**Dovri’s Journey**

A creaking cart rattles to a stop as it crests a bald hill. The forest extends as far as the eye can see. Trees line the side of the path, and one has fallen victim to a storm. Dovri, a portly fellow, heaves himself down and examines the situation. The corpse of the tree is split in places, blackened charcoal lining its edges. Dovri takes off his gray cap and scratches his vanishing hair. Grabbing a stick, the merchant levers the chunks of wood to the sides of the road. Alnir snuffles and begins moving forward. Dovri turns and yells, “Hold up there girl!” as he tosses his stick and stumbles towards the cart. He leaps back on and grabs ahold of the reins, chiding his donkey. Alnir plods along, and the familiar creak of the cart fills Dovri’s ears. It’s only as they descend back into the trees that Dovri catches a glimpse of Ordor’s towering walls in the distance. All too quickly, they are consumed by grasping branches.

Cool air from the forest swirls past Dovri as the sky disappears. The creaking of the cart seems to play in the wind with the shifting sounds of the forest. This is Dovri’s favorite path, from Dundyr to Ordor. Specifically, the latter half. Crossing the treacherous mountain passage to and from Dundyr wouldn’t be worth it but for their unparalleled metalcrafters. Dovri scoffs as he thinks to himself, that a Dundyran metalworker’s lofty skill is only paralleled by their prices. The daydreaming merchant is brought out of his reverie by a stray shuffle through the forest. The cart shudders to a stop as the leaf-heavy limbs continue to sway. Dovri squints into the darkness, tracking the shuffling as it nears him.  
  
 “Who’s there? Go on and show yourself, I can hear ya loud as an Elemental.” Dovri sings into the murky dark, hoping to set a friendly first impression. He puts on a smile that drops immediately as a tall, thin, hooded man saunters onto the path. He glints a knife in the sunlight streaking through the shifting leaves. Dovri shifts in his seat as Alnir snuffs and stomps.

“Any gold?” Asks the man. Dovri grips his meager purse at his side, then lets out a breath.  
  
 “Afraid not much. Take what you can carry, but do me no harm.” Dovri sighs. The bandit approaches carefully, eyeing Alnir as she makes it obvious the only thing holding her back is her rein.  
  
 “Now you stay quiet about me being here, alright? Any patrols come searching, and things won’t be so polite next time.” The bandit whispers. Dovri nods. The bandit snatches Dovri’s purse and takes an armful of hammers, stuffing the goods into a sack and dashing off into the forest. The merchant listens as the shuffling fades; and, with a deep breath, presses onward.

The sun draws low in the sky, but the only clue on the forest floor is the ever-growing confidence of the darkness. Shaken, Dovri presses on. He lights his lantern, but the dancing shadows produced deepen his stress. Different animals begin to stir as night falls. The air is now filled with the hooting of owls, a cacophony of insects, and the varied rustling of unseen beasts. The merchant’s nerves are slightly settled when a familiar blue glow begins to light the inky darkness. Twisting vines, coiled around the thick tree trunks, unfurl their leaves to reveal dimly glowing fruits within.

Scuttling fills Dovri’s ears as the forest glows. A small, long, furred animal scampers across the path, pausing to take a look at the oncoming donkey before sprinting off. Dovri smiles, finding the young neoga quite cute. He passes by a glowing vine and looks up at the fruit. One of the neoga stares at him with reflective eyes. It climbs around the side of the tree and attempts to dislodge a bright fruit. Its back feet are large and webbed, with wicked claws dug into the bark. Its front hands are much different, being more like fingers but for their large, clawed thumb. Finally, the neoga dislodges the fruit. It holds it in its hands and takes a small bite.

A piercing screech makes Dovri and the neoga freeze. With a flap of dark wings and another raucous caw, a corv assassinates its prey. The small mammal’s long body hangs limp, held in the middle by the large talons of the corv. Another flap and the murderer disappears into the woods. Dovri gets Alnir going again, shaken by the omen. Alnir trots faster and faster. The cart strains under the speed, but Dovri presses her on. Once they get to a clearing, they’ll stop, he assures himself. A sharp impact to the side of the cart sends the merchant veering. He kicks his weight against the tilt and slams the wheel back to the earth. In the swinging light, he sees the last thing he wished to.

Two sunken circles glow eerily through wisps of grass in the head of a Nature Elemental. Its clawed hand reaches out as the cart careens forward. Above all the noises, two now reigned supreme. The windy moans of Nature Elementals melding together into a terrifying symphony, punctuated by Dovri’s rapidfire cracking of the reins. Alnir huffs as she sprints, and the cart cracks worryingly. Behind them, Dovri can hear padding feet of Nature Elementals. The mindless pursuers are gaining, their moans growing yet louder. In a split second decision, Dovri clutches his lantern and tosses it behind him. The nearest Nature Elemental takes the burning light to the face, and is consumed with oily flame. Wildlife grows silent as its screech pierces the night air, and the rest scatter back to the woods. Dovri hunches forward and squints against the wind as he presses on through the darkness.

Moonlight strikes Dovri like a wave, and suddenly he is out of the forest. The road grows smooth, and grassy rolling hills now extend to the horizon. Dovri sits up and eases off the reins, Alnir coming to a skidding stop, sitting down next to a high burning torch set into the ground. A few glowing eyes of stray Elementals peer from deeper in the forest, disappearing in twos as they retreat. Dovri lifts himself off the cart and collapses to his knees next to Alnir.

“You did good, girl. Real good. Take a good rest now.” Dovri coos to her, feeding her a handful of grain from his feedsack. Wind gusts across the plains. The full moon lights the night as dusky day. In the eastern sky, the glow from Ordor’s walls is reflected back down by retreating storm clouds. Like a hearth of embers it shines upwards. Dotting the walls are numerous gateways, open as always under King Ruku’s rule. Amber light spills forth from them in a welcoming invitation to warmth and comfort. Dovri slumps down against Alnir, sleep threatening to take him. But residual fear and adrenaline fends that comfort off. He simply sits and waits for his heart to slow, to fool his mind into thinking he is safe once more. The scent of rain wafts around Dovri as he closes his eyes for a moment.

Dovri’s eyes snap open. The glow from Ordor has grown, peach and orange spreading from its spot on the horizon. Dawn has come, and Dovri knows not how long it has been approaching. He pats Alnir awake, to her annoyance, and leaps back upon the cart. Steadily it rattles along the path, though quieter this time. Ordor’s care of the roads seems to end once they wind into the woods. Dovri rustles in the back of his cart and produces a ration of bread and cheese from Dundyr. As he snacks, he realizes how close he is to buying some of Ordor’s sweetcakes, or perhaps a drink at the tavern. This anticipation deflates as he realizes his loss of his gold purse and a chunk of his wares leaves this trip only barely profitable.

The smell of smoke fills the air as lanterns and torches are snuffed out throughout Ordor. Men crowd around the gates, some holding bags, others riding whole carts full of goods. Guards call for backup to get the crowd organized into a line. One by one, the goods are searched. Above the massive doors, the sigil of Ordor glows faintly. Glass embedded in the stone in the signature swirl lets just enough light through from the interior of the wall to make the symbol pop. Beside it, two yellow banners are hoisted upwards. Guards atop the wall roll the banners up and begin dropping red banners in their place. The threat of Elemental attacks has increased to likely. Dovri sighs in relief, knowing he is safest within the city.

Finally, it is Dovri’s turn to be searched. He makes idle chat with a guard as another opens each bag and rustles through it.

“What brings you?” The guard asks.

“Merchant returning from Dundyr. Got some nice tools from the metalsmiths.” Dovri answers. The guard nods and takes a note.

“Any troubles on the way? I’m assuming you took the southern path.” The guard looks up. Dovri nods to the latter question.  
  
 “Nature Elementals gave me a terrible fright last night.” Dovri admits.  
  
 “What, they get near your fire?” Asked the guard.

“No no, I was going along the trail--”  
  
 “At night?” The guard interrupted, aghast.  
  
 “I had no time to set up camp.”  
  
 “What could have--Did they take chase before nightfall?”  
  
 “No, no.” Dovri raises a hand, exasperated. “Just before sunset I was approached by a bandit. He took my wares without harming me, and said if I told a soul he wouldn’t be so polite about it next time.”  
  
 The guard frowns, and writes down a note about the path. Dovri waves his hand as something occurs to him.  
  
 “I wouldn’t recommend a patrol down there. I’m sure I riled up the Nature Elementals enough to scare him away from that area for a while.”  
  
 “May have done more than scare him away, I’d say. Either way, it's not worth our time sending troops to die in that forest.” The guard finishes his note and looks up at Dovri. “You came from Dundyr, why didn’t you buy protection there?”  
  
 Dovri scoffs, “Even being robbed costs less than buying Dundyran guards nowadays. They’re in high demand. So many explorers are heading into the mountains. You know only three members of the first band to brave the northern passage returned? They said they didn’t even make it past the peaks! They’d be better off digging straight through them, I’d wager.”

“Better off going to Melen around the mountains, further north.” The guard says, taking some final notes about the state of Dovri’s goods.

“I hear the steppe around there is dangerous. Strange winds.” Dovri says.

The search completes, and Dovri is let through the open gates. He admires the towering wooden doors, the grain of the planks fading as they ascend skyward. Great hinges signify that the doors can move, amazingly, but only close when Elemental attack frequency is extreme. The bustle of the city washes over Dovri. Chatter of daily events, bells signifying mealtime, and the pattering of steps over cobblestone. Dovri guides Alnir to the stable next to the tavern. He picks up a tab from the stablemaster, with no coin to forfeit. He gives Alnir a pat as the stablemaster carries fresh hay to her spot.

Dovri hefts the cart himself and pulls it around the corner to the marketplace. The chatter takes on a different tone here, a sharp flavor sneaking under the guise of idleness. Everyone barters violently for a deal while outwardly musing about the weather or their families. Locating his stand, Dovri sets the cart down behind it and begins unloading his wares. Hammers, nails, stone decorations, and small metal toys line his stall. As the marketplace crowd extends to Dovri’s area, he makes a big show of heaving an anvil from the cart. Slamming it to the ground, it puffs up dust in a cloud, showing its weight and strength.

The merchant is now truly in his element, speaking fast enough to hold three conversations at once as the townspeople examine and study his offers. The chatter waxes and wanes with the preposterous claims Dovri peddles slowly deflating to more reasonable explanations of what this trinket’s history is, or what this toy can do. Once in a while, though, he scores an amazing upsell. A wealthy noble with more coin than sense spending a ridiculous amount on a simple metal ring puzzle. A blacksmith with a competitive streak against Dundyr, hoping to learn their secrets from a swiftly crafted hammer. A mother carrying an inconsolable child giving in to the dual pressures of her offspring’s wails and the merchant’s golden words.

The sun rounds the sky, and as it dips below the high walls of Ordor Dovri finds his stall empty. Unprecedented! The successful merchant cleans the area with a spring in his step, and counts the day’s earnings as he leans against the cart. The smell of incense begins to fill the air as lanterns light. A rustling of leaves, cracking of sticks, and clacking of bones rise over the city. The harvest feasts must have begun recently.

As the weather grows cold and the farmers finish their summer’s work, the townsfolk busy themselves with cooking the bounty into forms that can last the winter. The wonderful scent of bready goods fills the city as the sun dips behind the towering walls. A fellow merchant strikes up conversation with Dovri as he relaxes in the young night. He insists biscuits are the superior form to cook grain into. Denser, longer lasting, and easier to travel with than the fluffy breads some bakers make. Dovri nods along as he counts his coin, attempting to affect the most conflicted interest he can. Eventually, the merchant relents and seeks out another victim for his tirade. Dovri gets to his feet and makes his way to the tavern. His coin purse jingles happily with his stride, signifying his great success.

Equally sweet smells and music fill the air around the tavern. Dovri stops to pay the stablemaster his tab, and adds on a payment for an extra sack of feed for Alnir. The donkey snuffs as Dovri stops by, and the merchant gives her an extra pat. With the essentials taken care of, Dovri enters the tavern. Decorations of leaves, sticks, and bones adorn the hearth, walls, and tables. Incense of numerous types are burned in the open windows. Ordori welcome spirits into their homes during the harvest feasts that happen nightly until the first snow. The spirits are said to feed on the incense as humans do on sweets. The spirits are welcomed in hopes that they will treat the townsfolk kindly during the harsh winter. Some swear they can see wispy visages of the spirits wandering in the graveyard next to the castle this time of year.

Haunting melodies from instruments are played by musicians, their unique flutes crafted from bone. Dovri orders a pint and chats with a barmaid as the relaxing mood of the night wafts through his mind. He feels the soft embrace of alcohol all too easily, and so he pads his gut with the richest sweetbread he could buy. To hell with it, he thinks, and orders a meat pie to boot. The night is calm, and the city slowly begins to sleep. Dovri is able to stumble his way to his room in the tavern as the townsfolk return to their homes. He collapses in his bed after pushing open the windows to let the air in. The various scents of baking and incense fill his room as sleep takes him. He goes willingly this time. Instead of a surprising embrace from behind like the morning before, it’s the gentle caress of a lover.

Dovri is awoken by yelling out his window. He slumps out of bed and gazes out into the cheery morning light. A few hundred feet away, guards are forcing their way out of the gates. Townsfolk sprint in the opposite direction, carrying belongings and children. Dovri’s eyes widen as he realizes that can only mean one thing. The tavern is rocked as an explosion blasts the guards back into the city. Dovri sees a cloud of dust cover the area as he rushes to dress. His heart sinks as he hears a roar shatter through the city.

The tavern patrons stumble out through the doors to find chaos in the streets. Citizens are sprinting towards the castle, and guards line the roads to direct them to shelters. Dovri is about to follow when everyone seems to freeze. King Ruku strides through the street quickly. His malachite cloak shimmers like a portal to a viridian world. His hair and beard, though trimmed, show wisps of gray. He stops for a moment to talk to a captain, and looks towards the north gate. In a flash of green, he removes his cloak and hands it to a servant. In a blink, he’s gone. Dovri swings his head north and sees an emerald blur arcing across the city, followed by a coinciding explosion and roar.

Citizens continue to pour southwards to the castle, but Dovri presses through them. He knows it’s dangerous, but something compels him to see the battle firsthand. He rounds a corner and turns to find the gate in sight. Its doors hang loose, burning. Dust clouds the area just inside, but suddenly a flaming hand the size of a horse reaches out, grasping a chunk of the road. Wind billows as the dust clears, and Dovri sees King Ruku leaping upon the beast, his body wreathed in green flame. The Fire Elemental is terrible in size and shape. Two humanoid spines, ribcages bared like fangs, are attached at the base. They twine around each other like tormented snakes. The bone is charred and dissolving from the intense heat. Four arms, each as long as a house, writhe with ferocity. Most horrifying, two burning skulls clatter and cackle within the inferno. Flame erupts from them, coating the entire terrible form.

In an instant, King Ruku’s hand glimmers with green. Like the sun peeking through many leaves, the buildings and streets surrounding the battle are briefly bathed in forest light. Dovri dives back behind the building as a continuous blast assails the area. The Fire Elemental emits screams and roars, and Dovri hears a horrible scraping. A final, thunderous boom bounces off the towering walls as the damaged doors slam shut. Residual wind swirls around the area. A screech rises from behind the door, higher and higher. Just as it becomes unbearable, it falls into crackling, popping, and snapping sounds. Silence falls over the city.

The doors are swung open as watchers on the wall signal that the situation is safe. King Ruku strides back through, covered in ash. The smoking wreck of the Fire Elemental sits just outside the doors, and a smattering of green embers float from it. Ruku is burned, but holds himself tall. Dovri can’t help but see the age on his face, exacerbated by the covering of coal. He is immediately encircled by guards, with a concentric ring of medics rushing just behind. Ruku refuses to be carried away, however, and insists he walk back to the castle. The medics wipe the ash away from his face and quickly examine a few burns before giving the okay.

Citizens cheer as they exit the shelter near the castle, seeing their victorious king return. The warrior waves and talks to a few citizens, his face still as stone, gravely serious. The emotional pain seems to be far greater than the physical. Ruku can be heard apologizing to a group of farmers that had to flee into the city, their farms razed. After the cheers settle, chatter begins anew. People discuss the last time such an attack happened, nearly a decade ago. When the city was far smaller and less defended. The Fire Elemental today was unlike any other seen before. Some doubt the guards’ preparedness, saying they’ve grown soft as Elemental attacks reduced in frequency. Some question what the city will do when King Ruku is unable to fight, but they are hushed by others. Dovri can’t help but wonder the same thing to himself.

King Ruku returns to the castle, and the royal apothecary drags him into the infirmary. Dovri returns to the tavern to find a stable of shaken stallions, and an ambivalent Alnir.

“You think you’d be able to take ‘em, don’t ya Alnir?” Dovri chides his overconfident friend, giving her mane a scratch. “One kick to the teeth’d take him out?”

Dovri takes a moment to stand on the street and talk with people. Some are more shaken than others. An old man walks down the way and scoffs at a young woman still crying, holding her child.

“Should have more faith in King Ruku.” He tells her. Dovri, overhearing, frowns. A rather unkempt man comes out of a nearby house in a huff.

“Faith in an aging man, aye!” He yells, gesturing to the old man to go away.

“A warrior transcendent--” The old man begins to recite an ode but is cut off by the infant’s raucous cry. The old man goes on his way, shaking his head. With her baby now upset, the woman is able to transform from shellshock to comforting mother. She coos and comforts the child and goes back inside with her husband. Dovri takes a deep breath. The smell of acrid smoke tinges the air, but sweet incense and bread still lingers.

The merchant returns to his room in the tavern. He sets out his notebook and begins planning on what his next trip shall be. He immediately crosses out the road to Dundyr. Either a new path needs to be made, or the current one needs to be improved. It’s far too dangerous to re-enter that forest any time soon. Rutyr has been crossed out as well. Even if there were villages, the barrier there would prove deadly. That leaves the north. There’s a handful of villages just north of Ordor; and across the desert: Melen. From Melen, he could get to Gunudyr to buy some of their alcohol, or possibly medicines from the apothecaries. What could he sell in Melen that he could buy here for cheaper, though?

Melen, a city surrounded by desert, always needs timber. And Ordor has more than enough of that. But the market is cornered, there’s already dozens of merchants buying the wood from the loggers in the surrounding area. Dovri taps his quill on the notebook, trying to think of what else Melen could need. He remembers struggling to sell Ordori biscuits and breads in Melen a few years ago. The Melenites have very different tastes, more attracted to fish, slimy clams, and mussels. The alcohol they receive from the much shorter path to Gunudyr is just as good as Ordor’s, as well. Metals are in short supply in both Ordor and Melen, so he’s unlikely to make much of a profit moving those goods from one to the other.

