carefree sides. If the dard’nah fought side by side with the men from the rest of Mistrun that would make planning much easier. After this, they discussed some troop positioning before moving on to some other plans.

“Our rock, the Rustaln,” Ust’lik began, “We can use it. Set it up not far from the gate and raise it. Wait for the cheeky cursed to approach and undo the supports. Bam! We will have squished them. Some may be trapped inside as well due to the hole, but that will be less of an issue of course.” The Rustaln was large and could kill many cursed ones if it was dropped at the right time, this seemed like it could work. “Won’t people have to be inside to lower the Rustaln though? They would be trapped with the cursed.” Ed asked. Ust’lik nodded with an upset look on his face. He knew some would be lost, but believed it was worth the price.

“I could bring the Rustaln down.” Trissa said interrupting the silence, “From a distance, I could likely bring down the supports and we would not risk such losses.” Everyone agreed to this. That was surely a better option than leaving men to die. Ed did not doubt for a minute Trissa could do it and Ust’lik didn’t question this either. He was certainly a curious one. After this, it was agreed the Rustaln would be left not far from the main entrance to Sour Rock. This was the ground where the largest number of cursed would be able to gather since the other sides were far rockier.

A light had glinted in Vardon’s eyes when Ust’lik had mentioned fire weapons and he had been thinking since then. Now he put his thoughts forward, “Certain cursed are incredibly weak to heat. If you could ask your soldiers to focus their weapons on them, Ust’lik, they may be more effective.”

“Certainly old one. Which cursed ones will we be fighting. Not the teeeelvek of course.” Ust’lik said with just as much anger when he spoke the name of the telvek. Vardon lightly shook his head, “No not the telvek, but the scappers, gner and degrun definitely. The smaller cursed mostly if you come across any. That is why they are not travelling through the Blot.” Ust’lik agreed to inform his soldiers with fire weapons to target the smaller cursed more if they could.

Lady Grey said little in their meeting and Ed was happy she had recognised his ability. He could lead now and she would allow him to. Layal’s archers would be kept on the buildings just behind the wall. He had some plans for them if the cursed breach the wall. Other than what Vardon had mentioned about heat weaknesses, there was little they could use to fight the specific types of cursed in such a large force. Mayer and Vardon had found some weak points in some of the tougher cursed that they would explain to the men, but there was nothing they could use on a larger scale.

After the meeting, Ed received a report on the incoming cursed. It sounded as if there was a giant wall of cursed that was closing upon them. They had crossed the void without bridges and now all they had to do was reach Sour Rock. Fortunately, they were slow. Such a large force with such varying creatures was incredibly slow. That would allow a little more time for the people of Mistrun. Time may give them little now though. They had prepared all they could and were seemingly just waiting now.

People were getting restless and fear was growing in Sour Rock. Morale had dropped and it seemed that people now expected the worst. They would still fight relentlessly, but they had begun to doubt more that they would come out of this. This had gone from survival to last stand for many. These monsters could not rule the world without a fight. They would feel the wrath of all the people of this kingdom before they could take it. The fight felt more personal to many now. It was a fight not only for the life of the individual but for all the people of the kingdom they once owned. Now the last of such a large land all dwelt in Sour Rock. The cursed had taken so much so quickly. Ed wanted to believe they could not take it all, but he knew they had the numbers. It would be a brutal fight.

## 59. Final Lessons - Trissa

The cursed were getting closer by the day. Scouts said they were but a few day’s ride from Sour Rock now, but moved slowly. The whole city was tense like an overdrawn bowstring, an arrow ready to be loosed. It sounded as if the cursed number was too great. They came from all directions now, the greater ones from the east and the blot and the smallest ones surrounded them. It seemed there number was so large that even Trissa’s hope of stopping the observer seemed impossible. Yet that was what Trissa intended to do, she would not waiver now. Her goal was to kill the beast that had so brutally had her family killed; she had to kill it.

Vardon was teaching Trissa a few last lessons about the cursed ones. Mainly he taught ways to fight some of the more common types they had come across and a few forms of magic that would be more effective against them. At first, they had been trying to use fire again, Vardon’s speciality, but Trissa could still do much less with that than her abilities to push and pull. “The fire would have been useful against the scappers and gner, but they have other weaknesses dear. Let’s try something else.” Vardon said as calmly as ever. It seemed the looming threat of terrible war with an enemy they did not understand barely affected him. Maybe he was good at composing himself, he had had centuries to master waiting.

“Let us try shock,” Vardon continued, “You seemed to be better at making the shock runes. I want you to focus on the logs over there.” He pointed to a pile of log outside a nearby house. “I want you to will that they are struck by lightning.” Trissa strained in an attempt to bring lightning down upon the pile, but her effort seemed useless. It was like trying to topple the rocks from the cliff by Chillporth again. She closed her eyes and believed she was pulling the lightning from the sky above them. A crackling thunder sounded instantaneously across the street. Trissa opened her eyes to find the logs across the street burning.

Being prepared for their lessons Vardon had fetched a few buckets of water to put out any fires Trissa might start. He threw one over the burning logs before the fire could spread. Then he turned to Trissa, “Well done dear, well done. That was a powerful strike and will be effective against many cursed, but I expect you are tired. That will take a lot of energy.” Trissa was tired the lightning that she had willed had taken a great deal of effort. She sat down on the cobbles and asked, “Is there a way to use less energy with such magic?”

Vardon nodded, “Yes you should be able to will a greater or lesser force from the sky. That will take more or less energy respectively. Rest now though dear, you will need your energy for when they arrive. Here take these.” The old man presented two fully charged wistern stones to Trissa. She hesitated in taking them, wouldn’t he need them? “Go ahead. You will use them better than I, Trissa, my magic has been clipped as you know.” She took the stones from Vardon and thanked him. She would need all the energy she could get to beat the observer. Now she had four wistern stones which gave more energy than she had ever worked with.

Vardon sat on the cobbles next to Trissa and they began discussing tactics a bit more. “Remember what I told you about finding ways to use little energy for a great effect dear. That would be more imperative than ever now. Their numbers far outmatch our own. The smaller cursed will trip over each other if their frontlines are toppled.” He was going to continue, but Trissa interrupted, “Thank you, Vardon. You have taught me so much. I would be dead without your help and now I, along with all the people here, have a chance to stop this.”

Vardon paused for a moment and then said, “You are one of the best dear Trissa. How quickly you learn is astounding, we have a chance with you.” They then just sat there for a while considering the coming battle. The cursed ones would be relentless and the people of Mistrun would fight until their last breaths. Many would die, maybe they all would. Yet they had to fight. For their people, for Mistrun and a better future.