Dovri curses and slams his quill down. He gets up and puts on his leather coat, walking down the stairs to the tavern. He buys a slice of sweetbread with butter and fruit, hoping to improve his mood. The tavern is rather empty for the hour. A young couple sits at the bar, stress lining their faces. A boy runs in and orders a few sweetcakes. The tavernkeep, brawny but aged, comes out from the kitchen and asks what the rush is. The boy says his father is a soldier, and he needs a gift for him after the attack. The tavernkeep raises a bushy white eyebrow, but when the child pulls out a few coins he softens.

“Go on then, this’ll do.” The old man hands the sweetcakes to the child and accepts the payment, though it is less than the total cost. The boy thanks the tavernkeep before rushing out and down the street. A man in a foul mood shoves past Dovri. The man is slim, dressed in a brown apron, and his shoes carry sawdust into the tavern. The man orders a pint, noting to top it off. Dovri is scuffed, but listens in as the man begins to lay out his ire with a barmaid.

“Can’t believe it. Told him naught less than three times to cover it up. I come out today and he’s whistling to his girl.”  
  
 “And the wood?” The barmaid asks, sliding his glass across the table.

“Soaked! Absolutely waterlogged. I took one look at the lot and threw him out. There’s not one good thing I see for young men nowadays.” The man spits. Dovri turns in his chair, ordering a pint himself.

“Say there, you’ve got a load of wood that got soaked?” The merchant inquires.

“Indeed sir. My blasted boy’s got an earful of dirt.”

“Trouble working with it in that fashion?”  
  
 “That, and the stuff will start to rot in a few days. Put a damn timer on selling the stuff.”

Dovri’s eyes light up.

“Goodness, how much ya dealin’ with?”  
  
 “All of last week’s timber.” The man sighs deeply, and chugs the rest of his pint. “I thank ya for lendin’ an ear, but I’ve got to get goin’ on this.”  
  
 “Hold on mate! Now, I’m a merchant by trade. Carpenters like yourself are the lifeblood of this city, and it would pain me to see you bear the brunt of this misfortune yourself. I’d be interested in buyin’ all that soaked lumber off of ya.” Dovri leans in. “Of course, we’ll need to discuss the price. Whaddaya say?”  
  
 “Really!” The man exclaims. “Well, you’ve saved me from an embarrassing conversation with a less understanding merchant, I’d wager. Let’s discuss.”

Dovri and the carpenter leave the tavern, Dovri talking the price of the wood down to three-quarters of its dry value. After examining the pile of lumber, Dovri confirms that he’ll be able to take it all. The contract is signed, and the carpenter gives a sigh of relief as Dovri hands over the coin.

“Not quite the price I had hoped to sell all this for, but I still thank you, sir.” He smiles. “Tell me, though. What do you plan to do with this purchase?”

“Head north as soon as possible!” Dovri chuckles. “Through the desert with it, that should dry it out right quick. Need to get to Melen anyway to sell it.”

“I see! We should hurry along then. The lumber is near the eastern wall, in the yard out back of Rena Mill.” The carpenter gestures in the air, imagining the route. Dovri nods, recognizing the name.

The merchant rushes to the stable to get Alnir and guides her to the marketplace, grabbing his belongings in the tavern as well. He returns to the carpenter with his cart, and the two load up the wet lumber. Alnir gives a huff as she tugs the cart forward, and Dovri is on his way north before midday. He stops at a few stalls in the marketplace to buy rations, water, and tinder. As Alnir and he cross the northern gate, they see repairs ongoing on the singed doors and cracked ground. Ropes hang around the door, daring craftsmen climbing up to assess the damage. The pile of charcoal that the Elemental left still gushes smoke, and Dovri gives it a wide berth.

In what feels like no time, Dovri is off on another run. He had expected to spend a few days scoping out good deals in the city. Buyer’s remorse begins to take hold as he wonders if the wood will really dry out on the trip across the desert. Suddenly, Dovri is struck by a realization. He forgot to hire guards. He clutches his purse and realizes he doesn’t even have the means to pay them for a trip to Melen. There’s no turning back now, either. He has to get to the dry climate before the wood begins to warp or rot. He whips out his map of the area and looks at the villages on his way. There’s numerous in the hilly area just north of Ordor, but fewer and fewer as he advances into the desert. The only one deep enough into the desert is Sindal, a mining settlement that's known for its crystals.

To get to the desert quickest, he won’t be able to round Devrin Ravine. There’s only three bridges maintained across it, and not many use them. The bridge in the middle is a simple rope bridge, that won’t do. On the eastern side there’s a thin part of the ravine, and a wooden bridge wide enough for Dovri’s cart to cross. Dovri curses, and diverts off of the trail eastward. He needs to beeline for that bridge, then go directly north to hit the desert. Once in the dry climate, he can move west towards Sindal to reup on supplies and guards.

The cart creaks and clatters as it crosses the uneven, grassy ground. Alnir is nonplussed, but Dovri drives her onward through the day. The sun draws low in the sky, but the merchant wishes to press onward. He reminds himself, though, of the Elemental attacks that have become more common, and eventually comes to a stop at a rocky outcrop. He sets up a fire and eats a meal of bread and fruit preserves. He draws his leather coat about himself as the crisp fall air whips over the flat land. Warm, braced against nature, he falls asleep laying against Alnir. Dreams of his experiences in Ordor float through his mind. Time at the tavern, relaxing and fulfilling. The horror of the Fire Elemental, and the swelling joy of King Ruku’s defense. Dovri wakes twice during the night, each time taking an extra log from the fire kit to burn. Sleep takes him easily as the crackling of the flames waxes and wanes with the gusting wind.

The sky is clear, and stars can be seen once again. The moonlight is not as intense, but the land is still dimly lit in silver. Across the flat landscape, stray shambling shadows of Nature Elementals can be seen. Their whispery moans meld with the wind in the familiar song of the night. They all wander roughly westward, some straying south. Some fall and crumple, nearly falling apart from the force. Other, larger Elementals continue on their journey throughout the night. Day arrives once more, the sun glimmering over the flat horizon. Dovri picks himself up and eats a smattering of breakfast. He wakes Alnir, who is none too happy to get up.

After checking the lumber, Dovri hops back onto the cart with a creak. Alnir trudges slower, exhausted. Dovri knows he’s been pushing her hard, so despite the rush he lets off the reins a bit. Their pace is still good, he reckons. The morning passes, uneventful. Dovri takes to whistling to keep himself from dozing off. Alnir seems to perk up at the merchant’s song, and Dovri leans forward to scratch her ears. A distant rumble makes Dovri lift his head. Looking around, he sees the path curve left and hop over a hill just a few hundred feet away. A sign denotes the upcoming bridge.

As the cart bounces over the hill, Dovri’s face falls as he sees the bridge. It stands, reaching across the gaping chasm, but has been damaged. No singed edges are apparent, but a chunk from the middle-left is missing. It looks like something was thrown off, and decided it wasn’t going to fall alone. Dovri comes to a stop at the entrance to the bridge and takes a walking stick from the cart. He carefully moves forward onto the bridge, slamming the stick down a few feet in front of himself with every step. Everything seems sturdy enough still, but as he nears the broken area, a worrying tilt is felt. The splintered wood creaks as the mischievous wind threatens Dovri’s balance.

Keeping his wits about him, Dovri exits the bridge and pets Alnir, judging if the space is enough to let her pass through. He tries to lift the cart to judge its weight, and finds it far beyond his means.

“Well then, let’s be safe about it.” He mutters to himself, and begins unloading the lumber. Once half of the wood is stacked on the ground, he frees Alnir from the cart. He leads her onto the bridge with surprisingly little struggle, but once it begins to creak she’s immobile. With much pulling, pushing, and pleading, Dovri is able to get her nearly halfway. To her credit, she does not flee as the wind buffets the damaged bridge; but she refuses to walk further. Dovri curses at her and throws the reins down, walking back to the cart. She follows mutely.

After sitting and staring at the bridge for a few minutes, Dovri smacks himself in the head. He grabs a few pieces of lumber and drags them onto the bridge. Having proven it strong enough for him and his steed, he has no trouble rounding the hole and pushing the planks over top. The bridge threatens him with weary creaks, but seems to be all bark and no bite. The railing is still missing, giving a dizzying view from the side, but the path itself is much sturdier. Hopping back on the cart, he presses Alnir forward. She is nervous still, but when her hoof finally touches the laid lumber, she doesn’t fully freeze. Dovri holds the cart from the side and carefully presses Alnir onwards, keeping his stance wide to spread his weight.

The two breathe a sigh of relief as they step on to solid ground once more. Dovri, thoroughly exhausted, unloads the lumber from the cart and sits atop it as he drives Alnir back across for the other half. Alnir seems to have grown more confident, and after only a few minutes the penultimate crossing is done. Dovri’s face grows red as he heaves the lumber onboard the cart, rasping out breath as he lifts himself onto the cart once more. Alnir performs the crossing once more, flawlessly. Dovri wheezes a blessing to her as they reach the far end. That just leaves the matter of the three pieces placed on the bridge.

Dovri walks back out to the damaged area of the bridge. Alnir turns and watches him, flapping her ears and snorting. Dovri shushes her, knowing full well that he could just leave the pieces. But he paid good money for them, he thinks. It won’t be too hard to just pull them off, anyway. And if he left them, wouldn’t they just rot, possibly letting some poor fellow fall to their demise? It should be done, he surmises.

The merchant carefully sinks to his knees and grasps one of the planks, tugging it towards himself. As the far end crosses the void, he presses on his end to keep it level. The bridge emits a terrible creak, and Dovri freezes. Switching swiftly from mischievous to sadistic, the wind gusts the bridge at that moment. On the far end of the hole, a plank of wood comes loose. A piece of Dovri’s timber shifts, and begins to fall. Panicked, he reaches out, letting off the pressure of the current piece. The first piece tilts upwards in a flash as it falls into the hole, smacking Dovri upside the chin. The merchant rolls to the side, away from the hole, as stars dance before him. He hears cracking and snapping, and forces himself to his feet. He tries to grip onto the rail on the safe side, but loses his balance and tumbles down again.

Desperately, Dovri crawls on all fours towards the sound of a stomping Alnir. Louder sounds of destruction chase him down, but he stands once more and throws himself forward. He’s greeted back to solid ground by a faceful of dirt. After a few moments of groaning, he flips himself over. Alnir stands over him, sniffing. She snorts in his face and walks over to some grass to graze.

“I know, darlin. I know.” Dovri wipes his face with his shirt, and finds his chin bleeding. He sits up, still dazed. After a moment of staring at the blood slowly dripping onto his lap, he erupts into curses at his own stupidity. He looks at the bridge. It stands, but only barely. A thin series of planks still hold together in the middle, but the whole thing has tilted and dumped the loose wood on the broken side into the abyss. Dovri curses himself again. The return trip to Ordor will be even longer. And he’d just made all trade to the north of Ordor that much more difficult.

Alnir approaches him again, and gives him a lick on the back of the neck. The sullied merchant sighs and picks himself up. The sun is setting, the day spent. Dovri rides the cart a short way before stopping at the side of the road. He lights a fire, eats a bite of sweetbread, and promptly falls asleep. Dreamless, his sleep passes in a seeming instant. The wounded merchant sits up and begins fully examining his state. He cannot see it, but he feels the dried blood on his chin. His shirt is soaked with it, and he has no second outfit with him. Keeping an eye out for a pond or stream, he climbs aboard his cart and sets Alnir on her way.

After another day of travel and night of rest, the landscape has become much more parched. Dovri takes some time before his meals to gather grass for Alnir, noting that it will become drier from here. The fall air has become temperate, and overall the trip goes smoothly. Alnir seems to enjoy the flatter landscape, and the wood has begun to dry. Some planks have curved a bit, but it’s not too bad. Dovri thinks back to Ordor, wondering how the carpenter is doing. He wonders if the carpenter’s apprentice has pulled his act together. Memories of the Fire Elemental invade his mind once more, and he finds himself looking about in fear of an ambush.

The sun falls and the moon performs its arc across the sky. At dawn, Dovri wakes and continues his journey. The cart descends into a twisting canyon. Red and orange stripes line the walls, smoothly rising to the plateau above. Left then right, then back and turning back around again. The canyon paths are worryingly complex. Dovri begins to see grains of small crystals glinting in the daylight, peeking through the dirt. Sindal can’t be far now. Just as the thought crosses his mind, Alnir rounds a corner and the carved stone walls of Sindal come into view. Dovri jumps, quickly putting himself together as he approaches the threshold. The smooth arch of the gateway is burnt-red, and has a massive cut gem, purple and translucent, set as the keystone.

The townsfolk of Sindal are ashen-faced. Though their skin is tanned deeply by the sun, the chalky rock that bears the prized crystals paints all exposed skin with an alabaster coating. Though many were walking around the square, most coming in or out of the gigantic cavern with clay pots, all of them now stand stock still and stare at Dovri. A group of old men, each bearing a purple mark on their bald heads, exit a large door carved into the wall of the canyon to greet the visiting merchant. Dovri hops off the cart and holds Alnir’s reins, walking slowly. He gives Alnir a bite of grass to eat as the elders approach.

“Hail, sirs.” Dovri greets them with a warm smile. They exchange looks before nodding. A frail looking, short man steps forward.

“You look harmed. Have you brought danger to us?” The elder asks. Guards stumble out of a barrel-shaped house with cobbled together armor and weapons. Dovri raises his eyebrows before realizing his shirt and neck are covered in blood.

“Oh! Oh, no I’m fine, truly. A slip at the bridge over the ravine left me with a bit of a cut. My father always said I bled like I had the spirit of two!” He chuckles. “I apologize for the shock I must have given you.”

The council relaxes somewhat, and one of them goes about calling the guards back to the village center.

“My name is Mulu. Are you a merchant?” The frail man asks. Dovri nods. “I apologize for the worry. Fire Elementals have been appearing more frequently. Usually they dare not enter this far into the dry lands, but they’ve been growing more powerful.”

“It’s the same situation down in Ordor.” Dovri muses.

“Just a few years ago, there was an attack. We hadn’t had one for decades. Our guards were all but wiped out.” Mulu explains.

“I see. I’m sorry to hear of that…I understand why my presence like this was such a shock.” Dovri drinks deeply from his waterskin before refilling at the well. Alnir shakes her head after drinking her fill. The elder stares uncomfortably at Dovri’s sullied clothes. Dovri chokes as he remembers. The people of Sindal see outsiders bringing blood into the village grounds as a terrible omen. Wounds are to be bandaged before entering.

“Oh! Gods, forgive me. I forgot--The customs, um.” He stammers, backing away from the elder. “I’ll leave the grounds and wash myself. Ah, but, do you have a shirt I could wear?”

The elder smiles and nods, walking back into the large door and returning with a white robe. Dovri leaves the village hurriedly and undresses behind a rock. Using his bloody shirt and his waterskin, he rinses his chin, neck, and chest. The lightly red water is quickly soaked into the dry, cracked ground. Dovri spends the next few minutes struggling to understand how to wear the robe. Put on plainly, it hangs far too loose. He knows that certain areas are bunched and knotted for daily wear, and that different configurations of knots show that you’ve been mining or gathering or building. The specifics are beyond him, though. He suffices with stuffing enough of the robe under his belt to walk comfortably, wearing his coat over top. He knows he’ll look a fool, but at this point he’s beyond caring.

Walking back to the center, he finds the elder conversing with Alnir. She seems to greatly enjoy the elderly man’s scratches, as well as his treats of dried mushroom. Dovri hails him, and can see the laugh he holds back. Bearing witness to his outfit, anyone would, he reasons.

“To business, then.” The elder collects himself. “Where are you headed?”  
  
 “To Melen. I’ve a stock of wood I believe will sell well there. But I need guidance across the desert.” Dovri explains.

“I suppose it’s been a while for you to cross Shiln.” Mulu notes, referring to the desert.

“Indeed it has. Much has changed in just a few years.”

“Yes. Well, you’ll need more than a guide to cross her now. Stone Elementals have been sighted shifting among the sands. At times they come near, not usually aggressive. But the sight of a Fire Elemental sets them off. They go berserk and begin attacking anything nearby.”

Dovri takes off his cap and scratches his head. “That’s not what I was expecting.” He admits. “Well, you said the Fire Elementals rarely go too far in the desert, right?”

“Shiln repels them, yes. But it’s impossible to tell with their growing activity. We’ve been surprised too many times to not expect new, strange behavior from them.”

Dovri stares down into the well, the water glittering in the slant of sunshine it receives. He’s silent for a while, then an idea occurs to him.

“Now, I think I have a remedy to your situation.” He reveals to the elder. “Your guardforce is new. You need more people to train them, too. The last of the previous guardforce, what’s their name?”  
  
 “Dela. What’s your idea?”  
  
 “If she accompanies me to Melen, I will pay for two guards to return here, to Sindal, and train a new generation of guards.”

Mulu squints, studying Dovri. “We will be defenseless while Dela is away.”  
  
 “Think of it this way: If she continues training the guardforce alone and an attack happens, she may not be able to handle it alone. If Dela leaves for a time and returns with reinforcements, the village will survive. If an attack happens during that time, the village would most likely not be able to handle it. Surely you can see how this option has a higher chance of success?”

The elder frowns, staring down into the pool himself. “Who’s to say she couldn’t handle an attack here, alone?”

“You yourself said the Elementals have become erratic. You should expect completely different behavior. I do not cast doubt on Dela’s abilities, only recognize her mortality.”

Mulu’s dark eyes brighten for a moment, but he looks down quickly. A minute of silence passes. Dovri subtly shifts his stance to be more forward. The elder sighs, and looks up at him.

“I have not made a decision. I will introduce you to Dela, and we will see what course of action she wishes to take. She’s a prideful one. The day is over now, though. Let us sleep and we will reconvene tomorrow.”

Dovri nods and picks up Alnir’s reins. Mulu directs Dovri to a guest house on the south side of the village. The sun dips below the high rocks surrounding Sindal, and plunges it into inky darkness. No torches or lanterns are lit, but the caves still glow dimly. Dovri unpacks his things, checks on the wood, and lays down. The house is small, and only has a table carved into the rock and a thin sheet in one corner. Dovri covers himself, but finds it almost too warm. Soon, the cool night air begins to stream in through the open entrance. A strange silence fills Dovri’s ears. No chirping insects or rustling animals. No moaning Elementals, not even the breeze can be heard--only felt. As he shifts about on the flat floor, he comes to a rest with one ear against the ground.

As sleep begins to begrudgingly take him, he notices a faint thrumming coming from below. A vibration that briefly intensifies before returning to its low level. Like a heartbeat beneath the earth. He imagines the crystals, beating with light, growing slowly with each thrum. All in unison, their myriad colors painting the caverns like a grand work of art.

---

With the day comes heat, and it is the heat that eventually wakes Dovri from his slumber. Sitting up, his back assails him with complaints, and the merchant groans a response. After much cracking and popping, he gets to his feet and retrieves the last slice of bread from his pack. Tearing off a moldy side, he consumes the last of his prized Ordori snack. Exiting the room, Dovri is immediately assailed by the wind. The cold breeze of the night has checked out, and the angry gusts of the day reign. Dovri wakes Alnir and bids her good morning. She seems to handle the heat much better than he himself. Mulu arrives, greets Dovri, and leads him to the barracks. Dovri sees many of the villagers descending into the caverns. It’s in the veritable middle of the village, and seems to be the main focus. Dovri notices some villagers are equipped with rakes and knives.

“Could they be farming down there?” Dovri wonders aloud.

“The mines provide a great bounty of fungi. Some farmed, mostly foraged.” The elder explains. Dovri’s eyes widen, realizing that the caverns must be far more expansive than he believed. The barracks are a wide, barrel-shaped building extending along the east side of the village. Many windows dot its exposed side, the other being part of the rock. Within, Dovri can see the guards all working. The sounds of scraping metal fill the air with an unpleasant chorus. A tall, tanned woman exits the building. Her curly hair is as black as coal, but her eyes sparkle like jewels. Her robe is tied taut around her waist and chest, and only hangs to the knees, allowing easy movement. The outfit is reminiscent of the miners’, but a leather breastplate is worn atop. The woman hails the two, and Dovri greets her in kind.

“Your name is Dela?” Dovri asks.

“Indeed it is.” Dela responds. “Mulu said you had a deal to discuss, and that it involved me.” She’s serious, but still seems in good spirits.

“Mhm, I think I can help improve the situation here in Sindal.” Dovri explains his plan to her. He attempts to avoid implying she couldn’t handle an attack alone, but Dela speaks up.

“So, you don’t think I can handle an Elemental myself, huh?”

“Ah! Um. Well I don’t mean to state it that way, just--”

“I think you’re right.”

Dovri’s stammering ceases.

“I know when a battle is risky and when it’s foolhardy. Your offer seems fair-priced to me. I protect you up to Melen, and you pay by hiring guards to teach us.” Dela explains.

“Wonderful!” Dovri turns to Mulu for confirmation, but the elder is quiet. He stares up at the tall woman before sighing.

“Now that you’ve heard it, I know there’s no pulling you out of it.” He admits. “We will prepare rations. Inform the guardforce. They may not take this decision lightly.”

Dela laughs, “You’re right about that! I’ll get Rola to lead in my absence, it’ll be a good way to get her to come out of her shell!”

Dela enters the barracks again, and as Dovri and Mulu walk back towards the village square, he can hear the gasps of incredulity from the building. The two men walk into the crystalline cave. There is immediate relief from the heat of the day. The stone walls seem to suck the heat right out of the air, drawing it deep into the depths. Just inside and past a corner lies a room filled with mining implements. Past another hole in the wall is a storage room. Prepared fungal foods are stored in stacks, along with strange waterskins made of mushroom.

“It may not agree with your palette, but this is the best food for travel you will find in the desert.” Mulu says.

“I’m not opposed to fungus. It can be strange, and these are all very different from what I’ve seen before, but anything beats an empty stomach.” Dovri chuckles.

Dovri is given a sack filled to the brim with many kinds of fungus. Some are chopped and held together with some sort of binding substance in balls. Others are whole, and still others are rectangular, composed of many thin slices stacked atop one another. Mulu hands him a stick as tall as he is, with the strange waterskins hanging from the side of it. Inspecting closer, the stick is actually a type of fungus as well!

With his cart loaded up with new supplies, Dovri readies himself. He fetches Alnir from the city center, who has been lavished with praise by the children of the village. A necklace of crystal jingles from her neck as she strides, her ego thoroughly boosted. Dela stands next to the path into the village holding a spear of scaly powder-blue fungus tipped with a sharpened purple crystal. The elder speaks with her, giving advice and confirming the path they will take through the desert. Dovri is shown the path as well, a rough map charted in the dirt. The dunes shift frequently, and the wet season is coming. Dovri is warned that with the wet season may come torrential downpours. Immediately after, the land will be unrecognizable with greenery.

“I’ve heard of this, but only passed through once in the dry season. I suppose food won’t be an issue for Alnir during that eh?” Dovri explains. He receives hard stares from Dela and Mulu.

“Very few of these plants are edible, and a handful are dangerous to touch. We must take caution in our path.” Dela states.

“Understood.” Dovri copies their serious tone, masking his surprise. With the plan set, Mulu gives the two one last gift. A pristinely cut crystal the size of Dovri’s palm is placed into Dela’s hands. No words are exchanged, only Dela’s incredulous look met with Mulu’s kind smile. A few moments pass as Dela looks from Mulu to the crystal and back.

“I won’t use it.” She states.

“If you need to, do not hesitate. Your life is worth far more than my work.” Mulu answers. With this, Dela’s jeweled eyes shine brightly before she spins around to stuff the crystal onto the cart underneath the fabric cover. She faces away from the two as she rounds the cart and leans against it, an obvious facade of coolheadedness emanating from her. Mulu looks to Dovri, now.

“I’m placing a lot of trust in you, sir.” He states, his kind smile having vanished. His squinted eyes peer strongly into Dovri’s.

“My word is stone.” He replies. “It is my duty to uphold trade agreements, after all.”

The two exchange a nod. Dovri hops onto his cart and gives Alnir a pat. With a crack, the cart lurches forward. Dela walks alongside it, using her spear as a walking stick. Mulu sees them off, smiling at Dela.

Dovri suddenly turns in his seat, and yells out, “Almost forgot to tell you, the eastern bridge to Ordor is broken, by the way!” Mulu’s look of shock makes both Dela and Dovri erupt into laughter.

Dela directs Dovri north after a time, and they begin their journey across the desert in earnest. The air dries further, the hard, cracked ground beginning to crumble to rubble and sand. Over the vast landscape, warbling air blends the horizon and the sky, forming mirages of water. Dovri sweats excessively, quickly going through his waterskin. He thinks of the crisp fall weather just a ways to the south, and desperately desires the chill breezes there.

“Oh what I would give for a spot of cloud cover.” Dovri huffs. Dela laughs.

“Once Shiln bears her green fangs, you will regret that desire!”

“I’ll take a slower pace for relief from this inferno any day.”

“You said you crossed during the dry season before?”

“Aye, when I was ten years younger! I grew up in Dundyr, and grew thoroughly sick of the winters there. Snow up to your chest, layers of ice on every door and window! These extremes, I scorn them. Ordor is perfection to me.”

“I’ve never been too far outside Sindal. But I have heard stories of Ordor. It’s strange to me, to hear of these cities built wide and tall.”

“Understandable! It’s strange to me to see how Sindal operates, too.”

The two chat idly as the sun draws low. The heat finally begins to dissipate, replaced now with temperate winds. The gusts betray the coming cold, however. Dela takes a cloak from the cart and wraps it around herself. As the stars slowly spin above, Dovri’s eyes begin to grow heavy. Alnir, too, seems slower.

“Shiln rewards those that work during dawn and dusk. Come the cold of night, we will take a rest. Just a bit further now.” Dela says, patting Alnir on the hindquarters. The donkey snorts and continues to plod along. The dark wind of the night gusts harder, and Dela noticeably tenses up. She hops aboard the cart and looks to the distance, bracing herself against the tempest.

“We must stop.” She commands. Dovri complies and groans as he steps down from the cart. He props up a blanket with the water stick, forming a shoddy tent, and lays down atop his coat on the wood.

“A dust storm may be coming. Strong winds from the west usually accompany them. Besides, it is cold and we should rest.”

“Cold? I call this temperate!” Dovri scoffs, yawning widely. “But, I won’t complain…”

Dela wraps herself in a sheet and goes to sleep next to Alnir, resting peacefully on the sand as she munches from a bag of fibrous mushrooms. The chill night passes, Dovri eventually relenting to the cool air and tightening a sheet around himself. The wind draws the desert sand up into its dance, lightly dusting the group throughout the night. All of a sudden, Dela shakes Dovri awake. The merchant groans as his sleep is shattered.

“We must go. The sun will rise soon, now is the perfect time to get some distance in.” She explains. Dovri wipes his eyes and dusts the cart off. Dela wakes up Alnir as well, notably more kindly, he thinks. As Dovri tests out the mushrooms they have packed, he finds them actually quite tasty. Deep, earthy, meaty flavors in a chewy, satisfying package. Dela chews on one of the bars of sliced fungus while getting Alnir to raise each of her hooves in succession. She attaches a wide, flat mushroom to each foot. Secured with the same white substance holding together the sliced foods, she explains that it will assist with traction on the finer desert sand. Alnir takes a moment to get used to it, nearly tripping a few times. Once she manages to take a few steps around, she seems to realize the purpose. The underside of the mushrooms are ribbed, and grip a large amount of sand tightly.

Dela and Dovri resume their path northwards. Dovri inquires about how many more days of travel they have.

“Ten, perhaps a few more. If the rain comes, that will add a day. Right now, we’re aiming for Nulin. We can restock on water there. We should reach it in three or four days.” Dela explains.

“Does Nulin have anything to eat?” Dovri inquires. “In my last journey it was straight across, we went northwest from Dundyr Pass…Never doing that trip again.”

“A few types of trees grow fruit. There should be a few that are ripe enough to eat.” Dela takes another bar and chomps on it, delighting in the taste. “We don’t eat these too often in Sindal. Mulu went above and beyond!”

“Mmh.” Dovri eats the rest of his, swallowing quickly to add on. “Say, I’ve got a few questions about the mushrooms. I enjoy the taste, but I wonder how they grow down there? Mushrooms in the forest grow on dead wood and plants. And what’s the sticky stuff used to hold that together?”

“Ahah! You may not like the answer. I’m afraid it would ruin the rations for you!” Dela cackles. Dovri’s eyes widen.

“Well, now not telling me will absolutely ruin my appetite!” Dovri laughs nervously.

“Fine, fine! Well, the short answer is Tsen slugs. White little slimy things, as long as a finger. They dissolve the crystals with their slime, then eat the mush left behind. The crystals down there grow quickly, apparently. I’m told in other places crystals take years to grow. There’s always some down in Sindal, though.” Dela quizzes off. Dovri’s face turns a slight shade of green in the dawn light. Dela sees and laughs.

“I’m told you eat some sort of plant stalk’s seeds. All ground up and mixed with water, baked? So many steps! Isn’t it wasteful?”

“It’s not wasteful! Wheat is extremely versatile, and the honey from Ordor’s bees make it uniquely sweet!” Dovri pouts at the attack on his favorite cuisine. Dela laughs and pats his knee.

“Meant no harm there, sir.” Dela assures him. She takes out another bar, breaking it in half to share with Dovri.

“To make one of Lun’s bars here, she just slices a stoutshroom long ways, puts a layer of Tsen on the slices, and stacks them up. Back in the day, she used to make bagfuls for the guardforce!”

Dovri is surprised at how sweet the Tsen slime is. It, too, has an earthy tone, but is bright and seems to fade quickly on the tongue. The merchant thanks the warrior. A silence passes over the two, the only sound being the whispering of the wind and the soft plodding of Alnir. Dela refills Alnir’s feedbag with stringy bits of mushroom. Dovri musters up his courage to ask a tentative question.

“I hope I’m not treading too deeply into your personal life, but would you mind sharing with me how you’re injured? Mulu mentioned that to me, and I thought I’d better know in case of an attack. I’m not one for fighting, but if it’s death all around, I’d like to go with ya.” He shuts his mouth, sickly green traded for a blistery red. Dela laughs heartily.

“You needn’t be so careful, my friend! This isn’t your strange city of secrets and lies.” She assures him. Dovri relaxes, glad she is so friendly about the subject. Dela sighs, still smiling. “I may as well tell you how that last battle went down. Give me a moment.”

---

The sun has risen, and it comes bearing the gift of excessive heat. Dovri and Dela take off their outer robes and pack them in the cart. A few wispy clouds have started to appear in the sky, their shadows playing a teasing pattern on the distant sand. Dovri yearns for their defense. Dela grabs a waterskin from the stick and allows Alnir to drink from it while she regales.

“It was nearly 3 years ago, now. A Fire Elemental had followed another merchant like yourself to us. The man had panicked when he realized he was being followed, and went directly towards the nearest village. The Elemental was larger than what we’re used to seeing. A floating skull atop myriad spines, arms lashing out from every angle.” Dela shivers at the memory. “Horrid thing.”

“I wasn’t captain at the time, only joined a couple years before. Our force had fifteen people in it. Our leader was named Nelri. She was my mother.” She continues. Her excited tone has been minimized, a stoic seriousness reminiscent of Mulu replacing it. Dela takes a breath.

“Well, we started fighting it. When the merchant got to Sindal his cart was aflame, his horse panicked. He cried out about an Elemental and it crashed into the village walls. Its arms reached down and grabbed two people, burning them alive. Nelri and the other high rankers lifted a wave of sand to push it back. It reeled away from the village, to the outskirts. We got our weapons and rallied on the south side of the walls.” Dela starts and stops a few times, unsure how to explain next. “I...Nelri didn’t--No, I was foolhardy. I saw those people burn, I knew them. I couldn’t hear Nelri, I just needed to kill that thing.”

Dovri is quiet. Alnir plods along, flapping her ears once in a while. Even the wind seems to listen intently. The sun itself peers down upon them, imperious.

“It’s hot. Let us rest.” Dela interrupts her story. The listeners let out their breath in disappointment, a fitting gust dislodging a water sack from the stick. Dela moves to catch the precious package, kicking a leg out to fall low and reaching out. She succeeds, but cries out in pain. Dovri jumps off the cart and helps her up.

“What happened? Did you pull something?” He asks, helping her sit against an outcropping of stone.

“Well, that’d be my wound you wondered about.” Dela places a hand to her chest. “From my heart to my stomach I was burned. It was a strange feeling, unlike the burning of the sun or the sand. Or even of fire. The Elemental’s charcoal bones are unnatural. It left a long scar that burned hotter and hotter. It gets hot like that if I move too quickly, still. For weeks after the attack, it burned nonstop.”

“Why did it stop?” Dovri asks, unpacking a small meal and a water sack for himself. Alnir lays down nearby, and Dovri carefully opens a water sack for her as well.

“Not sure. I think I just healed. Or learned to deal with it. My kin did all they could. I think it was their infusions that helped me fight it back. It was like an infected wound.” Dela lifts herself up. “I’m okay, now.”

Dela fetches a sheet from the cart and puts one side underneath a plank of wood. She drapes it between the cart and the stone and secures the far side with a few stray rocks. With shade constructed, the group rests comfortably.

“So, how can you fight with the wound?” Dovri inquires, sipping his water slowly.

“If I focus my energy, I can make it hurt less for a time. My Aura seems to fight it, I think. But that limits how much energy I can use in combat.” Dovri nods, amazed at the concept of using Aura so easily. Dela laughs at his awe. “My prowess leaves a lot to be desired. Luckily, my mother taught me to focus on it from a young age. That’s how I got this spear strengthened.” She pats her spear.

“Amazing. So your spear is stronger than it would be otherwise?” Dovri asks.

“Well, it was able to block a few hits from that bastard Fire Elemental, so I’d say so!” Dela grins pridefully. “The crystal helps a lot, too. Stores a lot of Aura in a small size.” She taps the sharpened, purple crystal atop the mushroom stalk. The two chat for a bit longer, then rest more deeply. Dovri lays on his coat and sleeps lightly while Dela nods off against the stone. Alnir nuzzles against Dovri and joins the nap.

Dela awakes as the sun grows low in the sky. She taps Dovri and Alnir awake, and goes outside to scout their surroundings. Dovri finishes his water sack and tosses it away, beginning to wrap up the cloth sheet. The journey recommences, night falling and the air cooling. Dela knocks on the side of the cart to show Dovri a beat to keep, and the merchant mimics her. She begins to sing a song from Sindal. The wordless notes rise and fall in pitch and intensity with the thumps on the cart. It’s a slow paced song, and somewhat somber. Dela ends with a surprisingly deep note that trails off as Dovri knocks lighter and lighter.

“Thank you, that was fun!” Dela smiles at Dovri.

“Thank you for the performance. Is there a meaning behind the song?

“Not that I know of. It’s a bit sad, but to sing it you just make any noise that sounds good at the note.” Dela explains. “I learned it really well, hah! Back when I was recovering, the healers would sing it when performing infusions. Sounds a bit different without the screaming.”

Dela laughs, and Dovri chuckles a bit. He is a bit off-put at how easily Dela talks about such a traumatic experience, though. Curiosity still beating his politeness, he inquires about the battle with the Fire Elemental.”

“Well, in the rage I was in, I don’t remember what happened too clearly. I must have leapt at the thing, because I was in the air. I remember moving faster than I ever had, to block the thing’s hands with my spear, and sand swirling around me in a haze. I tried to smash the charcoal bones making up one of the spines, but the spine itself moved like an arm! I must have gotten launched backwards, and that’s when I started feeling the burning.” Dela places a hand to her diaphragm again, feeling the hard scab.

“I opened my eyes and saw the thing listing sideways. The rest of the group had attacked, but a loud explosion made me roll away. I was on my face in the sand, trying to get up. I heard Nelri cry out, and there was a lot of screaming from the others. The burning in my chest was unbearable, I could only writhe on the ground. I felt the heat of the Elemental floating above me as it neared. That heat was like a cool breeze compared to this curse. Another explosion rocked me, and as I rolled away I saw Nelri above me. Her right arm was gone.”

Dovri’s eyes grow wide.

“Whatever rage I felt paled in comparison to hers. I couldn’t even call them screams, they were roars of fury. She was wreathed in purple flame, and her blood was spilling, steaming, onto the melting sand. I was suddenly taken by a wave of sand, further away from the battle. I lost consciousness shortly after, but I remember seeing a purple glow overtake the reds and oranges of the Elemental. After I recovered enough to speak, Mulu told me they couldn’t find Nelri’s body. Not even ashes. He believed her elemental energy consumed her, transformed her entire body into elemental energy, to kill the attacker. He said it was a phenomenon that had occurred in the past.”

A while of silence passes. Dovri expresses his sorrow for her loss, and she thanks him for listening. Stars begin to appear in the sky, like many windows into the cosmos. The greater audience showed up late for the conclusion to the story, it seems. A few more hours pass, but the air does not grow unbearably chill. Dovri points this out to Dela, who agrees.

“Warm nights are a blessing and a curse. It usually means a monsoon is coming. We have two days left to get to Nulin--the oasis. If we walk through the night, we may make it before dusk tomorrow.”

“Have any tricks to stay up that long?” Dovri asks, already yawning.

“Fermented Tsen, if we had any. The sun dried stuff we have won’t ferment at all. We’ll have to tough it out.”

The night passes peacefully, but clouds begin to invade from the east. Dovri examines them.

“From the east...Could that but Dundyran rain?” He ponders. Dela squints at it.