Breaking the silence after a long while Vardon asked, “Would you do something for me after this Trissa? If I don’t survive found an order to teach magic. Most have the aptitude to learn but would take far longer than you. Mistrun needs more mages. In my study in Chillporth are books I have written on all I know. Don’t let our abilities die with us.” Trissa looked to Vardon and nodded. It would be wonderful to pass on her knowledge after this. To have a group that would maintain peace throughout the kingdom with their abilities.

Trissa hadn’t really thought much about after. She wanted to stop the war and constant struggle in Mistrun, but how she hadn’t considered. An order of mages could have that goal of peace and could help maintain it. With that and her help to stop the cursed the nobles wouldn’t be able to ignore her. It seemed the only remaining significant nobles were Ed, Layal and maybe Ust’lik, but Trissa expected the dard’nah may return to hiding in the Blot after this. Trissa believed she could convince them enough to form a united Mistrun, but maintaining it would be the difficult part. She stopped herself, she could consider the future properly after she had dealt with the present. The cursed would have to be stopped first.

## 60. The Beginning - Edward

Upon the walls cursed could be seen from all directions. They were spread as far as the eye could see but were just out of shooting range. They approached at a steady pace their different types mingled with no order. Some were huge and others tiny in comparison. There were so many types. What they had seen of the cursed already was nothing in comparison to what was before them now. Yet they all had a similar nature to how they looked. In some way, each looked twisted or deformed with an almost resemblance of being natural. They walked wrong, unsteady and lopsided. Their howls were ear piercing and their faces showed little expression. An unwavering force they came. They had not stopped for the rest of Mistrun and here they would come. If the cursed ones could bring ruin to Sour Rock they would. Then this would be their realm.

Layal was by Ed’s side along with Ust’lik. To Ed and Layal’s worried looks Ust’lik said, “More for us to kill ay.” To which Ed and Layal said little. Ed turned to the people on the walls, in the streets and on the rooftops who would be fighting. Looking into their faces he saw their fear. He saw that they were not prepared, that they were too young or too old. This was no army. They would have struggled against most armies that had inhabited Mistrun, but this was no normal army. Hope was a thing that had bounds and Ed now saw through it. There was none. How could there be against such insurmountable odds? This wasn’t a thing you could fight and hope to come out of.

Even if there was little to no hope, Ed knew they had to fight. It was that or die meaninglessly. At least if they fought they died fighting for their people and beliefs. He called out to all gathered, “People of Mistrun, for that is what you all are, and that is our union. Today we fight a threat to us all. To the very land we have tilled, where we were born, raised and have worked. This is our land and no one or thing has a right to tear that away from us. You have seen the threat that lies before us, it is greater than any we have seen. Yet we will not let ourselves waiver. This is our land and if we do not stand our ground we will fall. Give up on your worries for they will be taken from you if we cannot stop these cursed ones. We are the final wall between them and Mistrun. Will you open your gates to them?”

A resounding boo and no went around. They would not let the cursed pass without a fight. Ed continued, “Then let us fight until our last breath. For our children, for our land and Mistrun!” The people cheered their approval. They would fight until their last breaths if that was what it took. If they did not they would certainly lose. If they fought they might lose, but at least they would have resisted their demise. Then to Ed’s surprise, Layal stepped up by his side. He shouted out to the people, “I cannot put this into better words than Ed just did, but I wish to push his sentiment. This is our country and we cannot and will not let the cursed take it. Those twisted abominations do not deserve this land. Let Edward the Mighty lead us. In victory or death, our fight will be valiant. To Edward the Mighty.”

Layal raised Ed’s arm to the sky while the people of Mistrun echoed his final words. They chanted for Edward the Mighty. Birthright truly did not matter now, Ed was in his adopted ancestor's shoes against similar odds and with people with an unshaking belief in him. His actions and leadership had brought him here. There had been some wrong decisions along the way, but now the people saw him. They believed in him. He only wished that he wasn’t about to lead them to certain doom. The chanting continued for a long time, he could not wish for greater respect. Below he saw Trissa stood with Vardon joining the chant.

Now they were ready for the fight to come. Ed sent men to ensure everything was prepared. That the traps were laid, people were positioned, weapons were armed and everything was ready. Everything was the best it could be. Everyone was ready. A sort of pounding music played in their heads, the sound of prepared tension before the battle began. Ed did not fight it. He tuned himself to that music allowing it to drive him. He was ready for anything that was thrown his way. The people of Mistrun would fight with brutal glory no matter what came. They fought for what they believed in and nothing could cause that to falter. Even with few and unprepared men, it felt they somehow had a chance again.

The cursed let out a unified scream and their pace increased. The smaller ones ran for the wall head on. Ed commanded the archers to draw and fire upon the now close enough cursed. That would thin the cursed, but they would be lucky if they had enough arrows. There were just so many of them. Even now they were much closer the furthest cursed one could still not be seen. The people of Mistrun continued to fire on the incoming creatures. That was all they could do until they got close. Then the traps and armaments of Sour Rock would come in to play. The battle for Mistrun had begun. This would determine all of their fates.

## 61. Hunting Tricks - Layal

The fight had begun. Edward stood upon the wall commanding soldiers. Although the number of cursed were overwhelming and they barely had the men to man the outer wall, Ed mightily maneuverer them holding the cursed back. His moves were skilful and calculated, but they weren’t sustainable. The cursed were just too great in number. Yet it seemed there was little Layal could do; Ed’s commands were better than any ideas he had. The archers of Rainsmere just fired upon the oncoming horde. That was all they could do for now, but it made Layal feel a little useless. Trissa was casting her magic, Ust’lik was firing his flame shots and Ed was organising everyone. What was Layal supposed to do?

Gner and scappers were clawing their way up the bricks of the wall now. Cursed entirely surrounded Sour Rock, but mostly the smaller cursed were actually at the wall for now. Many of those who climbed were chopped through with the wall traps or shot down by the archers, but a few managed to scramble over the wall. These had been lucky to time their passing of the blades and arrows. Yet on the wall, they did damage to Mistrun’s numbers. Archers were not quick enough in drawing the blades at their sides and some simply did not have a close range weapon. Some who had no sword or dagger tried to stab the cursed with their arrows, but in doing so exposed themselves.

A small group of scappers hurled themselves at Layal. Their claws just missed as he rolled towards the stairs. They continued their pursuit. Layal stumbled his way down the stairs with the cursed still on his tail. He continued running into the streets. They were gaining on him now. He turned a corner where his archers had been positioned above. A volley of arrows struck the small group of cursed down. Layal quickly caught his breath and thanked the archers above.

Perhaps Layal could be of some use. If he waited behind the wall he could draw cursed that got over the wall into traps instead of allowing them to roam Sour Rock and possibly cause more damage. There were enough cursed getting through for this tactic to be of use now. A couple of gner and a scappers were soon upon him. This time Layal ran over one of the glowing patches of ground that indicated one of the runes that Vardon and Trissa had laid. Nothing happened when Layal ran over, but when the cursed stood on it flames rose from the ground engulfing them. They tried to continue their attack but fell to the ground just before Layal in pain from the flame.