“We’re too far north by now. That’s probably rain from the sea.” Dela responds.

“Ahh, the sea!” Dovri crows jubilantly. “You’ll be able to see it when we arrive at Melen--It’s truly wondrous.”

“The most water I’ve seen in one place is the Wuvri.” Dela thinks out loud. Dovri gives her a confused look, and she explains further, “The aquifer our well is connected to. Just a few steps down in the cave and there’s a path that takes you to it. Crystals glow under and over the water, and it stretches farther than you can see.”

Dovri is astounded. “I thought it would be spread out over many flooded tunnels, not all in one place!”

“Oh, it has many tunnels deep beneath. The water trickles down and feeds the Tsen slugs and the crystals and the fungus all. It’s the root of life below.”

Dovri cannot contain his amazement. He pesters Dela for more details of the caves for hours, and she’s perfectly content to extole her knowledge. The conversation is cut short, however, as the cart passes between two great spires of black rock. Dela jumps aboard the cart and peers to the northwest. The clouds have covered the waning moon, and darkness abounds. The stars’ meager light is minimal but appreciated.

“There, now! I see Nulin! We’re ahead of schedule.” She cheers. Dovri cheers with her and speeds up Alnir. Dela gets down and gives another water sack and some stringy shroom to the hardworking donkey. The morning sun’s glow is stifled by the thick clouds coating the eastern sky, foretelling the coming rain. If Dovri had enough liquid in his system, he’d cry. Alnir notices the green horizon and speeds up all on her own.

“Damn!” Dela curses, peering to the east. “The rain’s begun. We need to get to Nulin now!”

“You’ll be able to eat and drink to your content once we’re there, darlin, so forgive me for pressing you!” Dovri pleads with Alnir as he snaps the reins. The mushrooms on the donkey’s feet give enough traction to trot at most. Dela hops on board the cart and covers the back with a sheet. She takes a fist-sized mushroom from her pocket and begins rubbing the cloth with it.

“What is that--What are you doing?” Dovri turns and asks.

“The coating of this keeps the water away. Here, put your robe on and rub it all over.” Dela tosses Dovri the mushroom as he quickly unfolds his robe from his belt. He lets it drop down around his knees and rapidly rubs the underside of the cap over the surface. Once done, he throws it back to Dela, who does her own robe. Dela finishes securing the sheet over the cart, and the strangely straight barrier of greenery comes into sight as the cart crests a dune. Dovri looks east and pales.

A veritable curtain of water advances as swiftly as the wind. The calamitous crash of its impact with the ground knocks up a layer of dust that’s immediately struck down by more rain. Alnir veers left, but Dovri drives her straight. Just beyond the curtain, the strange, short-leafed forms of unknown plants extend upwards. Ahead, a curving line separating the brown grasses of Nulin from the loose sand of Shiln comes into view. It strikes Dovri as odd, such a strict demarcation of the oasis. He doesn’t have long to ponder as he feels a splash of rain hit his head. He cracks the reins again. Dela pushes Dovri from behind, making him bend forward with his robe’s hood covering his face.

Alnir lunges forward across the line of vegetation, and the monsoon sweeps over the group. Dovri grips the cart as the rain pounds on his head and back. Dela supports herself with her spear, and Alnir falls to her knees. After a minute, the rain lightens. Dovri gasps for breath and lifts himself. Alnir gets to her feet and walks a bit further in.

Just outside the hardy grasses lining the ground, strange vines snake to head-height in the desert. The sand is completely inundated with thin, white roots that support the tenuous structures seeking the rain. Alnir walks to the side of a pond and begins drinking deeply. Dela and Dovri jump to the ground and begin doing so as well. Once they’ve had their fill, they sit back against the cart, breathless. The rain patters off of the hydrophobic coating on the duo’s robes, as well as the sheet over the wood on the cart. The two sit in silence as they catch their breath, and Alnir begins grazing on the grass.

Dovri drives the cart around a small valley, Dela noting to not go deep into the indent. Rain will fill it soon. They come to a stop at a rocky spire bent to the side, providing relief from the downpour.

“How long do those vines stay?” Dovri asks.

“By tomorrow they won’t be nearly as tall. They grow too high and fall over, then flower. The nectar from them is actually quite tasty.”

“I thought you said there were dangerous plants?”

“They can be, if you’re caught in them. People have drowned in them before. But there’s worse ones, too. They’ll come. The rainvines are just the first to rise. There will be gourds that build pressure and then explode outwards. Their seeds are spined, and very painful. They’re a deeper green than the vines will be. There’s also another type of vine, a snaking, sneaky plant. Its leaves are bigger than the rainvines, and if they touch your skin you will itch for days.” Dela lists off the plants she knows about. “There are sure to be more. We’re safe here, though. The roots of the Funga fill this area.”

“Wha--Mushrooms? I don’t see any.” Dovri asks, incredulously looking through the rain.

“Shiln belies many caves below. The water of Nulin is from the same source as Sindal. The fungal essence fills the earth where the caves carve the surface.” Dovri looks at the ground and places his hand on it. Sure enough, beyond the gentle patter of the rain, he can feel a familiar thrum. He uncovers the cart to check on the wood, and finds it nearly untouched by the rain. The mushroom coating worked miracles. The rain pours throughout the day, the temperature staying warm and humid, but not blistering. The pond slowly swells, gratefully seizing more land. Numerous other ponds join hands and grow into a single, great lake by the end of the day. Dela collects fruit knocked to the ground by the rain. She examines the green rind, pulling some apart and peering at their orange-red interiors. When she has an armful, she returns to the cart and lays them out.

“The food and water we collect here will need to take us through five more days of travel, so do all you can.” She notes to Dovri. The day passes, relaxed. The rain lets up for an hour before restarting, during which time Dovri and Dela get a view of Nulin oasis. The distance is painted a patchy green, especially vibrant in the overcast, diffuse light. The desert has transformed into an apparent jungle, the rainvines reaching high. Dovri sees a few near the mycelium line that denotes the oasis. They’ve fallen over, resting on their brethren, and small tan pods dot the length of them. Further away, newly formed rivers rip through the underbrush of Nulin oasis, crashing into the lake. Shrubs, grasses, and the infrequent tree spread up a vast hill to the west.

“Just how large is this oasis?” Asks Dovri.

“It doesn’t extend much further past that hill. At the bottom of each pond lies their link to the cave system. The Funga spread from there, and have made this area theirs.” Dela explains. She takes off Alnir’s mushroom shoes and scrubs the Tsen slime from her hooves. The donkey walks with a slightly bouncier momentum afterward.

As a few days and nights pass, the two keep to a rigid sleep schedule, still waking before dawn and dusk, sleeping in the interim. Dela seems to have a keen sense of time, waking before Dovri every time. They collect fruit and refill the water sacks and personal canteens. Eventually, the rain begins to lighten up. The clouds persist, but their payload is exhausted. The rainvines have all fallen, and the view of the desert is relatively uncluttered. The ground is unrecognizable, though, with interwoven vines tangled together. Sporadic white and red flowers dot the landscape. The desert appears wholly transformed into a strange flowered field, unlike anything Dovri had seen before.

---

With the cart thoroughly loaded with fruit and water, the group sets off north once again. They veer west to stay in Nulin oasis longer, as the ground is far easier to traverse. Dela keeps an eye out for dangerous plants in the desert proper, noting to Dovri that she will point them out to him. The sun begins to peer through the breaking clouds as it falls west. Its effect is immediate, the air quickly filling with water vapor as the sun sears the soaked ground. The cart crosses over the threshold of Nulin oasis and returns to the desert. The fallen rainvines are simpler to traverse than the fine grain sand, and progress is much quicker.

“Alnir sure seems to know the way!” Dela jokes as the donkey stubbornly veers to the west despite Dovri’s insistence on straightening their path north. She goes silent when she notices the cause of the behavior. A line of bones scattered by the rainvines lay in plain moonlight. The alabaster remains extend for many feet, and are a mix of animal bones and human bones.

“A caravan?” Dovri asks, shuddering. “A poor fate, so near to Nulin.”

“Indeed.” Dela nods. “To all go at once…Either a particularly violent Elemental, or a past season’s rain. The death must have been rapid, they were in formation when they perished.”

“Any idea how long ago this occurred?”

“It’s difficult to tell, perhaps just a few months ago, or years.”

The cart finally passes the end of the bones, and Dela says a prayer for their souls to rest peacefully. The group presses on through the night, the terrain still acting as a boon. The moon’s nearly waned light is paltry, but Dela still keeps a keen eye out for dangerous plantlife. Come dawn, the group is presented with a wondrous sight. As the sun’s light falls onto the vine-covered dunes, the small brown buds erupt into white and red flowers all at once. Dovri watches, amazed, as the light sweeps down into a valley. With it, a wave of crimson-dotted white follows closely. Dela stoops to pick a few, handing one to Dovri.

“Try this. To eat it, you just pinch the stem with your thumbnail and suck the nectar out.” She demonstrates. Dovri repeats in kind, taking a few tries to pinch hard enough. When he does, a sweet taste fills his mouth. The nectar is not quite as thick as honey, but has a similar taste. More flowery, though, and it fades quickly. Dela goes about collecting handfuls and depositing them on the cart.

“These should provide a nice snack when we need it. Are you tired, by the way? The heat of the day will be here soon.”

“I’m alright to keep going until it gets unbearable. The rest at Nulin helped quite a bit.”

“Good! You’re building up a tolerance to Shiln!” Dela grins widely. Dovri chuckles in response.

“Oh I don’t think I’ll be making this journey again any time soon. I’ll be too old to ignore my aching bones.” The merchant muses. “Poor Alnir here can’t wait for the day, I’m sure.”

“What will you do when you can no longer trade?” Dela asks. “In Sindal the elders form a council that assist as they can around town and make decisions. I hear in Ordor it’s cutthroat. People live on the streets surrounded by houses, but no one will let them in!”

“It’s not quite like that!” Dovri laughs. He stops as he thinks of what to say next. “...Perhaps that’s more accurate than I gave it credit for. Well, Ordor only has so much space within the walls. Most of the impoverished live outside the walls, and usually find a way to make meager but livable conditions.”

“It’s strange to me. Is that just how humans organize when you get enough of them in a place?”

“Melen and Dundyr have similar issues. Perhaps it is. Regardless, I don’t plan to live my life among the beggars. Trade needs to be facilitated in the city proper, and I pride myself on knowing all the intricacies of the Ordori economy.”

“So you’ll delegate others? A dealmaker?”

“Of sorts. When I can’t move as easily and Alnir is relaxing in her final years, I’ll start a company in Ordor. I have a few connections I can pull from.”

“What’s the point of it all? Surely you have enough to live comfortably for your aged years.”

“Oh, of course. I have enough to last for myself just fine. But Alnir needs a plot of land to roam and graze. She’s worked too hard to not be given heaven when she’s done.”

Dela smiles at the merchant’s surprisingly sweet goals.

“Perhaps you’re more honorable than I thought, Dovri. To be honest, when I first joined you, I expected another merchant chasing the coin.”

“Well, you’re not wrong in that aspect!” Dovri laughs.

“No--But at least you’ve got a goal!”

“I think you’d be surprised. There’s quite a few people in Ordor and Dundyr that seem to only want to maximize their luxury. But I’ve met just as many, if not more, that wish to better those around them. The question I’ve been battling with is how the latter turns into the former. The individual’s age certainly seems to play a part, if you get what I mean.”

“You don’t want that to happen to you, I see.” Dela tries to keep eye contact with Dovri, but he casts his to the ground.

“No. I’m terrified of it. I have to be, I suppose. As long as I’m terrified of the prospect, I shouldn’t find myself there. Many men I considered my better have fallen to this enemy, however.” Dovri furrows his brow. A while of silence passes. The air warms, and the two stop to rest through the day. Despite his assurance, Dovri immediately falls asleep. Dela rests in a sitting stance, keeping watch from under the tent. Before resting more deeply, she stuffs the stems of the collected rainflowers into a water sack. The day passes, and the rainvines that knot the ground begin to turn a light brown and shrivel. In the deeper valleys they stay a light green, but the high dunes are nearly back to the previous sandy exterior. Pollen fills the air as the flowers find their end nearing, desperately shooting out their hopeful half-progeny.

Dovri awakes at dusk with horrible allergies. He groans as he feels his stuffy nose plug up his sinuses, a pounding pressure growing in his head. Dela packs up the cart as Dovri’s body desperately fends off the mistaken attackers. They set off again, and Dela is able to point out a couple dangerous plants in the distance. Through watering eyes, Dovri is unable to discern them from the green and brown landscape. Dela has a hand on Alnir to help guide her away from the plants. The moonlight still proves weak, so progress slows during the night. Dela eventually has to hop on the cart and drive Alnir herself as Dovri’s head pounds too hard to see. The merchant lays in the back, drifting in and out of sleep through the night.

“Of all the dangerous plants, I wouldn’t have guessed the sweet flowers to do you in.” Dela hands him another water sack.

“Those flowers are of another kind. Devils!” Dovri groans, sitting up and sipping on the water. He takes a moment to gaze at Alnir. After a pause, he states, “She’s thin.”

Dela examines the donkey as well.

“Happens to all in Shiln. We’re one more day from Melen. Good on food and water, so I suppose we can treat her at the next rest.”

Dovri lays back down and the night passes, uneventful. At dawn they take an extended rest, Dovri’s sinuses finally clearing up. They feed Alnir plenty of fibrous mushrooms and even a few of the sliced treats. Dovri brushes her down while chatting with Dela.

“Well, I’ve told you my plans for the future. How about yours? Once you have a guardforce there in Sindal, you’ll be the leader.”

“Defend until I die. That’s about it.”

“No desire to see the world? You’re injured, but a fighter like you will have a long natural life.”

“Sindal is all I’ve known, and I feel an allegiance to the people there. I want to give back to them for raising me, saving my life, making me who I am.”

“I suppose I understand that. If I came in to immaculate wealth, I suppose I would give back to Ordor in some way as well.”

“What would you do?”  
  
 “Hm…” Dovri thinks to himself. “I suppose building more houses outside the walls. And just...Giving money to those that need it? I wonder if that would work.”

“Sounds altruistic, but I wonder the true effect.” Dela ponders as well.

“Mhm…It’s a tough problem. Something for leaders, not me, I suppose!” Dovri tries to lighten the mood.

The journey recommences as the sun begins to set. With their goal in sight, Dela and Dovri drink deeply from their water reserves and eat a feast of rations. The rainvines have shriveled nearly to nothing, leaving the ground mostly sand once more.

“The rainvines are the first to go. Now the gourds and thistles will appear in greater numbers.” Dela warns. “Keep an eye out in front of Alnir.”

The two sit on the cart together, watching the ground closely. Suddenly, Dovri cries out.

“Look! The horizon! That must be Melen!”

Indeed, far on the horizon a band of tan walls rises above the desert. Their form warbles and shimmers in the heat of the setting sun, and the two increase pace. A piercing bray shakes the two, and Alnir lurches forward. Dovri tries to calm her as Dela jumps off and walks beside her. The donkey kicks over and over, and a purple thistle can be seen grasped onto her lower leg.

“Can you get it?!” Dovri yells over the cries of pain, giving up on the reins, quickly tearing off a piece of cloth and handing it to Dela.

“I think so--” Dela says, reaching out under the frame of the cart around Alnir. Her first few attempts are thwarted by Alnir’s kicks, but with a huff of frustration she grabs onto the cart and swings forward, grabbing the thistle with the cloth. Alnir finally slows down, limping to a stop. Dela curses and throws the thistle with all her might into the distance. The thistle’s spines were sickeningly sharp, easily piercing the cloth. Her hand throbs with pain but she washes it with water and rummages through the cart. She produces a small vial of a dark green paste and uncorks it, pouring it on Alnir’s wound and rubbing it with her hurt hand. Dovri pets the donkey frantically and scratches her ears. The ointment sizzles, and both of the wounded wince in pain.

“Will that ointment work? How bad is the poison?” Dovri assails Dela with questions.

“The toxin causes panic, it burns like a-acid and makes you run until exhaustion--u-unless you use this antidote. The pain will persist, but, but the panic will fade...Soon.” Dela stutters out, her breathing irregular. Alnir kicks a few more times, pushing against Dovri in front of her. Dovri hugs her head and shushes her.

“Just lay down, honey. You’ll be alright. I’m so sorry.” Dovri’s eyes fill with tears, seeing his tortured companion. Dela sinks to the ground beside the cart, holding her hurt hand to her chest.

“It’s my f-fault, I’m sorry.” She whispers. Alnir huffs and puffs, her kicking stopping. The wild look begins to leave her eyes and she, too, lays down.

“It’s...Beginning to fade.” Dela unclenches her fist and sits back, focusing on her breathing.

“Do not take the fault alone, Dela. We will share it.” Dovri pets Alnir’s head as she brays, her breathing starting to slow as well. The group rests as night passes, the cold bringing some relief to the throbbing pain. Dela wraps her hand with cloth as Dovri does the same to Alnir’s foot. They watch as the horizon glows pinkish yellow from Melen’s luminosity. Rest comes to the group, the first night they’ve slept through in a week. Upon waking, Dela finds her hand mobile again. Alnir is standing, testing her leg, and Dovri is examining her.

“Will she be able to make it?” Dela asks.

“I think so. This desert sand is too difficult, though. She can’t put much pressure on it and will be off balance.” Dovri removes Alnir from the cart, tying her loosely to the side. “We’re going to have to pull it ourselves.”

Dela gets up and uses her good hand to lift the left side of the cart’s rack. She notices a determined glow in Dovri’s eyes that she hasn’t before. The man’s face is stern, nearing a scowl. He hefts the right side on his shoulder with a huff, and sets off.

“Watch Alnir, if she falls behind, we slow and check on her.” Dovri commands. Dela nods. Progress through the hot day is slow, and Dovri frequently looks over at Alnir. The cart moves at half the speed it usually does, Dela keeping an especially keen eye out for thistles and gourds. Dovri’s face has grown red, his clothes soaked with sweat, by the end of the day. Yet, he hefts the cart’s side once more after reapplying Alnir’s bandage.

“You should take it easy--” Dela tries.

“No. Alnir needs rest. She’s got less time than I do, even with this exertion.” Dovri wheezes out, his voice raspy.

“She’s only in pain, the wound isn’t life threatening.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean in the grander scheme. Like we talked about.”

Dela stares at Dovri for a moment, processing his point. She starts to say something, then stops, continuing to walk with the cart. Alnir does surprisingly well through the night, keeping a decent pace and only needing a few rests. Melen nears achingly slow, the walls’ enormity becoming clearer than ever. As dawn strikes across the landscape, the tops of the walls are painted pink and amber with sunlight. Dela stares at the magnificence, but her gaze is torn away by a low thump next to her. She turns and sees Dovri crumpled on the ground. He slowly brings his arms to the ground to push himself up, but shakes and falls once more.

“That’s enough, now.” Dela chides, picking the exhausted merchant up and placing him on the cart. “You went above and beyond. Let me handle my mistake now.”

“It’s not...We…” Dovri hisses through his dried lips. “Both...our fault.”

Dela continues on, keeping her eye on Alnir. The donkey seems to be steadily improving, and limping less now. As the heat of the day arrives, she takes a break to reapply her and Alnir’s bandages. Dovri wakes and sips a water sack, his blistered hands shaking. Dela gives him some rations, and tests his mental condition with a few eye tracking tests. He’s not delirious any more, but still suffering from exhaustion. She demands that he stay on the cart until they arrive in Melen. They should arrive by next morning. Dovri stays silent, disgruntled, but accepts.

The sun sets on the final day of the journey, and Dela lifts the cart again. She trudges along the fine desert sand, her muscles eventually beginning to scream out for rest. Alnir begins to outpace her at some points, even. Dovri sips more water throughout the night, falling in and out of sleep. A few times when he wakes, he sees Dela’s form wreathed in a deep violet light. She emits short bursts of sound, akin to a warrior’s cry when they release an attack, with every step. Dovri’s gaze falls upwards and he sees the wall towering into the sky. Suddenly, darkness overtakes him. After a moment, light envelopes him. Melen shines.

---

When Dovri next awakes, he’s laying on a cloud. His fists clench the material, and he realizes it’s something he nearly forgot the feeling of, a bed! He feels lethargic, but is able to lift himself. He’s in the same robes he was wearing during the trip, on a bed, in a small room made of sandstone. A deep blue rug adorns the floor and a shelf of stone juts out from the wall. Within, it has four deep impressions that hold food, drink, clothes, and miscellaneous belongings. After a moment of collecting himself, he gets up. He first partakes in the drink. Cool, fresh water. He had grown very used to the earthy taste imparted upon the water in the mushroom sacks. Dovri feels the cool drink flow down his throat and chest, more satisfied than he had ever been.

As he eats some of the meal--small bits of meat covered in a thick, sweet sauce, he hears a knock on the wall near his door.

“Come in!” He says, surprised at the hoarseness of his own voice. Dela shifts the curtain at the door to the side and steps in. Her hand is still bandaged, as are her legs. She strides into the room confidently, however, and embraces Dovri. The merchant is surprised, but hugs her back. Dela pulls away and gives him a light bump in the shoulder.

“You should be glad I’m not telling anyone in Sindal what you tried to pull. Far from praise, getting too stubborn and overexerting will lead to scorn! What you did was dangerous and unnecessary.” She wags her finger in Dovri’s face as he looks down. Dela takes a breath and checks Dovri’s leg. He’s got a scratch, but it’s not deep enough to be more than a slight pain. Dela grasps Dovri’s wrist and waits, counting his heartbeats. After a minute, she nods.

“You’re doing fine now, at least.” Dela sighs. “Almost disappointed I don’t have more of a reason to scold you!”

“I’m sorry, sorry.” Dovri says meekly. “That was pretty reckless, I agree…”

A quick moment passes as Dela crosses her arms and takes a breath.

“And yet, I’m still proud to see such gumption in a travel partner.” She grins.

“Ah well, I haven’t pulled something like that in years! Hopefully I won’t have to ever again.” Dovri chuckles. “Where is Alnir now?”

“I talked to the stablemaster, and was able to negotiate a tab. I also signed her on for an examination by a local horsemaster.

“And the cart?”

“Oh, I’ve been sleeping on it.” Dela laughs. “Getting you medical help left my purse empty.” Dovri’s eyes bulge out of his head.

“You spent your money? Wait--You had savings? No no no. I’m paying you back for this, I had enough to cover it!” Dela cackles at Dovri’s awe.

“Fine, fine! If it settles your mercantile ire!”

The two sit and eat, Dovri eventually venturing outside the den. He walks up a set of stairs to the main level of the tavern. Sunlight peeks through the short, wide windows. The plucking of stringed instruments fills the air as many people shuffle in and out of the tavern in the dying daylight. Dovri buys a map from the tavernkeep and exits to the cart with Dela. The two stop by Alnir, and Dovri has to doubletake at the stablemaster’s tab. Alnir receives pats and a quick examination of her leg, and the stablemaster informs them that the horsemaster will be arriving tomorrow morning.

Dovri sits on the cart and lays out the map of Melen. It’s marked with numerous shops and the owners’ names, as well as official buildings. The city looks very different from how Dovri remembers it years ago. A wide, central road runs north to south, and at its center is a large circular building with a slightly thinner road running east to west. After examining the district markings, Dovri purports that the shipbuilding companies in the north of the city would pay the highest price for the load of lumber. Dela nods as he riddles off their names and reputation. The night in Melen is lit with bright candles and myriad mirrors placed around them to spread their light. As the night grows later, the two turn in. Dovri pays for a room for Dela, and pays half a sum to a patron to guard his cart, promising the other half the next morning.

With his purse sorely beaten, Dovri falls asleep quickly and comfortably. In the morning, the two wake and reconvene out in the main level of the tavern. The area is bustling, Dovri being bumped by a few people in a rush. People grab food--Thin circular bread slices, rows of them stacked high--As the bartender rapidly marks down each person’s tab. Dovri and Dela order some breakfast from a barmaid, not wanting to put additional stress on the bartender.

Walking outside, they find the patron stayed true to his word, so Dovri gives him the last of his funds. The two pick up the rack of the cart and head towards the main street running north. As they come onto the street from the side, they’re assailed by a wave of bustling citizens. People from all over mix and mingle in the morning, heading to trades, jobs, travel. Eventually, the two make it to the center of Melen. A large fountain sprays a cooling mist into the air, and a tall, domed building rises behind it. The bustle is not as intense around the fountain, with everyday citizens making way for religious monks to conduct their daily prayer in the water.

The two head further north, and as the sun peers above the towering walls, the density of human bodies reduces drastically. Dovri and Dela soon see why, as the heat of the sun billows downwards into the gigantic bowl that the city forms. Sweating profusely, they arrive at the north docks. The smell assaults them first, rotting fish cooking in the sun’s heat. Carts twice the size of Dovri’s pass by, carried not by horses but by men. Fish are piled so high Dovri has to crane his neck to see the top of them. Dovri pulls out the map to examine their position, and redirects their course east to the first company.

The merchant hails a worker outside the multi-level building, and is directed to a room in the building’s ground floor. There, an elderly woman works at a stone desk surrounded by paper stacked several feet high. She peers out through thick glasses at the two entering the candlelit room.

“Hello,” Dovri starts. “We’ve come to trade.”

The secretary begins scribbling at high speed.

“Name?” She rasps.

“Dovri.”

“Goods?”  
  
 Dovri details the dimensions of the lumber, their origin, and numerous other specifics as the secretary rattles through them. Her quill scratches rapidly, and Dela watches in amazement at the two’s back-and-forth. The rapid scratching of the quill ceases suddenly, punctuated by a rip of paper. The secretary hands the torn sheet to Dovri.

“That’s the quote. Are you interested in completing this deal now?” The secretary asks, not looking up while rifling through a stack of paper.

“We’re going to shop around, but thank you.”

“Have a nice day, then.”

Dovri and Dela leave the building and heft the cart. The process is repeated for two other companies at the docks, with similar processes for each. Dovri then pulls the cart to the side of the road and examines his options.

“Well this is disturbing.” He frowns at the three sheafs of paper. Dela leans over to see.

“They’re all the same?” She asks.

“Indeed. That shouldn’t happen. Each shipbuilding company’s demands should be different depending on a million factors. Either there’s been government standardization of prices, or they’re colluding. Either way, these prices are way too low.”

“Huh. So...What’s next?”

“We figure out what’s going on!” Dovri smiles and jumps down from the cart. “I’d prefer to not believe illegal collusion is so rampant in this good city, so we’ll need to talk to officials about the situation.”

Dovri retrieves the map once again and looks it over. He notices that the government building that he had glossed over actually has a different name than the one he remembers.

“Dela, have you heard anything about a shift in government here in Melen?” He asks. “I’m sure you get some Melenites coming down from the desert.”

“Not much. What few we do receive enter Sindal, buy food and water, and depart on the same day. They’re not too talkative.”

“I suppose we should just ask them directly, then.”

The two lift the cart and head back to the fountain center. It’s midday, and the area is mildly populated. Day workers mill around eating thin breads filled with fish, clam, or seaweed, all rolled into a cone with paper around the end to hold. The cart turns towards the domed building and stops beside it, and the two enter. They’re greeted by a young man welcoming returning workers and everyday citizens in. The doors are kept wide open, in a way reminding Dovri of Ordor.

“Greetings! Can I assist you?” The man says, approaching the two.

“Yes, err...We’re travelers that haven’t been to Melen in a while. We haven’t heard what events have happened with the government in the past few years. Is there a resour--” Dovri is interrupted.

“Ahh, understandable! Many things have happened. We have a display detailing the fall of the Yut Monarchy and the fixing of Melen!” The greeter guides the two to a side room with a large placard and even larger paintings. “If you have any other questions after this, let me know!” He walks quickly back to his post to greet more citizens. The two walk over the polished stone floor, their steps echoing in the cavernous room. They approach the great metal sheet with the city’s story written upon it.

*For over one hundred years, the Yuts ruled over Melen.*

*Their success in defending the people from Elemental threats and forming this great city cannot be ignored.*

*However, as monarchy did, does, and will do, corruption seeped into the rulers.*

*Numvar Yut, the final son of the Yut name, instigated a trade war with the tribes of the north passage.*

*Melen suffered for three years.*

*With military might, the foolish king sought to heighten tensions with the tribes and expand the city into a kingdom.*

*A murderous empire.*

*Through blood he wished to further his power, and through blood came his fall.*

*He was cast from the throne by the citizens he scorned, and the throne itself was torn from its placement.*

*Unyo Ren led the force that dissolved the monarchy, and led the effort to fix Melen’s economy. May his name live on in reverence.*

*In democracy, the halls of this building are thrown open forever. Welcoming any and all citizens of Melen to attend to their government.*

*Blessed be the reign of the people.*

*Blessed be Unyo Ren.*

“A good tale, it sounds like the city is in better shape than it was!” Dela comments.

“A ‘fixed’ economy, indeed.” Scowled Dovri. “I don’t know how the people run the government, but whatever they’ve done may spell more economic trouble.”

Dela looks at him for a moment.

“Do you prefer monarchy, Dovri?” She asks slowly.

“I do believe that King Ruku leads Ordor well, better than any other Ordori could.” Dovri states. Dela is quiet, turning her gaze back to the walls, examining the paintings of the events described. A pause hangs in the air.

“At the same time, it’s killing him.” Dovri sighs.

“Is it the stress?” Dela inquires.

“Multitudes of stress. Elemental attacks, the ever-increasing population, nobles vying for position.” Dovri trails off. “I don’t know everything about it, but word gets around.”

“There’s some stress on the elders of Sindal. But some people are jealous of their position, getting to rest and lead.” Dela says.

“Leading seems hardly anything like rest to me. Even in the council system Sindal has.” Dovri looks over at a painting of Unyo Ren casting a doubly crowned demon down into an abyss. “You know, for a long time I thought monarchy was the only way for a long-term settlement to work, but seeing him degrade from the stresses makes me wonder. If all the best men rule, but die woefully young, is the government just a machine to kill the best?”

Dela looks over at him for a bit, then at the floor.

“Yet, this citizen-run stuff hasn’t made a great first impression...” He trails off with a scowl. “Ah, listen to me go on. Apologies.”

“Not a problem. I enjoy hearing your thoughts on these things. It’s all still foreign to me.” Dela assures the merchant.

The two walk out of the room and the greeter takes a moment to check on them.

“Do you have any other questions?” He asks.

“Is there any information on standardization of prices? Specifically lumber?” Dovri eyes the greeter differently with his new knowledge. Could he be one of the revolutionaries that tore down the throne? Murderers could be all around, in plain sight.

“Yes sir, let me contact a librarian.” The greeter walks down the hall and returns shortly with an older man in long gray and brown robes. He wears very thick glasses, somewhat denoting his position. The librarian takes the two to the mandate section of the library. Dark, polished stone forms bookshelves and many scrolls and bound books dot them. Vast amounts lay in the back on the floor, and Dovri can see many more down the length of the library.

“Excuse the mess, we’re in the process of reorganizing. You said you needed to see lumber import prices?” The librarian picks out a freshly bound book and cracks it open to flip through the pages. After a few moments, he lands on the page he wants. “Here you are, sir.”

Dovri examines the page, comparing to his quotes. The price certainly has been standardized, but his quotes lie far below the amount listed. He scoffs at the revelation.

“Is there anything else I can assist you with?” Asks the librarian.

“Certainly, I need to know how to report a couple of companies breaking standardization.” Dovri says, folding his arms.

The librarian refers the two to the financial wing, and after a bit of walking and getting lost, the two find the door. Within, many individuals scribble away quickly in a grid of tables. A secretary sits next to the door, and greets the two. Dovri explains their situation, and the secretary takes the quotes to examine them. He returns them to Dovri and leaves for a moment, returning with a well dressed man and explaining the quotes. The man wears a turban adorned with a gold oval, stamped with the seal of the city. His robes flow long behind him, and are alabaster white. He nods as he listens, then turns to Dovri.

“Hello, my name is Unva. I believe you are Dovri?” The two shake hands as Dovri nods. “Please accompany me to the companies you received these quotes from.”

Dovri and Dela carry the cart as Unva walks beside them. The sun grows low in the sky, and begins to sink behind Melen’s tall walls. With the evening comes the end of the work day, and the streets fill with people. Luckily, the group makes it to the dock before being trampled by the swathe. Upon entering the first company’s building, the secretary looks up and bolts out of her chair upon seeing Unva. She returns with a similarly dressed man, who introduces himself as head of financing. The two begin to talk, and talk, and talk. Dovri follows for a while, the discussion revolves around the wrong prices, but soon it grows out of his wheelhouse, into inter political ties and mistaken documents. Dela leans against the wall, trying not to fall asleep.

Dovri is knocked out of his dozing when Unva points a question at him. He pops back into wakefulness and asks him to repeat, apologizing.

“I said, does this price sound acceptable to you?” Dovri looks at the paper in front of him, and is surprised to see a much more reasonable price for the wood. It’s above the standardization price.

“Ah--Um. Yes, indeed it does! I will--I can take this deal?” He says, slightly confused.

“Indeed.” Assures Unva. The company head smiles, friendly, at Dovri. The merchant stares at him for a second before reaching out and shaking his hand. In a rush, the cart is unloaded by workers and a large pouch of coins is dropped into Dovri’s hands. He gets back to the cart, his head still spinning. Dela yawns and stretches, sitting next to him.

“So...What happened?” She asks.

“I uh...Okay, so we...We received low quotes, all the same. The standard price was much higher, so we got...A government official--Unva, to talk to the companies. And they...They received a wrong price? Or...Wait, and they…” Dovri struggles to coalesce the information.

“You got a good price though, right?” Dela leans over. “Sure looks like it.”

“Of course, I’d never take a bad deal!” Dovri laughs. “But...That seemed odd.”

The two sit for a moment while Dovri counts the coin and organizes his thoughts.

“As I said!” He erupts. “A fixed economy indeed! I see what happened now.”

“Hm?” Dela wakes up from dozing.

“They lowball the price with everyone, but you have to go through all that process to actually get the decent price! And there must be some law that they pay more for lowballing. But enough people don’t want to deal with the financial shenanigans and just accept the price!”

“Sounds like haggling.”

“It is! It’s haggling in this framework of politics, but obfuscated by this damned...Process!”

“No sense in complaining now, though. You got the money.”

Dovri acquiesces, pocketing the bag with a frustrated sigh. The two return to the tavern in the south of the city, fighting through crowds. Without the extra weight of the wood to press onwards, they’re tossed around like a raft in a storm. They eventually arrive, battered. The night is still young, as the tavern is filled with patrons cheering and singing with musicians. Dovri and Dela sit outside on the cart and discuss what to do next.

“Well, I’ll admit that I’ve no eye for a warrior.” Dovri says with a laugh. “So it’s up to you to choose the two to hire.”

“Understandable. To be honest, I’m just planning on going with gut instinct.” Dela grins.

“Hah! Well then, should we start looking in the tavern?”

“For warriors?!” Dela shares an incredulous look with Dovri before erupting into raucous laughter. “You think the best warriors are drinking in a den like that? No no--They’ll be on the walls, perhaps even out in the steppe around the city.”

“Oh…” Dovri’s face reddens. “Well, I told you that you were more knowledgeable!”

“It’s good you brought me along, hah!” Dela gives him a punch in the shoulder and hops off the cart. “Let’s rest for the night and explore the walls tomorrow.”

Dovri hops down as well, and the two eat a quick meal before launching into their beds. The mental and physical strain of the day catches up to them immediately, and sleep embraces them just as quick. Not even the clamorous feasting above could shake the two from their slumber. Only after the sun begins to rise and Dela’s instincts kick in does she shake off drowsiness and sit up. She wakes Dovri with some fuss. The two go up to the main level of the tavern and find the tavernkeep cooking the flatbreads for the day. They graciously grab two off of the growing pile. The burly tavernkeep turns and gives them a nod, his hands still working the dough rapidly. The morning is early enough that the streets are bare. The journey to the massive front gates is relatively unimpeded.

“Uh, hey there!” Dovri hails a guard standing at the gates. The guard turns and raises her hand in kind.

“Greetings. What can I help with?” The tan woman smiles.

“We need to hire two guards to return to Sindal with us.” Dela explains plainly. The guard nods and places her hand on her chin.

“S’pose you’ll need to talk to the captain. Not sure if he’s busy, but we can check. Follow me.” The guard turns and walks along the great wall. The trio enter a small building, no bigger than three rooms, jutting out of the wall. Dovri notes a fiery sigil above the door.

The walls inside are lined with books and scrolls. Weapons line the far wall, displayed in perfect condition. The captain looks up from his desk, and meets Dela’s stare. He is middle aged, with thick, full facial hair just beginning to gray. He wears no robe, only clad in tan, shiny cloth armor. Dovri introduces himself, as does Dela. The captain meets their gazes with a nod.

“My name is Riv.” He says in a deep voice, standing up and approaching the two. He stands as tall as Dela. His movement is slow and calculated, almost careful.

“We’ve come to hire two guards to return to Sindal. We need them to help train a guardforce.” Dela explains. Riv interlaces his fingers and his brow furrows slightly in thought.

“How long do you need their assistance?” Riv inquires.

“At least a year.” Dela says.

Riv holds his chin with his hand for a moment. He steps back to his desk and examines a sheet of paper, his fingers splayed out to hold it down. Eventually, he scribbles a note on another sheet and brings it back to the duo.