Layal repeated this process many times. Drawing the cursed to his archers, enchantments or runes. Many cursed fell to this method, but as they continued more and more were getting through. There was getting less and less time for Layal to recover between each sprint he made away from the cursed. He would have to rethink this strategy. He repositioned some of the archers to ensure they were above the narrower streets where larger numbers of cursed would be bottlenecked. That way Layal would have an easier job of escaping and when the hoards breached the wall, as seemed inevitable now, more would be stopped on their advance.

This method seemed far more effective. Layal could wait at the entrance of a narrow street to be spotted by the cursed. Then he didn’t have far to retreat before the cursed were shot down by the archers above. Layal found this method far more manageable and posted similar runners on a few other streets to use the same tactic now that more cursed were breaking through. It somehow worked. Layal had managed to lead effectively in battle; something he had believed himself incapable of. Yet his methods were killing their enemies and saving many of their own. He just worried what would happen when the numbers breaching the outer wall grew too large. There would be chaos before they reached the inner wall.

Fortunately, the cursed breaches began to steady. The number getting through eased. With the numbers, steady Layal’s little tactic was sustainable for now. They effectively thinned the great mass of cursed ones. Yet that worried Layal more. Why had the number of cursed getting through stopped increasing? There certainly was more cursed. They would have had to have fought for days to have reduced to the number of cursed by any significant amount. Were they preparing something? Had the larger cursed reached the wall? From Layal’s low position he could not tell and he did not have much time to think about it. Cursed ones still came and he had to continue to retreat down his little alley to avoid and stop them. He just hopped Ed and those on the wall would be ready for whatever was coming.

## 62. Sustained Assault - Trissa

Upon the walls, the battle raged and the full onslaught of cursed ones could be seen. Trissa threw debris and fallen weapons at the oncoming foes with her mind. Yet when a cursed one fell they were just absorbed beneath the masses of cursed. It was as if they had never been. There were just so many, when Trissa looked out further she saw just how great a host of enemies were upon them, but she rarely focused on that instead just fighting. The wall was lined with gner and scappers, if one had looked from the outside it would have looked as though the wall was built from them. Traps swung out cutting some away, but the blades were not enough to cull the horde. When cursed came over the wall Trissa willed them away and they would fall upon their allies bellow.

Initially smaller cursed had just been running at the wall and clambering up, but now the bigger cursed were arriving they retreated. The small cursed regrouped with the larger ones. Looming in the distance the larger cursed had lumbered toward the wall much slower than their smaller cousins. Yet now they had reached the wall they helped the smaller cursed. On the backs of stragvor and other large creatures, unknown to those from Mistrun by name, were smaller cursed. These smaller cursed were degrun, scappers and gner, but also many more twisted forms also. It seemed they had only seen a fraction of the composition of the cursed horde so far. There were huge crocodile like creatures that seemed to swim through the masses of cursed and others that looked to be rocks on stilts. Upon their backs were shelled dog like creatures and tall shrouded figures. These new creatures were but a fraction of what Trissa witnessed in a glance across the expanse of bodies shuffling toward Sour Rock below.

As they approached Trissa took a few quivers of arrows from fallen soldiers around her and began to loose the arrows with her mind. She aimed for the bigger beasts in hopes to topple them before they reached the outer wall. She sent out blasts of arrows toppling some stragvor by hitting their weak points, but others trampled on arrows bouncing off their thick skin. It wasn’t long before the quivers Trissa had picked were empty and the stragvor that had not fell were worryingly close holding tens of cursed on their backs. Trissa willed rocks and swords and any debris upon the wall she could find towards her enemy, but the lines of stragvor and other great beasts were too thick. Some toppled crushing those below, but others plodded on.

They had reached the wall. The rocks surrounding Sour Rock were nothing for such large beasts. Ed must have been watching for he called for the release of the wall blades. They sprung out slicing through many legs of the greater beasts and chopping others who had been climbing the wall through. Legless the bodies of Stragvor and others fell, but it was not enough. Still other greater cursed were coming and the blades upon the wall would not be loaded in time. It wasn’t long before stragvor and the rock like creatures and many others Trissa hadn’t had a chance to look upon reached the wall. From their backs and on to the outer wall leapt many minor cursed. The cursed number seemed to be thickest where Trissa stood. The soldiers upon the wall attempted to combat them but were overwhelmed by the numbers.

Breathing deeply Trissa propelled her body darting between the cursed as she had the Calvari in when she had first begun to understand her powers. It would drain lots of energy, but it allowed her to avoid the oncoming attacks. Ducking and weaving between the enemies everything was a blur. Many cursed fell, but not enough. They were closing upon Trissa. Ed shouted for men to charge her section of the wall, but it seemed they would be too late. In her panic Trissa almost let out a burst of power, as she had many times, then she restrained herself. Instead stood in the middle of the swarm she pushed out just enough to stop the advance of the closest cursed. The others tried to push past, but could not. Trissa held them there in stasis for what felt like a lifetime.

As Trissa was beginning to strain Ed’s men descended upon the cursed upon the wall. Focused on Trissa the cursed ones gave little resistance to the soldiers who quickly cut their way to Trissa. The wall where Trissa was, was now secured again. Yet another wave of the great beasts were coming and the climbing of the walls by the minor beasts was beginning again. With another attack like the one they had just combatted, the outer wall would surely fall. Looking around in the short respite the manning of the wall had thinned considerably. Trissa had to do something to repel them. She searched for an opening as Vardon had taught. Then remembering the tumbling of the rocks upon the cliff face by Chillporth, she focused on the rockface leading down from Sour Rock.

She felt for an opening with her mind and then pulled free a loose rock. This then created a cascade of falling rocks. They fell crushing some cursed and causing those with long legs to tumble. Those upon the backs of the greater beasts fell to their demise. Yet certain beasts like the crocodile like cursed were unaffected. They were too flat to the ground and too large to be affected by the rockslide. This was still enough to allow the regrouping of the guard and to give the soldiers time to breathe. Trissa checked her wistern stones; she had drained one of the four. The battle raged on and showed no signs of stopping, there were just so many cursed, Trissa would need to save more energy if she wished to fight the foul observer.

Some of the large cursed that had reached the wall now began battering upon it. The crocodile like ones with their huge tails, but others with their heads or arms. Trissa tried to throw debris upon them, but it did no good. These cursed were too large and too many. She didn’t know what to do. The very wall began to shake and parts of the battlements began to chip and crumble. Trissa looked around for something, anything. Then Ust’lik and some dard’nah ran over. “Do not worry powered coldlander, this is something we can deal with.” He chuckled. With that, they used their fire shots to throw flaming balls upon the creatures below and through them, black holes were burnt. The creatures collapsed by the wall they had been trying to rip through. Ust’lik winked at Trissa and rushed to another end of the battle with the host of dard’nah in tow.