“For two of my guards, this is the price.”

Dovri’s eyebrows raise, and he nudges Dela to tell her it’s outside his range.

“Ah. Uhm...Is there a uh--A standardization? For this?” Dela chokes out, suddenly thrust into unfamiliar conversational waters.

“No, this is my price. The guardforce is no company.” Riv clarifies, frowning at their reaction. “I apologize if this is untenable. Much of the guardforce is needed at the moment. Between Elemental attacks and pirates…”

“Thank you, but we’ll have to politely decline, then.” Dovri says. The two turn to leave the room, Dela looking confused. Riv calls out to them.

“And what will Sindal do? With no guardforce?”

Dela and Dovri stop and turn back.

“I’ll return. And train them myself.” Dela says resolutely. Riv squints.

“Yet that’s what you were doing before you made the journey here, to Melen.” He muses. “Hold a moment, what happened to Sindal’s guardforce?”

Dela’s gaze falters and meets the ground.

“They were lost in battle. I’m the last one of them. We have new trainees, but I…” She says quietly. Riv keeps his stern look.

“I see. Not an uncommon situation, nowadays.” He says. “Here, I will help you.”

Dela looks up again, angrily.

“Now that I’ve told you my sob story? What do you take me for?”

“No, now that I have a clear idea of the situation. You come here not as Dela, but as a representative of Sindal. You are requesting aid, not hiring guards.” Riv taps his fingers on his desk to punctuate his words. “I will file this and get back to you with news of the commander’s decision tomorrow.”

Dela is taken aback as Riv walks back to his desk and begins scribbling away notes. He pauses to look up as the two stand awkwardly.

“I said tomorrow. Return here at this time tomorrow.”

“Right! Sorry, thank you!” Dovri says quickly, beginning to move to the exit.

“Ah--Yes, thank you.” Dela says, moving with Dovri. Riv looks down without comment.

The two begin to return to the tavern, unsure of what just happened. Dela repeats what Riv said, mulling it over. Dovri smiles as he puts it together.

“Not as Dela, but representing Sindal…” She mutters.

“By the gods, that’s great!” Dovri cheers. “Not just two guards, a whole group, a platoon? I forget the name. You’ll have an excess of assistance!”

“Really! Is Melen known for its army at all?” Dela brightens. “Any past extensions of aid?”

“Any city this large is sure to have a whole slew of guards on their force. As for past aid…They built a road up to the Dundyr mountains. They told Dundyr to finish it, having gone half the distance. Melen had the easier terrain, though. Dundyr can’t find a way past the peaks there--” Dovri rattles on and on, Dela eventually cutting him off.

“Well this is wonderful!” She cheers as well. “I’ll need to tell Mulu that we don’t even need to pay. And that if we need this again, just send me or someone else as a representative of Sindal!”

“Hmm…” Dovri suddenly looks thoughtful. “I still wonder, though, if they intend to require payment.” He seems vexed at the ease of this process. Dela stops her celebration to look at him, puzzled.

“The aid is coming, no matter what. We will pay whatever’s necessary to protect the village.” She asserts. Dovri nods, still musing.

The two arrive back at the tavern and have a meal. The day flies by as they talk with patrons and each other. Dovri voices continued concern, but Dela waves him off.

“I still worry that--” Dovri starts once more.

“There’s no point in worrying about it now. Again--Aid is coming. Whatever they want for payment, we can handle. It’s this or nothing.” Dela asserts. Dovri closes his mouth and turns, pouting a bit. Dela shrugs and goes to the bar.

A minute later, she returns with two glasses of dark wine. She sets them on the table and pushes one towards Dovri.

“I’m sorry, friend. Don’t mean to talk over you.” Dela apologizes.

“Thank you--It’s not that, though. Just…This nagging feeling that we’re missing something. Maybe it’s just me, though. Can’t shake the thought of worry…This could help, though.” Dovri accepts the apology and the gift, taking a swig. His face puckers from the sourness. Dela sips hers after laughing at Dovri’s face, spitting it out soon after.

“Undrinkable!” She coughs.

“I actually quite like it…Suppose you won’t mind if I drink yours?” Dovri asks.

“Please, yes.”

Revelry ensues, Dovri feeling his face redden as swelling tones of stringed and wind instruments embrace the tavern. He dances for a while, but quickly grows dizzy and requires Dela’s help to sit back down. He sneaks one more drink, that sour wine. By the time the revelry has ended, Dovri is swaying. As he eventually stumbles down the stairs and flops onto his bed, he briefly wonders what he should buy to fill his cart for the trip back down to Ordor. The grace of thought does not stay long, however, and the merchant passes out into a deep, snoring sleep.

Amorphous dreams assail the merchant, sometimes a reverie, sometimes an absolute bore. The final dream is a mad dash across the desert, a rumbling thunder chasing right on his heels. Just as the rain hits, Dovri wakes. Immediately, he is assailed with a terrible hangover. He shakily draws the covers over his head, but peeks from behind them as Dela knocks outside the entrance.

“Dovri, you awake?” She asks. No response. “Dovri--”

The sick merchant groans. Dela walks in, slowly putting the pieces together.

“Oh gods.” She groans in kind. “Would you get up?”

Dovri attempts to sit up, but the room decides to spin violently. Dela sticks out a hand to catch him before he tips over.

“I will never understand the partaking of alcohol, if it always ends up like this!” She scoffs, handing Dovri a cup of water. The sick merchant sips shakily.

“Reason will leave you just as soon as it touches your mind.” He mumbles.

“Well then, you should wrest it back!” Dela taps her foot as Dovri struggles to compose himself enough to exit the building. The merchant turns green, and stumbles over to the shelf for food to puke. Dela shudders. Dovri groans. Minutes turn into an hour.

“We need to meet with Riv today. Are you going to be able to make it?” Dela asks, barely trying to conceal her impatience. Dovri tries to turn but needs to double over again. After the fourth bout of vomiting, Dela leaves in a huff, stating that the time has nearly passed.

After a while of mixed moping and sickness, Dovri crawls back over to his bedside. He sips more water, sitting on the floor against the stone bed, and stares thoughtlessly as his body thrums with pain. The candle outside the entrance to his room is within his still gaze.

Slowly, a memory forms in the addled drunk’s mind. The thrumming pain, moving from his head to the rest of his body, begins to remind him of the crystals underneath Sindal. Vibrations in different ways, different forms. He imagines his Aura, frazzled and pulsing irregularly. The blurry sight of a purple-flamed Dela carrying the cart into Melen visits him again. Sleep encroaches on his vision as he falls to his side, snoring loudly.

When he awakes again, his head pounds just as much as before. He doesn’t feel the shakiness, at least. He lifts himself up and plops down on the bed, taking a few breaths. Worry about Dela plagues him. How long has it been? Did the discussion go well? Eventually, he fetches his quill and notebook, as well as the map of Melen, and tries to brainstorm what to buy for the return trip.

Setting aside funds for food and water for he and Dela, that leaves a good amount to buy goods. What could Ordor want that Melen has? The Ordori are as fond of Melenite food as the reverse, he’s sure. Metal and jewels come from Dundyr in greater numbers and quality. Perhaps oil? Melen produces an excess of fish oil from their food market. For lanterns, Ordor uses farmed plant extracts. Dovri flips through his notebook to look at the last prices he logged for Ordori oil. He pauses afterwards, realizing he has no quotes for oil in Melen. He’ll need to venture out of his room and network to try and figure that out.

Memories of the arduous process of getting a good value on goods flood back to him, and his headache bears its fangs once more, digging deep into his skull. Dovri falls back on his bed, his thought process ruined by the pain. Before he knows it, sleep has found him again. It does not stay long, however, as Dela taps him awake. Dovri winces, but hears no reprimands from the woman. He turns and opens his eyes to see a shocked and scared Dela. He sits up quickly.

“What’s wrong? Wait--What time is it?”

“It’s evening. I...Just got back from talking with the commander. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have gone alone.”

“You’re fine, I was in no shape to…”

Dela averts her gaze. “Things progressed quicker than I expected. Riv brought me to the commander to plead my case, and I did. I told him the situation and he seemed to understand.”

“Good! So when should we expect the aid to leave? I’m struggling to find what to buy--” Dovri gets up and flips through his notebook when Dela interrupts him.

“But, you were right. They asked for payment. I didn’t really understand before I had agreed.”

Dovri looks over at her, his smile fading.

“What did you promise?” He asks slowly.

“They assured me aid would be sent. The commander said right after, though, that Melen will accept Sindal as a vassal state, and asked me if that was correct. I paused, and Riv turned to me. I blurted out yes, and they scribbled away. I wasn’t sure what he meant. But--I knew we needed aid, above all else.” The warrior’s voice cracks.

“A vassal...You, he...Okay. This changes a lot.” Dovri stutters out, struggling to get a hold of the situation.

“Did I just sell Sindal?” Dela asks, choked.

“No, no. Its...Sindal’s situation is going to be different now. Uh--Let me see…” Dovri digs through his papers to find reference to a similar situation. “Um, well…Okay, so there’s a small village near the jungle by Ordor, the part that’s not in the barrier. They ran into food issues after the barrier formed, so Ordor signed an agreement to make them their vassal and send them food every few months.”

“What’s given in exchange?” Dela asks.

“Essentially, loyalty. But for you, it’s a bit different. They’re sending military aid to protect the village, so they’ll want either money or goods in return.”

“So…it’s like a trade agreement?”  
  
 “Sort of…But, I mean, are the elders in Sindal okay with this?”

Dela hesitates.

“To protect the village, they’d give anything. But...I know Mulu won’t be happy about losing independence like this...”

“Do you think you can go back and contest this?” Dovri asks, perking up.

“We need the aid. If I go back now and revoke the plea, what goodwill can I draw upon with Melen for aid?” Dela’s eyes fill with tears. She sits on the bed and wipes her eyes. Dovri sags and closes his notes.

“Well, what’s done is done, then. Did they say when their forces will embark?”

“In a week, they’ll be ready.”

“Got it.” Dovri scribbles a note down on his calendar. “In the meantime, I need to buy some goods to return to Ordor. That’s going to be taking up my time this week. Is there anything you need?”

Dela rubs her sore eyes and leans back, thinking.

“I don’t know what to do. I need to sleep.” She gets up and parts the curtain blocking the entrance to Dovri’s room. She turns, “Regardless of how this turned out, I want you to know that I appreciate your willingness to help. Thank you.”

Dovri sits on his bed in silence for a while. Eventually, he lays down, staring at the ceiling once again. His hangover is gone, and he guesses it must be late night by now. He shifts in bed, and makes a mental note to see Alnir tomorrow. With that, he falls to sleep. His dreams are vivid, rife with actions he had taken that very day. He dreams of sheafs of paper falling around him. He tries desperately to read what’s on the page, numbers and figures shifting on the page rendering his effort pointless. Next, he’s sitting at his desk, but in Ordor. He runs his hand over his fleeting hair as the drifting smell of incense wafts by his window. He holds his quill tight as he calculates cost benefit scenarios, but the paper seems to keep moving.

Suddenly, sleep seems to thrust Dovri out of her arms. The merchant sits up, groggy, and takes a sip of water. His head turns as a slip of paper floats down outside the dimly lit doorway. It slides just under his curtain, so he gets up to retrieve it. As he does, a gust flows down the hall, putting out the dim candles in a whuff. The paper flies down to the dead end, landing on a table holding two smoking candles. Dovri walks down slowly, feeling his way along the wall in the dim light. He retrieves the paper, but can’t read it in the darkness. Carefully, he steps back towards his room, holding the document tightly. His hand slides along the sandy rock wall, his feet shuffling lightly, the paper crinkling slightly.

Finally, he reaches the stairway. He ascends, and finds the tavern empty. Looking down at the paper, he sees wavering text, numbers, and images. At once it is the map of Melen, oil documentation, and words of a sentimental letter. Dovri looks up, and sees the massive, open space of the ravine. An ocean of air fills the murky depths, the cliffs seeming to soak up the sunlight. Dovri stands on the edge of the creaking bridge, wind gusting about him. He opens his mouth to speak, slowly taking a step back, and his eyes snap open. Sitting up, Dovri slowly comes to the conclusion that it was a dream. He feels his body, blinks a few times, and taps his feet to ensure he’s not still trapped in the reverie. His breathing slows, and he looks to his door to see no such paper laying beneath it. Once his wits are about him, he lays back down.

When morning comes, Dovri is awoken by Dela as per usual. He rubs his eyes as the warrior greets him.

“I’m planning to talk with some people around Melen.” She says.

“No objections here. Did you want me to come along?” Dovri asks.

“No, it’s okay. I need to get some things off my chest. Talking to you helps, but I need more opinions about…some of my thoughts here.” She explains. Dovri gives her a nod.

“I’ll be contacting the oil companies around town, and will be back at the tavern by sundown.”

Dela thanks him and takes her leave. Dovri gets ready for the day and heads to the stable. Alnir brays loudly when she sees Dovri, and the merchant embraces her head tenderly.

“I’m sorry I was gone for so long. Did you fare well?” He coos to her.

“Hooves are in great shape, especially after crossing the desert.” A voice comes from behind. Dovri turns to see a short young man wearing a tightly tied robe, two leather sacks hanging from his waist bulging with metal tools.

“You must be the horsemaster! It’s good to meet you. I didn’t expect you to still be around a day later.” Dovri greets him.

“Well met, sir! Name’s Tir. You’ve got a special donkey, there. Never seen one quite like her.”

“Ahah! I’m sure you say that to every patron, eh?”

“Not at all! You scorn me, sir!” The two share a laugh.

“Well, we’ll be heading back south across Shiln in a week.” Dovri says, giving Alnir a scratch behind the ears.

“A merchant, I see! She’ll be ready, I assure you that. Say, care to tell me the secret as to how you kept her hooves so safe? Most people that take horses across the desert end up with worn down hooves that are all off balance. Alnir’s were in great shape in comparison!”

“Ah, that was these mushrooms my guide from Sindal used.”

The horsemaster erupts into laughter, his toolbelt jangling as he wheezes.

“Quite the funny bone in ya, huh? I’m serious though, I’d like to know! Don’t tell me it’s proprietary, now.”

“No no--Haha! I realize how bizarre it sounds, but it’s true! In Sindal they have these huge mushrooms, they’re as hard as leather! She stuck them on Alnir’s hooves and the rough underside gripped the sand.”

The horsemaster squints. “How’d they get it to stick?”

“Slime from the slugs--” Dovri is interrupted by more boisterous laughter. He frowns. “I’m really serious, what would I gain by lying to ya here?!”

“No no,” The horsemaster says, wiping an eye. “You just gotta realize I’m sitting here, wondering how this donkey’s hooves survived the desert, and you so easily go on about mushrooms and slime! It’s such a funny image!”

Dovri waits for Tir to recompose himself.

“Well, tell me sir. Do you have a sample of this mushroom? Or the adhesive?” A serious tone overtakes Tir’s voice as he recovers.

“Ah, no, I’m sorry sir. They wore out and we tossed them in the final stretch here. Alnir was jabbed by a thistle, that’s what that wound there is.”

“Mm! I see. I noticed a wound on her leg there, and some strange green residue.”

“That was the antidote to the poison.”

“Gotcha, right. Well it sounds to me like I need someone to go down to Sindal and grab me some of those mushrooms! Oh, and slime!”

Dovri blinks at the man as he waits.

“Oh! Uh, yes, I could. Wait...No, I’m sorry, when I get back to Sindal I have some pressing matters to attend to, and I have to get back to Ordor.”

The horsemaster frowns at this, and offers a more than reasonable payment. Dovri shakes his head and shows his palm.

“I’m quite sorry, but you’ll need to find another merchant. I don’t think Alnir or I could handle another trip across Shiln so soon.”

Tir nods, understanding but disappointed.

“I understand, the desert isn’t for everyone. There’s a reason I’d never heard of this technique, hah! I appreciate you sharing that with me though, it’s fascinating!”

“Absolutely! Enjoyed the talk!” Dovri waves as Tir takes his leave.

Dovri sighs. It seems every last citizen of Melen is business focused. The merchant prides himself on being business savvy, but it appears this city is in a whole other league. As he feeds Alnir and brushes her, he grows nostalgic for Ordor. The cooling breeze of fall, sweet smells and sights. Oh, to see the forests glow with myriad reds and yellows, oranges and browns. The coziness of winter, huddled away in the tavern sipping on steaming cocoa as the blustery winter winds coat the houses with a light and fluffy snow.

“You must desperately want to get back to Ordor’s fall.” Dovri notes as the brush carries a notable amount of hair from Alnir’s back. The donkey flaps her ears. After a few more minutes of care, Dovri replaces the brush and feedbag in Alnir’s stall.

“I’ll be back tonight, darlin!” Dovri pats her and she shakes her head as he leaves. Taking out his map, he examines the oil companies. He heads north to the nearest one, pushing through crowds. The oil companies are clustered just south of the docks, and fish parts not used for food are brought in daily for processing. Dovri was prepared for the smell, but he didn’t realize it’d be this bad. He chokes as tears well in his eyes. He quickly plugs his nose, entering one of the buildings. No secretary rests near the entrance, but the room is filled with boxes of fish guts on wheels, and workers deftly slicing and separating the usable from the unusable. Dovri approaches one of the workers, fighting the urge to gag.

“Excuse me, could I talk to someone about buying some oil?”

The worker stares at him for a moment, before laughing.

“You must be lost, the oil shops are near the city center--Near the fountain.”

Dovri mimes the stare.

“No, no I want to buy oil directly. I’m a merchant.”

The worker shrugs and yells a name to the back of the room. A slightly better dressed man walks down the aisle of gore and greets Dovri. The merchant explains his desire to buy oil, but the manager shakes his head.

“I am sorry, friend. We do not sell oil directly, we sell to Virin’s store near the fountain square. This is part of our contract with him.”

Dovri frowns. More obfuscation.

“Alright, then. I’ll take my business elsewhere.” He turns to walk out the door, but the manager calls out.

“It is mandated that oil companies have deals with retail sellers of lanterns, you know.”

Dovri stops for a moment, then continues on his way, grumbling. He returns to the fountain square, and as per usual, the monks are praying in the waters. Dovri presumes their prayer is mandated, as well! Thoroughly annoyed, he makes his way to a small store labeled Virin’s Oils. Tossing the curtain at the door aside, he strides in to find a casual, relaxed mood within. A handful of customers are browsing the different qualities of oil, examining lanterns, and chatting with the man behind the counter, whom Dovri assumes is Virin. The square-faced man has well-trimmed, pitch black facial hair. His eyes glint in the candlelight, and his mouth runs a mile a minute. Dovri avoids the man and goes straight to the jars of oil, examining their prices. He can barely keep his jaw from dropping.

Virin must have noticed Dovri’s sticker shock, as the man walks over and greets him.

“May I assist you on this fine day?” Virin cheerfully smiles.

“Ah, yes uhm...My name’s Dovri. I’m from Ordor, looking to buy some oil to sell there.”

“Ahh, a merchant! Come with me, please.” Virin walks behind a curtain made of glass beads to an office, and Dovri follows, confused and a bit suspicious. “Apologies if you went to the oil company first, the smell there is atrocious, I know.”

“Hah! You’re not wrong there.” Dovri takes a look around the room. It’s rather dimly lit, except for one corner. An L-shaped table rises from the floor, carved from stone and polished to a shine. Three lanterns hang from the wall enclosed by the desk. The rest of the room is apparently storage for documents, with piles of paper rising nearly to Dovri’s chest. Virin digs through a smaller pile on his desk and produces a copy of a trade agreement.

“Here we are.” Virin sits down beside his desk and leans on his hand, filling out the necessary info. He slides the document nearer to Dovri and scribbles a handful of prices on it. “Are these prices acceptable? And, what grade of oil would you prefer?”

Dovri peers at the document, and finds the prices indeed are much more reasonable. He decides on a medium grade of oil, the price being slightly lower in proportion to the others. Virin fills out the rest of the information, Dovri’s cart size, and the projected date of delivery. After signing, Dovri exits the building, a bit frazzled. He wonders to himself, how much of a cut Virin is taking from the oil. He shoves those troubling thoughts from his mind. In the past they’ve done nothing but stress him. He knows the price of oil in Ordor is much higher, and he’ll end up with a profit. He even has some gold leftover from the purchase.

The day is still young, the sun just starting to descend from noon. Dovri thinks about what to do with the rest of his time. Rations and water are first to his mind. He decides to travel to the food stalls and see what long-lasting food they have for sale. In the mid-afternoon heat, the area is nearly vacant. Some stalls stand closed, while the owners of others simply languish in the boiling air, fanning themselves. Dovri examines some of the food. Salty, dried fish dominates most of the market, as it is left unbothered by rot in the daily heat. The Ordori merchant has not found comfort in the fish based food as easily as he had hoped, though. The fishy taste stains his mouth, leaving the scent tickling his nose from behind for hours. Not the most pleasant, especially coupled with sickening heat. There’s dried seaweed goods, paired with very thin breads in various shapes. Those are fine tasting, but not filling at all. Rich bone broths would go bad within a day without being kept at a boil. Reluctantly, Dovri begins examining some cuts of fish. He buys a few samples and tastes them. Some are revolting, but some of the filets are surprisingly tasty. They forgo the horribly slimy texture for one more similar to meats Dovri is used to, stringy almost. However, a few minutes after tasting, Dovri finds himself parched. To bring rations of dried fish, it seems he would need to bring twice as much water!

As evening falls, the sun nearing the wall’s brim, the streets fill with hungry workers looking for dinner. Many more stalls open, and Dovri is presented with a vastly increased slew of options. Notably, bread! Given the rarity of water, Melenite breads are dry, thin, and cracker-like. Many are salted heavily, with a slew of spices on and inside them. Dovri eventually finds a stall selling more suitable breads for travel. The crackers are very dry, but contain little salt and are still spiced! Dovri buys two boxes of the stuff, and signs that he will return in two days. Twilight fully blankets the city as the sun hides behind the walls, and Dovri rushes back to the tavern, dodging the growing crowds. Water will have to wait for the next day, it seems.

Pushing past the curtain in front of the tavern’s door, Dovri is greeted with a familiar jovial vibe. Stringed instruments are strummed rapidly and citizens shed their working personas to revel freely. Dovri spots Dela, and makes his way towards her. She sits at the bar, talking to a woman clad in leather. The Melenite woman has her rough, black hair tied back tightly, and formed into a bun. Her eyes are surrounded by dark makeup, making them strike distinctively. Dovri stops as her eyes flash to him and Dela’s follow.

“Dovri! Good to see you.” Dela greets him warmly. “This is Fon.”

“Nice to meet you, Dovri.” Fon gets up and reaches out a hand. Dovri shakes it, surprised at how quickly Dela’s mood seemed to have improved.

“Good to meet you too! Are you one of Melen’s guardforce?” He asks.

“I am! Dela and I met when she dived in on the Fire Elemental I was fighting.”

Dovri’s eyes widen, shocked that such a battle was brought up so casually.

“Saved your hide, I’ll bet.” Dela points, her other hand holding a glass of water.

“I’ll never tell!” Fon laughs.

“So, did you find goods to buy, Dovri?” Dela leans forward.

“Indeed I did! Found a good price for lantern oil. It’s sorely needed in Ordor.” Dovri croons proudly.

“Ahh, an Ordori! A lot of your kind make it up here, but not through Shiln! Most of ‘em come through Dundyr. Any reason in particular you decided to make the trek the long way?” Fon seems intrigued.

“I had actually just visited Dundyr, picked up some tools to sell in Ordor. On the way back, a pack of Nature Elementals attacked my cart. Decided I wouldn’t go back that way, so north to Sindal and Melen it was! Also, I had some damp lumber that needed to dry out in the desert heat.”

“Damned Elementals have grown quite brave recently.” Fon nods. “We used to only see one violent one a week, now it’s nearly every night one wanders near the city.”

“Is it mostly Fire Elementals here?” Dovri asks.

“Aye, mostly Fire. We did see one or two Earth Elementals, though. I’ve never seen a Nature Elemental myself. I hear they’re weak alone, but in a group they can cause some damage?”

“If they get their eyes on you without a fire nearby, you’ll be chased as fast as you can run, that’s for sure.” Dovri laughs, slightly nervously. Fon’s eyes light up, and the air around her shimmers briefly.

“Ahhh! I’d love to send some of them burning away! Fire Elementals are no fun for me. I have to burn so hot, hotter than them, to actually do any damage. It takes it outta me, y’know?”

“Ah, yeah.” Dovri nods along, not quite following. “Do you use a weapon?”

“Naah, never picked up on any. Captain says most fire users opt for fists anyway! Any metal I heat up wouldn’t be too easy to hold, yea?”

“Suppose that makes sense.” Dovri turns his head at a clatter. The tavernkeep has thrown aside a chair to perform an arm wrestle with a local. The two muscled men strain, the table creaking under their pressure. Fon cheers for the tavernkeep, stomping her foot in time with the crowd surrounding them, her wine spilling about. Dovri looks at Dela, whose grin transforms into a laugh at the merchant’s bewildered look. A few patrons whip out their strings and begin plucking a rapid tune, increasing even in tempo as the competitors’ faces redden.

Dovri orders a meal and a drink--Opting out of the wine, this time. With a blasting yell, the tavernkeep slams the patron’s hand to the splintering table, and stands up with the following cheer. The tavernkeep pours himself a mug of clear alcohol and chugs the whole thing, roaring after draining the cup. Dovri meekly eats his meal of bread and fish as the raucous crowd intensifies. The band takes center stage now, competing to play a verse faster than each other in rising succession. Dela sits down next to Dovri, and asks if he’s alright.

“I’m fine--truly. I’m just going to finish my meal and go to bed. Fon seems nice!”

Dela grins with his assurance.

“She is! Meeting some of the guards helped put my mind to rest. If these people will be protecting Sindal, I think I made the right choice. Sorry the tavern’s a bit wild tonight, there was a big battle. Apparently the guardforce likes to celebrate after them. Get some rest, mate!” She pats him on the back and pushes through the crowd back over to Fon. Dovri smiles, his mind similarly de-stressed. After finishing his plate, a part of his mind tugs for him to partake in the revelry, but the memory of the hangover is far too young. He pushes down the desire and makes his way to the stairway down to the bedrooms. Taking a quick note, he marks down how much was spent on the oil, and when to pick it up. Exhausted, he wonders if buying water will be similarly complex.

The next morning, Dovri awakens feeling greatly refreshed. An unusually cool breeze has swept over his room. After getting dressed, he finds the cool air has inundated the tavern and the outside air as well. Dela is already up, drinking some bone broth in the tavern. She looks over at Dovri and greets him good morning.

“A chill day in Melen. This city holds no end to its surprises!” Dovri sighs in the cool air, filled with nostalgia for Ordor.

“Indeed. The tavernkeep told me this happens once or twice a year, when the winds from the sea twist south. The city is preparing for a festival in the fountain square.”

“Huh. Maybe I’ll swing by there to see what this holiday is all about.” Dovri sits down next to Dela and orders some broth for himself. “How are you feeling about Sindal’s situation?”

Dela stares at her steaming broth for a while. Dovri sips his, pulling out his map of Melen to examine where to buy water.

“I think...I’m more okay with it. I think Mulu will understand.” Dela shares quietly. Dovri huffs and turns.

“I think so, too. But I’m still put off by the way they got you to agree. Trickery.” He frowns and takes another sip. “They must have wanted Sindal for a while, hm? You ever get representatives down there asking to make you all a vassal?”

“Once, relatively recently. I was still recovering from my injury, but I heard stories that a group of men in immaculate robes came from Shiln, introduced themselves as liaisons from Melen. Must have been when the monarchy fell and the government reformed. They must have begun to look southward once that happened.”

The two sit in silence for a few minutes, slowly sipping their meals. Dovri pushes his empty cup away, then pats Dela on the back.

“I’m gonna head out. I’ll be back here by tonight.”

“Sounds good. I’m going to be with Fon for the day.”

“She’s a raucous one, that! Be safe, hah!”

“Indeed! But what she lacks in subtlety she makes up for in passion.”

Dovri takes his leave, walking out into the cool air. The sky still hangs clear, the sun shining warmly down onto the waking city. Dovri basks in the gentle warmth, reminding himself of Ordori springtime. There, the skies finally begin to clear after the long winter, and the sun bathes the landscape in lifegiving heat. The nurturing warmth raises the foliage from its deep slumber, and they pass the gift on to the animals. The short cool period in Melen seems to be cause for great celebration, as Dovri sees people discarding their robes for thin two-piece clothing, and dancing to wind instruments in packs on the street. As he nears the fountain, he sees the festivities fully. Colorful bands of cloth are strewn across the buildings surrounding the fountain, forming a curtain of rainbow colors on the plaza. People revel in the fountain, splashing wildly.

Dovri takes off his robe as well, folding it under his arm, and simply wears his shirt and overalls. He’s splashed with water, but isn’t too perturbed. It’s a holiday, he reasons. No need to scorn their fun. Besides, he gets to splash them back! The merchant passes by the food stalls, all closed surprisingly early. On the far west side of the city, there’s a government complex that deals with water. Dovri walks in, and is greeted by a woman at the door. He explains he wishes to buy water for a trip across Shiln, and the greeter guides him to a desk.

“Here is the price per bottle.” She says, sliding a piece of paper across the desk. Dovri sighs in relief.

“That is acceptable. I’ll need two cases.” He signs the paper and slides it back. “When should the order be ready?”

“Apologies, but it won’t be until midday tomorrow. We take off for Mele’s Blessing this afternoon.”

“That works just fine, thank you! ...Say, what are the festivities planned for this evening? I’ve never been during this holiday.”

“Oh! There will be a feast in the fountain plaza. Fruits of all kinds are imported for this day, and all food and water at the feast are free for the night. The monks of Mele will be crafting ice, as well.”

“Sounds like a grand time! I may see you there!” Dovri waves as he leaves, the secretary waving back and affirming the notion.

Dovri takes a look at the angle of the sun, finding it not to be that late yet. He decides to try something he hasn’t yet, taking a walk around the city. Already near the western wall, he finds many other people with the same idea. He takes his time as he climbs the numerous stairs near the western gate to the top of the wall. He thanks the gods for the cool air, for on an average day in Melen he would have passed out from the arduous climb. The view from the top is immaculate, and well worth the aching in his legs. For miles the desert stretches, dotted with small pockets of trees. Tall, arcing, black stone pillars jut from the sand in some places as well. Some are taller than Melen’s walls! But as he turns north the rolling yellow wastes are suddenly interrupted by the clear, blue sea. A line of green stretches along the shoreline, demarcating where one extreme changes into another.

The merchant follows the stream of people moving south along the wall, taking in the vast desert and equally vast ocean. Once in a while, a warm breeze will wash up along the wall, kicking dust into the city. Soon after, the cool air in the basin of the city presses back, pressing the dust along the inside of the wall. Far down below, Dovri can see guards patrolling. A unit is heading in the same direction as they are, carrying extra weapons. Looking further on, Dovri can see a group of people leaning over the side of the wall. Hurrying along, the merchant peers over the side as well.

A mass of rock and sand is pounding at the wall just below him, and he can feel the rumble resonating up along it. The beast is wholly composed of stone, rocks of many sizes held loosely together with sand. Two glowing, angry eyes are inset on what could be the head. The Elemental digs the jagged stone making up its arms into the wall, digging away at it. Guards band together around to pull it away from the wall, tipping it over onto the ground. The Earth Elemental creates a cloud of dust as it rights itself, the stones making up its body rumbling and cracking. Its eyes can be seen to glow even through the gloom of the dust. In an instant, the dust implodes to the golem, sticking tightly to its body in a show of unparalleled control over the earth. Fon and Dela appear, running along the wall. They join with the guards and receive information on the situation. A few guards initiate hand-to-hand combat with the Elemental, attempting to smash the rocks making up its arms. The aggressor attempts to swipe at them, but the Melenite warriors dodge with ease.

The crowd atop the wall screams as numerous explosions of dust arise around the guardforce. Dovri can feel the tremors in his feet. Below, four more Earth Elementals are rearing their heads. One of them is knocked over by a fireball that blasts through its torso. The flaming ball slows and stops, revealing Fon regaining her footing on the ground. Dela dances around another Elemental, baiting its hits and slashing deep cuts into its stony arms with her spear in counterattack. She manages to immobilize the target, and the crystal atop her spear begins to glow, starlike.

The sand beneath her flows and gives way suddenly, and she falls backwards. Fon yells out and blasts with flame to her aid. As the wounded Elemental raises its arm, ready to strike at the off balance Dela, Fon increases her fire to new levels. She impacts the stone and roars as she grabs hold of the arm of the Elemental, landing with a skid. Dela gets up and stabs her glowing spear deep into the torso of the tipping Elemental, twisting it rapidly. The purple glow slowly spreads through the beast’s form, and it begins to shake and destabilize. Fon holds its arm down, burning brightly, until it finally collapses to rubble.

Other guards compete with the Elementals in similarly tight battles, using their numbers and coordinated use of attacks to immobilize, destabilize, and crush the Earth Elementals. Fon cheers as she approaches Dela, the two gripping hands in mutual respect. They move to support the other groups, but they seem to have everything under control. A scouting unit tests the area by raising and lowering pillars of earth, trying to wake up any other Elementals that could be lying in wait. Dovri gasps inward as he realizes he was holding his breath, and suddenly can hear the crowd around him chattering and cheering at the success. Dela and Fon part ways as the latter moves back to her rank, and Dela heads to the gate.

Dovri moves away from the wall and begins walking along with the citizens again, now moving east along the south side of the wall. There seems to have been a fight with a Fire Elemental, as smoke rises from a charred site a ways away from the wall. This battle did not go as cleanly. Guards with missing limbs are carried away by medics, while others stumble away from the burning wreckage of the Elemental. The sight is gruesome. Many guards bear painful burns on chunks of their bodies. Dovri turns to look away as one guard pulls the charred corpse of a friend towards a medic, begging them to help. It’s too much, and he hurries along. He can’t help but imagine Dela or Fon in that situation. He wonders if King Ruku ever went through that in his battles in Rutyr, before the barrier formed.

Dovri has heard speculation that emotion has a lot to do with using elemental energy. He wonders, then, what that would imply about the Elementals, made wholly of such energy. They certainly seem enraged. Is rage all they are? Dovri comes to the east side of the wall, made apparent by the distant mountains. They stand colored blue, nearly the same as the sky, but slightly darker. After admiring the spectacle and looking once more towards the ocean, Dovri descends the stairs of the wall. The festivities seem to rise to meet him as he reenters the city.

As the shadow of the western wall creeps across the city, the cool wind turns into a chill gust. Following the shadow, lights appear in a wave, floating up and out of the city. Squinting, Dovri can make them out for what they are: paper! He surmises they must have an oil burner within. The outsides are decorated with myriad colors and pictures, and the shapes vary widely. Perhaps this was why Virin’s oils available to the citizens were so expensive. Dovri passes a few families in the street, their children cheering as the paper lanterns take flight. The parents look proudly on, and some begin to dance as other members play music.

Dovri nears the fountain plaza, and passes by a few stalls. They sell colored glass bottles for what the merchant would consider inflammatory prices. The children seem to love them, though, as exasperated parents treat them to the merchandise. Suddenly, the alley opens into the fountain plaza in its full glory. The net of ribbons has formed a complete casing over the plaza, keeping the air within pleasantly warm. Revelry abounds. Citizens have forgone their regular tan robes and brown leather overclothes for colorful, patterned robes that flow long and twirl in the air. Several bands play on the outside ring of the plaza, surrounded by rapid dancers. Inside of them lie two rings of stalls, with a ring of tables set between them. Cityfolk get food and drink from the stalls, then sit at the tables to feast with their kin. As Dovri passes by the stall ring, he briefly catches sight of hurrying feet transporting food from shops to the stalls.

Past the inner stall ring lies the fountain itself, completely packed with people of all ages dancing and splashing to the reverberant music. Dovri can’t help but laugh with the people, their joy is infectious. His hunger overrides his desire to dance, however. He picks up a plate of multicolored breads, filled with a thick sugary sauce. No drinks are available except pure water, but served in many different colored glasses. Why, Dovri wonders, would you buy the multicolored glasses just outside the festival when you could just use some for free inside? Since he feels especially worn out from his extensive walk, he also picks up a plate of thinly sliced fish, rolled around wooden sticks to make a spiral.

Carrying his load, the merchant surveys the area for familiar faces. He hopes Dela and Fon are able to make it. He decides to eat first and sate his aching belly, then do a lap to look for them. Strange fruits line the table all around, and Dovri sees many people taking slices and squeezing them into their water. He decides to do the same, sniffing a few until he finds a scent he likes. A bright, vibrant taste that’s a bit sour. It pairs fantastically with the fish, but somewhat overrides the taste of the sweetbread. Still, though, he is overwhelmed by the quality of the food. This certainly seems to be when Melen goes all out. Perhaps they have fewer festivals than Ordor does, so the revelry is packed more tightly into a smaller space.

Filled enough for his first helping, Dovri gets up and begins walking clockwise around the ring. He looks out for Dela and Fon’s stature, as well as listening for Fon’s boisterous voice. The going is rather slow, as the area is packed with revelers. The people eat as if they’ve fasted all day, and Dovri realizes they must have. All the food stalls were closed during his trip. With a shock, Dovri realizes he, too, fasted the day away. Suddenly, a familiar voice cries out in amazement. It sounded like it came from the other side of the fountain, so Dovri heads towards the center of the plaza. Rounding the fountain, he’s splashed by many revelers, and returns the favor in kind.