The assault seemed to lull. The next wave of large cursed ones was distant still and was still picking up smaller cursed. The others seemed to recoil briefly as if regrouping, although that was not needed in such a mass of cursed that still surrounded Sour Rock for a mile at least. Traps on the wall were rearmed, Trissa collected more debris and the soldiers on the wall regrouped. It seemed it would not be long before the outer wall fell. The cursed mass was too great and the defenders of Mistrun too thin. At least on the inner wall, they might be able to man all sides evenly. Currently, there seemed to be a constant rush of soldiers from side to side for there to be any hope of combatting the cursed. Yet by giving up the outer wall they lost the traps there and gave the cursed cover within the streets.

## 63. Twisted Advancement - Edward

The people of Mistrun were just barely holding back the masses of cursed. If the defence from any one side of Sour Rock fell now the best option would be to retreat to the inner wall, but Ed wanted to hold out as long as they could. From here they had a clear sight of the approaching cursed and could use the traps on the outer wall. Yet Ed knew it would not be long before they were forced to make that retreat.

The short respite they had been given from the attacks of the cursed ended and they returned with devastating force. Many Stragvor came and other greater cursed harbouring smaller cursed upon their backs. Many smaller cursed continued to clamber up the wall and some cursed continued to batter at the wall and gates. Ed was most worried about the attack on the gate and rushed to meet it with Ust’lik not far behind. Mostly small cursed like the scappers and degrun were attacking the gate, but one of the large crocodile like creatures approached and some telvek also attacked the gate.

Ed waited for the crocodile to get close and then ordered the oil dropped from above the gate and burnt. He knew it would have little effect on the telvek from what Ust’lik had said but hopefully, it would stop the others. Alight the creatures ran in circles before toppling to the ground. The large crocodile like creature perished, but the assault of the telvek intensified. They spouted fire from their mouths towards the gates, and they flung their flaming bodies at it burning the gate with the oil that had been intended to protect it. “Damn telvek,” Ust’lik spat, “We will have to find their nasty squishy parts.” Then he rushed down the wall and faced the crumbling gate. It seemed it would not be long before the telvek battered through the gate with their hardy shells and the fire to assist them.

“Retreat, retreat,” Ed called, “to the inner wall. I need some men to cover the main streets and slow the advance of the cursed.” The outer walls were abandoned as the telvek crushed through the main gate. Ed and Ust’lik stood side by side to meet them, but as the gate broke the telvek were frozen. They did not move. Vardon and Trissa’s enchantments were making an effect. Men rushed to chop at the tentacles and underside of the telvek before they began to move again, but as they were chopped and stabbed a wave of gner scrambled through the gate. Layal’s archers shot many from the rooftops, but Ed and Ust’lik were forced to continue their retreat.

While Ed and the others began to retreat he called for the Rustaln to be collapsed upon the cursed. Trissa who was not far from them now, used her magic to loosen the stilts upon which the Rustaln was raised. It fell crushing and clattering down on the cursed ones beneath it. Many had been gathered there and although it did not significantly reduce the number of cursed who attacked right now, perhaps they would be grateful for the thinning of their number later. Now the sole focus was on the retreat to the inner wall.

As they backed slowly through the streets repelling gner, scappers, degrun and more cursed, traps triggered. Cursed were shocked, burnt and paralysed which slowed their advance and allowed the retreat to be far safer. As the troops on the rooftops were passed they fell in behind Ed’s lines so that they were not left stranded in the main city. Due to the ease of retreat Ed stayed with the line fighting cursed in the streets until many of the traps had been triggered. This allowed cursed to be picked off and stopped before they gathered into a larger force once again.

It wasn’t long before the cursed were beginning to come in greater numbers and many of the runes and enchantments had been triggered. Ed didn’t wish to risk more soldiers than he needed to and called them into the inner wall barring it shut as he did so. This gate had a metal portcullis which slammed down on the outer side of the wooden gate as it was closed. That would stop the cursed from burning through this gate.

Inside the wall soldiers briefly caught their breath before finding a post to hold from. Everyone was exhausted. Each man must now have killed many cursed, but yet they continued to advance. The numbers of cursed were just so great. It seemed they would fill the entirety of outer Sour Rock and maybe still have cursed to spare as they flooded in. Ed looked down upon them rushing through the gates and freely over the outer wall now. There were just so many. It was daunting to consider fighting them. They had fought so long and only beat a fraction of their force even with the advantage of Sour Rock. Their situation seemed to grow more hopeless as the twisted host of the cursed ones advanced.

## 64. Battle Considerations - Edward

The outer wall could no longer be seen, it was completely covered in cursed ones now. They appeared like a swarm of bugs crawling and scurrying over Sour Rock. The cursed had almost filled outer Sour Rock now and many were still outside the wall, yet they had not begun the attack on the inner wall yet. Ed, Ust’lik, Layal, Mayer, Vardon and Trissa were gathered upon a tower on the inner wall looking down upon their enemy. “There are just so many,” Layal said, “How can we hope to survive.”

“Hope,” Ust’lik laughed, “No we fight. We may not win, but at least we get to show these sneaky ones.” Ed worried also. He had believed they had a chance, but now that chance was waning. Ed said clawing for a possibility, “Mayer, Vardon do you have any suggestions. You both know the most about the cursed.” They shook their heads, no tactics or weaknesses would aid them against such devastating numbers. “The only hope would be to find the observer,” Vardon said defeated, “Yet it has little reason to show itself. All cursed are not natural allies and are more animal like in nature. They cannot form such a great horde without an observer guiding them. Killing the observer will return the cursed ones to their natural state. They will fight amongst themselves and give up on attacking Sour Rock.”

Trissa had been distant throughout the conversation staring out into the great mass of monsters before them. Maybe it was shock, there were just so many, but then suddenly Trissa turned. “I saw it. The observer. I caught its purple flaps of skin just before it went behind a building.” Trissa exclaimed. They then began to plan how they would stop the observer. Now it seemed like their only chance. Stopping it would stop the assault if they could reach it.

The plan was to send a force to cut its way through the horde until it reached the observer. Trissa and Vardon would be with them as they were the only ones who had the power to fight an observer. With two wistern stones left Trissa believed she had enough energy to fight the beast and when she spoke of it fire rose in her eyes. With them, Layal insisted on going saying he wanted to be of as much help as he could. Ed made his case for going, but everyone believed he would have to stay for there to be any hope of the defence holding out. Ust’lik would also stay, but he agreed to send some of the best dard’nah fighters along with them. Any other man they could spare without completely sacrificing the defence would also go with them.

Ed knew this would likely mean sacrificing the inner wall very soon and being forced to defend from just the keep, but it seemed this was their only chance. He wanted to help, to fight his way through to the observer but without someone to lead the defence, it would likely fail. Ed wouldn’t allow that, so many people who couldn’t even fight would be trapped with no escape in the depths of the caves below the keep. That wouldn’t happen without some resistance. No, it made sense for Ed and Ust’lik to stay and prevent that for as long as they could.

The party that intended to fight the observer exited through the gate to outer Sour Rock cutting through the cursed gathered there. Trissa and Vardon pushing many back with their magics and the other fighters assisted them. Defending Ed and Ust’lik stood on the inside of the gate weapons drawn to fight any cursed that entered before the gate had been shut. The portcullis slammed down behind the exiting party leaving a few cursed on the inside. They were dispatched quickly and the wooden gate was closed. Ed looked out on the party as it did hoping and trusting in them. Then he returned his focus to the defence. That was how he would help.

## 65. Finding the Observer - Trissa

They pushed through the crowd of cursed. Soldier’s cut forward, dard’nah used their fire weapons and Trissa and Vardon used their magic. They cut a path through the horde towards where the observer had been seen. Many fell, but the progress towards the observer was good. If they could stop it then this would be worthwhile. Trissa tried to push back cursed who got too close, but she was sparing with her magic. She needed to save her last two wistern stones for the confrontation with the observer. Vardon used fire magic to burn those who got too close.

Continuing to push to where Trissa had seen the observer men fell in their attempts to protect Trissa and Vardon. Trissa hoped she had seen correctly; if she hadn’t all these soldiers were lost for nothing. These soldiers fought so valiantly believing this was a chance to save their families and friends, but if that wasn’t the case they were lost for nought. This had to be the right way to the observer.

Now they were very close to where Trissa had thought she had seen the observer. They pushed around the corner to see the observer floating at the other end of the street. It levitated there, its skin flaps looking weightless, with a purple glow of cursed magic around it. The pure red of the eyes of the observer were fixed upon Trissa. As it saw the force coming toward it the observer grinned menacingly. Then it lifted its hand toward Trissa and the others and the cursed around refocused purely upon them. For a moment there was silence before the cursed began to move, but then the monsters pushed into a sprint toward them.

As if running into an impenetrable wind their advance halted. The sheer quantity of cursed slowed them too much. Men began to drop left and right at an alarming rate. They would never reach the observer now. Then Layal rushed forward cutting through a cursed with his sword. He motioned for the rest to follow him and they did, finding a small opening. They were advancing again with Layal at the head. He chopped and swung, but he was no fighter and his attacks were clumsy.

Layal turned again to look back at the force, but before he had time to react a huge stragvor foot came down upon him. Trissa used her magic to topple the stragvor expending lots of energy, but Layal was crushed and when the stragvor leg raised his body was unrecognisable. Some soldiers around shouted, “For the light of Varon.” And charged with even greater commitment than they had had before. They swung and clawed fuelled by the death of the one who had saved many of their lives. The other soldiers who were not from Rainsmere followed the charge and once again they were making good progress toward the observer but at the cost of Layal.

Finally, they had almost reached the unmoved grinning figure of the observer. There he floated mildly amused by the events. He lowered his arms and suddenly all the cursed in the street stopped moving, the light in their eyes seemed to disappear. The soldiers around Trissa looked confused, some continued to attack the cursed while others stood there bewildered. The observer just laughed an unholy laugh. It felt as if the sound came from the depths of the void. Slowly the cursed parted and closed their eyes making a path between the observer and Trissa’s group.

Now all the soldiers stopped attacking the cursed ones around then. Instead, everyone focused upon the forceful presence of the observer that approached them. As it got closer the soldiers grew tenser. Then they screamed and charged for the evil creature before them. In one movement of the creature’s hand, the entire group of remaining soldiers were flung aside. Some hit buildings and others fell into the horde. Wherever they landed they began to be eaten by nearby cursed ones.

Now only Trissa and Vardon were left to fight the observer. It stopped its menacing approach taunting them. The observer did not need to advance now. It had the advantage. Trissa and Vardon, the only ones who had a chance of beating the observer, were now stranded in a mass of cursed ones. The observer believed it could beat them without the need of its minions though so it floated waiting for their attack. Trissa drained a wistern stone energising herself for what was to come and leaving only one stone remaining. She looked to Vardon, they were ready to fight.

## 66. The Duel of Mistrun - Trissa

Trissa and Vardon approached steadily toward the observer who began to use its magic to push back against them. Trissa felt the force that had held her back while her family were slaughtered and that fuelled her will. She pushed back with all she had learnt and resisted the observer’s magic with her own. Together she and Vardon were able to combat the pushing force the observer exerted upon them enough to continue their advance. They approached slowly, but steadily. If the observer wanted to kill them with the dormant cursed around it could, but it enjoyed this too much. As they fought against the observer’s push it seemed to barely exert itself.

“We need to attack Trissa. This is no time to hold back and we will be using our reserves quickly here anyway.” Vardon said looking to Trissa. She gave a nod. Then she flung debris from behind the observer at its back and Vardon cast fireballs toward the floating beast. Shocked the observer broke its hold upon the two with a look of anger upon its face. Each flap of skin was encased in a huge purple tendril of cursed power. Rolling and reaching these tendrils flung around.

In an attempt to knock Trissa and Vardon down the tendrils spun at them. Vardon was able to burn away those coming from his side and Trissa diverted the others. Between the two of them, they were just able to hold the flurry off, but Vardon was beginning to tire now. The tendrils got closer as the observe flung them at the two, but still did not reach them. It seemed if they did not act then the tendrils would certainly reach them if they continued.

Trissa found a gravel of stones in a road and rained them down upon the observer with great force. For a moment they were able to breathe and Vardon diverted his fireballs back to the observer, but the balls had become slow and less potent. Trissa was able to look properly upon Vardon now and he had grown pale and was drenched in sweat. Together they continued to bombard the observer.

Angered by its lack of success the observer growled and then snarled at the two mages. It cast its hand toward Vardon throwing him into the mass of cursed. Trissa followed the trajectory of her mentor to see him land in a group of gner and degrun. There they ripped and tore at the old man. Blood covered them and before Trissa could act Vardon was dead. This was too similar to how her family had died. She would not let this observer take anymore. Another great push of force came from the observer, but Trissa was ready and pushed back harder screaming.

The observer hit a building behind it leaving a huge hole. Following the beast, Trissa pushed herself from the floor and flew after it. She landed upon the observer before it could recover pinning it to the ground. Channelling her will behind each strike she sent a flurry of great blows down upon the observer. Suddenly beneath a blow from Trissa, the observer went limp and its purple tendrils and glow disappeared. Had she killed this horrible creature?

Before Trissa knew what was happening she was flying back across the street. The observer had tricked her. Trissa landed among the cursed who descended upon her as they had Vardon, but before they could get to close she roared and sent out a disintegrating shockwave that vaporised the cursed around her. She drew her last wistern stone draining it all before the other cursed reached her and then leapt. She used her will to push against the ground flying above the horde. Then she launched herself once again at the observer. It tried to push Trissa back, but she was going too quickly.

Just as Trissa reached the observer it floated to the side causing Trissa to crash to the ground before she could fully stop herself. There Trissa began to feel a tugging on her mind. The observer was trying to break Trissa’s will. She found the source of the tug. The horrible mind of the creature she fought. There she returned the push. Worming and probing for weakness in the observer she found only corruption and greed. Somehow even this mental battle pleased the observer. She felt its pleasure.

The observer was getting deeper into Trissa’s own mind now, but she managed to stall it. At that moment she found a weakness. The creature believed in the depths of its mind that it would fail. Trissa encouraged that within the mind of the observer. It overtook the observer. Drawing herself from the dive into the observer's mind Trissa witnessed the creature become feral. It made a horrible wailing and dropped from the sky where it had floated. As the observer crashed to the ground it began to attack those around it, but the other cursed were too many. They jumped upon the observer as they had Vardon and Trissa’s family.

Cursed approached Trissa and she used her magic to fly away. As she did she witnessed the different species of cursed turning upon each other. No longer under the control of the observer, they returned to their natural allegiances. Only fighting for their own and diverting their attention from the forces of Mistrun who now only defended the keep. Trissa’s glimpse of victory was brief though as she felt her energy dwindle only when it was too late. She began falling from the sky. Again she tried to cushion her impact by pushing as she fell, but she had so little left in her.

Crashing into a broken building Trissa felt pain all over. She breathed deeply. Everything hurt. The pains of the battle overwhelmed her along with the force of the impact. She tried to force herself to stand but barely moved. Trying to do anything was useless. She couldn’t. Her eyes closed. Sounds of fighting cursed were all around her, but Trissa could not remain conscious.

## 67. Victory for Mistrun - Edward

The inner wall had fallen and those from Mistrun had been forced to retreat to the keep of Sour Rock. Now the people who fought the cursed ones must have only numbered in hundreds and yet the cursed numbers did not seem to dwindle. Arrows were running low and most who still survived were badly injured. It seemed they simply could not go on like this much longer. Ed hoped for Trissa and the others while he fought. She was certainly their only hope now. If this attack did not stop there was no way to hold back these cursed.

“Don’t look so glum coldlander. We still have some fight in us.” Ust’lik said rushing past Ed to fight some Telvek that had clambered on to the battlements. A large group of Telvek were using their tentacles to use windows and crevices to climb the keep. Ed joined Ust’lik and they slashed at the tentacles and stabbed beneath the shells when they could, but there were many Telvek and it seemed two clambered up before one was slain. “We can’t hold against this Ust’lik. We need more men.” Ed Shouted over the battle.

Ust’lik was knocked down and the teeth at the centre of the bottom of a telvek lunged for him. Before the Telvek could do any substantial damage a huge crocodile head gripped the Telvek shell with its jaw and swung it around. Then the telvek was crushed with a forceful crunch. The crocodile creature then proceeded down the keep wall attacking telvek as it went. Ed had a chance to look around and see infighting had begun among the cursed ones. Gner fought degrun and stragvor fought scappers. Trissa must have done it. It was all as Vardon had said; the cursed ones were no longer united across species.

Unfortunately, some still attacked the people of Mistrun, but many had diverted to fight their own. Many cursed even seemed to be dispersing away from Sour Rock. Although the cursed ones had relented, the people of Mistrun still needed to fight. Ed called for the men to push back and ensure nothing mounted the walls again. Without a united attack, the cursed ones would struggle to do significant damage to the keep defences. All cursed were pushed off the keep and few were able to make their way back up. When any did get up they were swiftly chopped down.

Ust’lik laughed, “It looks like these silly cursed will not be killing the dard’nah today, no.” Ed smiled and was happy for the absurdity of Ust’lik’s comments. “Nor will they defeat the people of Mistrun. We have survived a great attack of evil, but its shroud will pass. Let us continue to stand united as we have today.” All around people cheered as they repelled the dwindling attempts at attack from the cursed ones. The creatures below now truly fought each other and seemingly all attention had been drawn from the keep.

Those cursed at the outer edges of the attack fled from the chaos, but those inside Sour Rock were bottlenecked by the gates and were forced to fight against their natural enemies. Without the observer to unite them the cursed couldn’t stand each other. They attacked any type of cursed one that was not their own. This could go on for a long time, but Ed knew now that they could survive with what was left in the keep of Sour Rock.

As they held the defence of the keep became more stable, Ed began to worry for Trissa, Layal, Vardon and the others that had ventured into the streets. It would be hard to survive in such Chaos and many may not have even made it to the observer. Although those people had left knowing they may not survive, Ed hoped they had. What a shame it would be to lose incredible magic again after it being lost for so long. They needed every man they could get to rebuild Mistrun after such devastation. People like Layal may have made that rebuilding easier. He was a smart man and knew how to run people.

It seemed now the cursed within the inner wall were thinning. Many had left making room for those further into Sour Rock to move. Now the numbers of cursed ones had begun to thin those that were left fought more ferociously. Stragvor were flung into buildings by the crocodile like creatures creating devastating destruction. Smaller cursed tried to avoid the impact, but many were squashed and others overwhelmed the crocodile swarming it. Much of Sour Rock would be destroyed before the day was over. Yet if that allowed the people left to be safe Ed did not care. There were so few left that there would be enough shelter left in any great town for all of the people in Mistrun now.

Maybe they could make the new Mistrun more peaceful than the old. Ed would stay in Sour Rock and hopefully, some would stay with him. They would rebuild and make a new Mistrun. It could be more peaceful and safe than the old. There would be the threat of lingering cursed but without a union, Ed did not doubt they could deal with them. Yet it could be a long time before the land was as populated as it had been. Ed sorrowed for the loss of life but was joyful that they had managed to survive. Had it been so hard for Edward the Mighty?

## 68. Crumbling Sour Rock - Trissa

Awaking in a building Trissa was sore. Her head pounded and it was a struggle to stand. No cursed ones seemed to be inside the building so Trissa had a moment to breathe. She found a window to see the cursed fighting, but couldn’t see the keep. Hopefully, Ed and some other people had survived. Digging into her reserves Trissa could bring forth no energy. Her magic was depleted and she had no wistern stones. With such a lack of energy, it took a lot of effort just to move. Maybe she could stay here until the cursed stopped fighting, they seemed to be moving out of Sour Rock in their struggle.

Trissa found somewhere away from the window and carefully sat down in an attempt not to cause too much pain. As she did so she winced, everything hurt. Nothing seemed to be broken, she had cushioned her fall just enough to avoid that, but she would be lucky to make her way down the street with her injuries and lack of energy. Outside the cursed ones crashed and banged, roaring as they did. They seemed to be in a greater rage than they had been attacking Sour Rock.

Suddenly a telvek crashed through the opposite wall from Trissa shell first. It skidded along the ground to just by Trissa hissing and after the creature came a crocodile like cursed one. The Telvek spat fire at the crocodile. Then the crocodile cursed snapped and roared bashing at the hole the telvek had made so that its huge mass could enter. The two cursed seemed not to care about Trissa so she ran. She found a door in the corner of the room and escaped through it just before the tail of the crocodile cursed swiped that way.

Outside Trissa had to catch her breath. Already she had strained herself a lot. She forced her ringing head to concentrate. Without cover from the battle, she would likely die. Trissa began moving up the street slowly and avoided drawing attention from any cursed. Ahead she could see the keep now and that soldiers still stood atop it with few cursed attacking. At least some of Mistrun had been saved. Trissa just hoped that enough were left and that Ed was alive.

A pack of gner scurried out of an alley spotting Trissa. They eyed Trissa hungrily snapping their teeth. There was no way Trissa could fight them so she ran. They were hot on her heels. It seemed Trissa wouldn’t lose them and she wouldn’t be able to maintain this run for long. Seeing a wall she hopped over it and rounded a corner quickly hoping to lose them. Around the corner Trissa found some barrels to hide behind and stopped. She breathed heavily and waited tensely for what might come. Yet after what felt like many lifetimes nothing came. When Trissa was almost certain the gner could no longer be around she sighed.

Trissa was struggling to keep her eyes open once again, but she knew she couldn’t stay here. Her hiding spot was too visible. Forcing herself up Trissa moved on. As she did she kept her eyes open for anywhere she might hide, but buildings were collapsed or shut tight, cursed ones were everywhere and Trissa could barely focus. Fortunately the cursed were far more focused on each other than on Trissa. Unable to go on she found a fallen stragvor and crawled beneath its body. She seemed reasonably hidden and this was the best she could do. Trissa’s mind was blank she couldn’t think. Briefly, she felt the sorrow of loss for Vardon and her family, but couldn’t focus on it. All will and energy were gone. For a few moments, Trissa lay there staring into nothing before drifting back into the black.

## 69. Retaking the City - Edward

Most of the cursed had now left Sour Rock with only a few lingering to fight each other. Unfortunately, that meant cursed ones would now plague the land of Mistrun, but at least they were no longer so united. The creatures were more animal like and would not form such a large force again. It would be difficult to rebuild with them around; at least they could rebuild though. They had survived the cursed it seemed. There would be struggles to come and they would be harsh, but none could be so great as battling the army of cursed ones. Ed was relieved that they had overcome this.

“I never doubted we would win in your stationary house.” Ust’lik exclaimed slapping Ed on the back. Ed chuckled, “It may have been a different story without the dard’nah.” Ust’lik looked deadly serious for a moment and then he began laughing, “Of course it would. Every dard’nah took down twice as many as one of you lot.” They laughed for a while looking out at the dispersing enemy. Finally, there was some significant success.

When the cursed were sufficiently low in numbers within the walls Ed began putting together a party. They would sweep the streets looking for survivors and clearing cursed from the city. He wanted to make sure people could be safe within sour Rock but more importantly, he needed to find Trissa and the others that went to fight the observer. They could be trapped, struggling to survive somewhere. Ust’lik came along as well as around fifty soldiers. They would stay together and carefully pick through the streets to avoid unnecessary losses.

Inside the inner wall were few cursed as many had fled arrow fire from the keep. They were quickly dealt with by Ed’s force who moved out into the outer portion of Sour Rock. Here there was far more damage, buildings had been destroyed and cursed fought with great anger. There were large cursed like the Stragvor and crocodile creatures that the force would have to be careful when fighting. Fortunately, cursed here were more distracted by each other and barely noticed Ed and the soldiers with him.

For now, they avoided most battling cursed. If they left them to fight they might kill each other without intervention. Instead, they fought only cursed ones that attacked them which were mostly smaller cursed like gner and degrun. Along the way, they found the bodies of soldiers that had been sent with Trissa to fight the observer, but few were recognisable. There seemed to be a lot of them, could they have all died? In the centre of the street was a twisted human like creature with flaps of skin splayed about it. That must have been the observer, yet it also looked like it had been ripped to look wholly unlike it had before.

Ed began to worry that they had lost Trissa, Layal and Vardon. Between them, they had great abilities. Trissa and Vardon with their magics, Vardon and Layal with great wisdom and understanding of the world and Trissa’s undying determination. Without any of them, rebuilding would be more difficult, but if all had gone then it would be a great struggle. They continued to push through the streets, but Ed took less notice of bodies believing he already knew that all his companions were dead.

A few more streets were cleared and Ust’lik shouted, “You may want to see this coldlander.” Ed rushed over to find Trissa lay beneath a fallen stragvor. Between the soldiers, they pushed the stragvor aside. She was alive, breathing. Ed tapped her, but she barely stirred. He called her name and she tried to open her eyes. “Ed is that you? The others, they’re all gone.” She said frailly before her eyes shut again. Ed and a few men rushed her up to the keep leaving Ust’lik to lead the others while they made Sour Rock safe again.

Their way to the keep was uninterrupted and soon Trissa was in the hands of Mayer. He noted she was badly bruised and likely lacked energy. He had talked to Vardon about the effect of using magic and knew that if she had strained herself she would be practically drained of all energy. He fed her soup and said she would take some time to heal now. The best they could do for her was to let her rest and hope she was well when she recovered. Ed thanked Mayer before returning to the battlements of the keep. He looked out to see the force sweeping Sour Rock. It had almost been retaken now. Finally, Ed sighed; they had lost a lot, but they had lived through this disaster. Layal and Vardon were gone and they would have been a great help, but they would have to try without them now.

## 70. Rebuilding Mistrun - Edward

After the cursed had dispersed they began to work on rebuilding Sour Rock. Sending scouts to other areas of Mistrun showed that no one else had survived other than a few of the warring tribes to the west. They still seemed to be using cursed to their advantage and may have even used them to fight other cursed ones. Those from Rainsmere who had travelled with Layal were the only people left from there and the dard’nah were all that remained of their race. Orson and the Rydels had fallen in the north and everywhere Ed’s scouts went they found ruin.

Many decided to stay in Sour Rock as they believed it the safest option and Ed had decided to rebuild there first. It would take a lot of effort to rebuild with fewer people, but for once they had little threat of war even if there were roaming cursed to worry about. Ed hoped to see Mistrun return to its former glory, but he did not wish for the fighting to return. He could happily live his life without any more war. Not long after the cursed had been defeated he felt the weight of everything he had done to get here way down upon him. It had been a tough year and many had died for the country or simply to survive.

Although Ed had begun organising the rebuild and was essentially leading all that was left of Mistrun now, he had not considered kingship. When after a few weeks of the rebuilding process Lady Grey and many others approached suggesting he should be king now he was surprised. It wasn’t long before he was crowned and songs of the rebirth of Edward the mighty were sung at the coronation. It seemed birthright no longer mattered since the world had been torn apart and most noble houses had been destroyed. Clinart was practically forgotten and became a simple merchant after a few weeks of acting like he had lost what was rightfully his.

Ust’lik and the dard’nah insisted on helping rebuild Sour Rock after saying, “We helped destroy your town, best we can do is help you coldlanders fix it.” Once substantial repairs had been done though they became more and more eager to return to the Blot. It wasn’t long then before they cleared the Rustaln. That wasn’t too difficult since many of the cursed had killed each other that were trapped inside, but a few lingered surviving off the bodies of the dead cursed ones inside. Mayer insisted on researching the cursed and asked some be captured. This Ust’lik took a kind of pride in accomplishing and a good number of the smaller cursed were preserved for Mayer.

After that, the Rustaln supports were repaired and it wasn’t long before the dard’nah departed back to their homeland. Before they left though they gave gifts of heatproof suits and arrangements were made to ensure contact between the dard’nah and Sour Rock was not lost. They now trusted Ed and his people. With the cursed ones the dard’nah had captured Mayer wanted to research the cursed and update records. These would help with fighting the cursed that now littered Mistrun after their dispersal and if an observer returned then Mistrun may have a fighting chance once again.

Not long after that another small group of people, who had been part of Layal’s army, ventured to rebuild Varon and make Rainsmere their home again. Ed gave them his blessing and they voted on who would lead them. Their new leader was made a noble and named his family the Talkahns. This man would be the new great lord in Rainsmere. Arrangements were made with this group for supplies to be sent to them while they set up and afterwards they intended to create a trade agreement. Hopefully, these agreements would go as smoothly as planned. Ed didn’t want the new leaders to have such hatred and ambition as the ones before the Second Cursed Calamity as it was now called. Further trouble was something they could do without.

Maybe if so many had not died before the battle with the cursed more would have survived the Second Calamity. If that was so, Mistrun would not feel so desolate now. Too many good men had died with Layal, Orson, Boudain, Vardon and the hardest for Ed, Badger. They would have helped shape and rebuild this new world, Ed only hoped he could lead the people of Mistrun clearly. He had seen little experience leading without war, but peace had always been what he had strived for. Now peace was here he worried he would not know how to lead through it. Yet he had been made king and hopefully he would learn quickly enough that his mistakes would not have lasting consequences.

It took some months before Trissa recovered, but when she did she began to help around the town. She was restless though. It seemed she wished to be elsewhere. Ed talked to her, but she seemed distant. Then one day she explained to Ed that she wished to set up a school for magic. Vardon had told her that anyone could become a mage but for some, it would take many years of practice. After fighting the cursed ones she believed mages could help Mistrun protect itself and agreeing with how Ed was running Mistrun she wanted to pursue this. She would go and find Vardon’s magical journals in Chillporth and then Venture to the mountains between Burnbury and the old Rydel lands. There she wanted to set up a kind of magical school. Around ten went with Trissa to help her and to learn. They knew it would be hard, but after seeing her they were willing to commit their lives to learn.

It was all a good foundation for the future of Mistrun, but only time would tell how sturdy the foundation truly was. Ed was just happy that everyone seemed to be on the same page for now. They all wanted peace and they wanted Mistrun to prosper. Everyone wanted to rebuild and be comfortable once again. War was cast to the depths of everyone’s minds. Even the warring lands seemed to gain a sort of stability. Ed just wanted to maintain this for as long as he could and that was what he would strive to do.

## 71. Wistborne Tower - Trissa

First Trissa Ventured to the ruins of Chillporth. There she would find Vardon’s writings and other books he had collected which contained much knowledge of magic. She was not expecting such a scene when she arrived though. There had been few Rydel soldiers left in Chillporth after the raids and so many defenceless people lay dead in the streets. There were barely any cursed bodies suggesting this hadn’t been much of a fight. If only Orson had brought his people with them or they had got word to him quicker. Such a loss of life of people that were so helpless seemed fundamentally wrong.

Soberly Trissa made her way through the wooden building before reaching the town hall. Inside she made her way to Orson’s study first, although she tried to stop herself. Inside was a singular body, torn to shreds it lay not too far from the window where a crow sat. Trissa bowed her head. Orson was the reason why she was here, the reason she was alive. He had allowed Vardon to try to find a mage. Without Orson, the cursed ones may have won. He should have survived this. She and the people with her buried Orson in the courtyard outside the town hall. A wooden plank was left at its head with Orson’s name on. It wasn’t a customary send off into the void, as was the preferred end, but burial was the next best thing.

After burying Orson and saying a few hushed words Trissa found Vardon’s quarters with many books. Together she and her companions loaded these on to a cart they had brought. There were so many books, hopefully, they held the secrets that Trissa wanted to find. Maybe there was enough to restore magic to the kingdom. Trissa flicked through a few books and they held many words she had never heard. It would take time to digest these books, but it could be worthwhile.

After Chillporth they headed to the mountains Trissa and Vardon had travelled through. There on the edge of the mountain mist, Trissa would found her school. Maybe she could learn to overcome the mist as Vardon had then. That could be a valuable thing to learn. There was still so much for Trissa to learn and without Vardon to pass on his knowledge it would be difficult. Trissa missed Vardon, he had been so warm and helpful when he had been around. At least teaching magic to others would not let his efforts go to waste.

When Trissa found a suitable spot on the edge of the mist and mountains they began to build a tower from the stones in the hills and with supplies they had brought. It would be Wistborne tower the first part of the school and Trissa’s new family name. Ed had given her noble status and essentially made her a great lady before she left and Wistborne was the name Trissa had picked. Reading one of Vardon’s books he had brought to Sour Rock she had found wist was another name for energy. That was where the name wistern stone came from. Wist was often used when talking about energy in magical terms in these books it seemed. Although Trissa did not intend to make a region under her name as many nobles had done in the past, she would act as a kind of head of mages. Her noble name gave her the power to make decisions with the other lords.

After the tower was done teaching would begin. It would take time for both Trissa’s students and herself. She had never taught before and the students had never even attempted to use any magic before. It would be a long time before they even cast anything perhaps, but they all seemed dedicated so Trissa was hopeful. When they were ready these new mages would go out into the world and protect against cursed ones that were left and other evils. Then hopefully they would pass magic on to others and the knowledge of magic in Mistrun would grow once again to what it once was.