A massive block of ice comes into view, with a ring of people encircling it. They are denoted by their deep blue robes, and they smoothly move in formation. Dovri sees Fon and Dela in a crowd nearby, watching. A citizen robed in cerulean steps up to the block of ice while the others back to the crowd. The leader, Dovri supposes, has a golden signet on the forefront of his robe. With a flourish of his robe, the block of ice caves in. Another wave, and a different part compacts. The leader continues with strong, distinct gestures, the ice sometimes flowing with him, other times cracking and shearing off. As chunks fall, the other blue robes melt them instantly, causing a splash as they impact the ground. The leader grabs some of the droplets flying in, and incorporates them into the statue as tiny pebbles of ice.

Dovri slowly circles towards the crowd, staying out of the way as the feat continues. The sculpture begins to form the shape of a man pulling on a rope, straining with all his might, laying his whole being upon pulling down. The leader hastens as the ice softens, the followers aiding him by re-freezing sections that have begun to melt. The impacts of the ice are less now, but the leader’s movements are just as energetic. Features like the texture on the rope and the man’s face, as well as his flowing robe and the cragged ground he stands upon, begin to take form. The crowd cheers with a name: Unyo Ren! The leader raises his voice, calling to others. With a pounce forward, four robed individuals lift upwards. Water spouts from the ground, lifting the gargantuan statue. The leader finely controls the flows as the statue raises. The fountain’s water is pulled into the effort, and in a flash a pillar of ice forms in the center of the upward flow. The statue stands atop the fountain, suspended by the cool water. The robed figures move out to be equidistant along the fountain’s rim, and enter a praying position.

It’s then that Dovri realizes these are the monks he’s been seeing. They must practice all year for such a show. Atop the fountain, the statue stands strong. Unyo Ren pulls a rope with all his might, myriad hands reaching from outside to assist him. The ground he stands upon cracks with the force of their combined effort. It truly is a spectacle. Dela taps him and he turns, greeting her warmly.

“Dela! Fon! It’s wonderful to see you. I took a walk along the wall and saw the battle with the Earth Elementals.”

“You saw that? I’m so embarrassed, damn!” Dela grins. “I’m not used to fighting Earth Elementals. I only had one plan of action, and no clue what they could pull off. Fon really saved my hide.”

“Ahh, don’t beat yourself up anymore! Earth Elementals are right bastards.” Fon spits. “They never know when to quit, at least a Fire Elemental will collapse once you smash it’s bones!”

“You certainly seemed to uh...Stab it good!” Dovri says supportively. “When it started glowing and fell apart?”

“Ah, yeah that was Fon’s idea. Before we went out, she said if I can’t blow big enough holes in the Elementals to make them collapse, I’d be best off using my weapon to destabilize their forms. Right she was!”

“Takes it out of me like no other, trying to burst through those damned rockslides. I can’t fireball much like that.” Fon admits. “Captain always says I need to hone my control. But why should I when I’ve got good pals like Dela to do that part for me? Ha!”

“My control’s still nothing compared to those guys.” Dela refers to the monks keeping the icy statue in shape. “They’re on a whole other level.”

“Mhm. It’s one thing to make ice, that’ll take it out of ya. It’s another to keep it frozen in conditions like this--and then shape it? The monks of Mele are the pride of Melen!” Fon proudly proclaims.

“Fon, I meant to ask you.” Dovri says. “Are you part of the force coming south to assist Sindal?”

“Yes!” Fon jumps in excitement. “I’m going to put in an application to live in Sindal, even. I’ve heard tales of the crystals there, and the mushrooms? So cool!”

Dela smiles, clearly being the one to regale such tales to her. Dovri grins as well. The three band together and go to eat another meal. Dovri acquires more bread-based foods, this time more savory than sweet. Sheets of dough fried until pockmarked with char, served with a thick and rich fish sauce. Dela sits with a plate of skewered fish, freshly caught and cooked over fire. Fon arrives at the table with a plate stacked high with clams, and three cups of different colored sauces. The Melenite warrior is none too bashful about snapping open the clams and digging out their insides. Dovri decides to talk to Dela instead of facing the brunt of Fon’s violent feast.

“I’ve got rations and water fully sorted out. The cart will be loaded up tomorrow, and we can head out the day after. I assume you want to get to Sindal before the troops, right?”

“Yes, that’d probably be best. Melenite troops arriving in Sindal with little prior notice could cause a scuffle.” Dela agrees.

Dovri casts a look to his side. Leaning across the table, he whispers to Dela.

“Is Fon coming with us on our trip? Or with the troops?” Dovri asks eagerly. Dela smiles and speaks frankly.

“No, she must stay with the troops until she arrives in Sindal. That’s when she’s planning to put in her request to be permanently stationed there.” Fon perks up and clatters clamshells out of the way.

“I can’t wait!” She cries out. “I love Melen, but Sindal sounds even better! It’s a mix of both the desert life and southern Nevorian life! I want to see Ordor once, too. I hear they eat some sort of yellow bug?”

Dovri raises an eyebrow at the accusation. He thinks for a moment, before chuckling to himself.

“Do you mean honey?” He laughs. “No, no, we just eat what they spit up!”

The look on Fon’s face causes both Dela and Dovri to cackle. The group wander around the circle after finishing eating, nabbing snacks here and there as the festival winds down. The moon shines brightly overhead, and bizarrely quickly the chill begins to lift. Southern winds gust over the walls and bring dry warmth. With the pleasant warmth comes a pleasant drowsiness to all staying up so late. Fon takes her leave, heading back to the barracks and wishes them luck on their journey south. She notes her need to help load up the caravans before the troops head out, so she won’t be available to see them again until Sindal. Dela and Dovri return to the tavern and immediately retire to their rooms.

The two sleep deeply, exhausted but satisfied from Mele’s Blessing. With daylight comes a waking city, refreshed and rested. Dovri surprises Dela by already being awake when she knocks on his wall. He’s writing up costs from the new purchases, and invites her in.

“Well, I’m nearly done here. Then I’ll be heading out to Virin’s oil with Alnir to pick up that order. Next is the rations, then the water in the afternoon. Then, I’ll take inventory and be done for the day. Tomorrow, we head out! Are you ready?”

“More or less. I must tell you, though, I’ve almost no more mushrooms on me. I have four more of the hoof pads, and two water sacks. Only one more bottle of antidote for thistles, as well. We could see more rain.”

Dovri nods. “Alnir will appreciate the hoof pads, that’s for sure! And I know a few of Shiln’s tricks now..” He grins at her. Dela smiles back fondly.

“It’s been quite an adventure.” She says.

“Only halfway over, though.” Dovri notes.

Dela nods, then a thought strikes her.

“Right! We need to get used to Shiln sleeping. We should leave early tomorrow morning, so make sure to go to sleep early tonight.”

Dovri swings back around, making a note in the margins of his notebook.

“Good idea! Right then, well, how will you spend your last day in Melen?” He asks, closing his notebook and packing up his things.

“I thought I’d just accompany you with your errands. I feel bad leaving all the business stuff to you.” Dela laughs.

“I’d be just fine with that. Ready to head out now?”

“Yes, let’s!”

The two travelers heft the cart once more, bringing it around to the stable. They hook up a very excited Alnir to it, and she begins walking on her own. Dela and Dovri jump on the cart as she attempts to outpace them.

“Silly girl! Been doin’ that now and then, especially after rest. I think she gets all excited to roam again.”

Dela gives the excited donkey a pat and receives a bray in response. Travel through the streets goes well, citizens giving far more space to the donkey than just Dela and Dovri pulling the cart. They arrive at Virin’s Oils, and the two travelers enter. Virin recognizes Dovri and greets him. He slips into the backroom and comes back out with a sheet of paper. He hands it to Dovri and sends him on his way. Dela confusedly follows Dovri out of the shop. Looking down at the paper, he is similarly confused.

“It’s a ticket...To pick up the oil from...An oil company? Now why in the world…” He hops back on the cart and Dela follows suit.

“What’s going on with the oil?” She asks.

“Well, I bought some from Virin because the oil company doesn’t sell it directly. The price was...fine? But now he’s...Wait a damned second--He’s sending me back to the oil company to pick up--Gods dammit!” Dovri slams the side of the cart with his fist.

“More obfuscation?” Dela laughs at Dovri’s inordinate fury.

“Yes! I don’t get how this town works, I swear. In Ordor it’s so much simpler!”

“I wonder if the Melenites would feel similarly, but reversed?” Dela notes. Dovri contemplates the point, calming down a bit. He frowns but waits for Dela to get to her point. “I think it would be a feeling of uncertainty for the Melenites in Ordor. This system seems to be based on their old system of haggling, but standardized to keep people from getting scammed.” Dela explains.

“Scammed! I nearly got scammed selling my lumber.” Dovri reminds her.

“Well…True. I suppose it’s more like…Reducing how badly you can get scammed?” Dela thinks out loud.

“Phf.” Dovri snorts. An awkward moment passes between the two. “Well, I suppose I won’t act like Ordor doesn’t have its own issues. You’ve got a point there.”

Dela smiles at Dovri’s attempt to stifle his indignation.

The two arrive at the oil company, and both immediately plug their noses. With a nasally voice, Dovri asks a worker where they turn in their ticket for a purchase of oil, showing it. The worker directs them to the back desk, and they repeat the process. They then are brought to a side alley into another building, and finally Dovri sees the product. A pallet of bottled oil, lightly golden and clear, sits with Dovri’s name on it. Stock workers assist the two in lifting the pallet onto the cart, and they set off. Dovri quietly steams at the process as Dela makes light of it. The merchant takes out his notes and checks off the oil, marking the food stall as their next goal.

The fountain plaza has been cleaned immaculately. The massive frozen statue is gone as well, but the monks still stand in the water and pray. As they pass, Dovri looks closer than before, and notices small pieces of ice playing around their clasped hands. It seems it's not just praying, but training they partake in every day. The cart creaks to a stop beside the food stall. Dovri steps off and the owner comes out to greet him. Beside the stall sit two crates tightly wrapped in cloth. Dovri and Dela heft the crates onto the cart, and Alnir looks at them and flaps her ears.

“It’ll get lighter once we get movin’, darlin’!” Dovri gives her a scratch behind the ears.

The sun has reached its peak, and the familiar searing heat of desert day has fully reappeared. Finally, the two head towards the water company. Picking up the water is a similarly smooth process, and Dovri’s mood significantly improves with it. The cart clatters its way back to the tavern. Alnir is brought back to the stall and given an extra treat. The sun begins to fall, and the heat of the day has grown unbearable. Dovri and Dela take refuge in the tavern. There, they chat idly, eating and drinking to their heart's content. Dela reminds Dovri that they should go to sleep now--to wake up before dawn--and he nods with a groan, having partaken in wine once again. Though, he made sure to have Dela pour it to mediate.

Dovri walks to bed only slightly off balance, and the next thing he knows, Dela is tapping him awake. The hangover is nothing compared to the previous, but is still somewhat present. He gets up while Dela helps him gather his things. The two head out to the cart in the dark, the moon having set already. A blue haze lies over the city, and the slightest chill in the air could trick an uninitiated soul into thinking the day will be kind with its heat. Dovri now knows no such luck is in store for them. Alnir is hooked up to the cart, and together the group head south.

Guards at the gate search the cart, and verify nothing is being smuggled. Dovri grants them a sleepy farewell. Soon after leaving, the rocky road dissolves into fine desert sand. Dela gets off and attaches the hoof pad mushrooms to Alnir, who seems to take to them much better. She presses forward, even with the heavy load to bear. Dela sits on the cart with Dovri this time, and taps him as she sees him nodding off. His sleepiness fades as the sun rises, though. The bright light of day will see no comfort, not in the desert. Dovri sips on a mushroom water sack, but finds the taste to be subpar.

“Am I just spoiled by Melen’s water festival, or does this taste odd?” He asks Dela.

“The water sacks start to decompose after a week or two. It’s just mushrooms, though. In Sindal we sometimes leave them out in the desert in the north, and they ferment into a delicious broth.”

“Perhaps I’ll come back up to try some, sometime!”

“Oh? I thought you were done with the desert.” Dela raises an eyebrow.

“Done making this trip across Shiln. Sindal isn’t too far out of the way in comparison. Plus, I have friends there!”

Dovri gives Dela a warm smile, and she returns it in kind. The two come to a stop and spread out the cloth as a tent. They detach Alnir from the cart and she rests under the cloth with them while they drink and rest. Dovri catches up on his sleep with a few short naps, and before he knows it, it’s evening. Dela folds up the sheet while Dovri reattaches Alnir to the cart. They continue onward, the process now encoded as habit. Dovri knows Nulin oasis is just a few days away, and prays for no rain until then.

Looking around, he realizes they traversed this area but in a very different way. No more are the tangled vines, dark green gourds, and yellow thistles. All seem to have completely disappeared in the few days they stayed in Melen. Sunken back below the sands, their task of propagation completed. Dela relaxes in the back, adjusting some of the bottles so they don’t clatter so much. She stuffs cloth in between them and shifts them closer to the center of mass of the cart. Alnir plods along, seeming excited to move once more but disappointed that it’s in the desert.

“Well, how do you think Mulu will react, now?” Dovri asks Dela. She’s silent for a second, then sighs.

“Angrily. He’ll be ecstatic to have the help, but he’ll know instantly that it won’t be free.”

“Hmm.” Dovri thinks. “Any way to soften the blow?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve thought a lot about it, but once he figures out Sindal is a vassal of Melen, he’ll be furious.”

“Will he try to cancel the agreement?”

“I doubt that. He’ll know that that will lead to tensions with Melen. I’ve basically set him up into an accept-or-fight scenario. And fighting really isn’t an option.”

A while passes in silence, Dela staring into the darkening sky of the evening. Light pinks fade to blue and purple, all eventually consumed by an inky darkness.

“I think this was inevitable, though.” She says.

“What do you mean?” Dovri asks.

“Sindal becoming a vassal of Melen. We’re a small village, and Elemental attacks have been rising in frequency. I think the guardforce being wiped out would have happened even if they had fought off that Fire Elemental that day. It’d just happen later, when everyone’s older and frailer.”

Dovri ponders Dela’s point. “So, are you saying, in a way, it’s good that the loss happened then rather than later?” He says carefully.

“It’s good that Nelri had enough foresight to save at least one. It’s still my fault, in the end though. But, yeah. I think Melen would have extended their hand eventually.”

Dovri frowns at Dela blaming herself for the tragedy. Still, he doesn’t speak up on the matter, concerned he doesn’t know enough.

“Did you talk to Fon about the tragedy?” Dovri inquires.

“Oh, yeah. She got surprisingly serious. She said--Er, well. She said something personal that I won’t get into. You can ask her yourself, if you want.” Dela says.

“That’s understandable. But, what did she think of your action in the tragedy?”

“She...Hm. She seemed to see the whole guardforce as a unit. Like a being or a creature. And the tragedy was like the creature being heavily damaged. She mentioned a sea star...But, she didn’t see any blame placed on one part, just the whole unit malfunctioning from stress.”

“That’s...Actually kind of a good way to look at it. What are sea stars, did she say?”

“She said they’re like both plants and animals. They go along the seafloor really slowly. Slower than you can see. But they’re really resilient, and if you chop an arm off of one it will grow back. Not only that, but the disembodied arm will grow into a whole new sea star!”

“Huh! I’ve never actually been up to the sea in Melen. Only heard stories from Dundyran sailors. It sounds monstrous.”

“Fon’s father was a sailor, so she has many tales of it. Talking to her helped a lot. Fighting alongside her maybe more.” Dela smiles to herself.

“You two are a force to be reckoned with.” Dovri chuckles. “You’ll defend Sindal well, I’m sure.”

Night has fully fallen, so the group rests once again. They bundle themselves tightly in cloth to stay warm. The cold of the desert has grown bitter in just the week since they last traveled. Alnir sleeps comfortably alone, her thick coat protecting her from the freezing air. The journey south continues before dawn, Dovri still yawning and nodding off. Dela pokes him when she sees him dozing. She keeps up idle chat to keep him awake.

“So, do they really use that much oil in Ordor?” She points at the crates creaking in the back of the cart.

“Oh yes, especially during the winter. They have oil burning stoves that keep their houses warm, even when covered in snow.”

“Oh, yeah! Snow--What’s that like?”

Dovri looks at her for a moment before starting.

“Oh! Huh. Guess you wouldn’t have seen it, eh?” He chuckles. “Well, it’s really nothing special. Pretty annoying to traverse through. It’s like...Ah--Powdered chalk that melts when you touch it, but there’s so much and it’s so cold out that it just sticks around. And it compounds as people step on it, and gets really slippery as winter goes on. Ordor really needs a better way to clear their streets during the winter.”

“Wow...So does the city just stop for the winter when you get lots of snow?”

“What? No, no. We just deal with it. It’s just a bit annoying, not a cause to cease operations. Though, there was that year where the city got so much it did stop for a day.”

“Was everyone just trapped inside?”

“Pretty much. The guards started to clear the snow, but it took the whole day to get the city into a manageable condition.”

“How’d they clear it?”

“They had a few wind users that cleared most of it. They’re amazing, most of them captains. They swept the main street right down to the gates and tossed the snow out along the walls. But they’re only human, y’know? They wore themselves out quickly and fell ill.”

“So it’s not just a merchant thing!”

Dovri looks at Dela, confused.

“Wha?”

“Pushing yourself to the point of exhaustion even if you don’t have to! Just to show it off.” Dela says with a grin.

“Oh for gods--You’re talking about totally different things!” Dovri snips. Dela laughs heartily, and for a moment Dovri feels like they’re on their first journey again. Before all the trouble and worry. Quickly though, it comes back to him that the first trip was inundated with worry as well.

“Well, I won’t be pulling anything like that this time.” Dovri assures her.

Day comes, and with it rest. After that, more travel. Dela notes they may reach Nulin oasis by midday. She asks Dovri if he would like to travel through some of the day to reach the oasis sooner.

“Ahh I suppose I could.” He says, putting a pompous affectation to his voice.

“Oh alright, I just won’t ask next time! I’ll just pack up the cart and send Alnir on her way, dragging you behind by a rope!” Dela jokes.

“Such violence! I scorn you for that!” Dovri jokes back.

The group travels through dawn into the day. Familiar hills come into view, and the two celebrate as they near Nulin. Vegetation is much sparser this time. The hills are not the friendly shade of light green they were before, but rather a barren tan. As the cart crosses over the mycelium barrier, Dovri looks over to see what appears to be dead shrubs and grass. The trees still bear thin leaves, but their bark has grown tan and light.

“Is Nulin...Dying?” A worried Dovri asks.

“Oh, no no. This is what Nulin usually looks like.” Dela reassures him.

The group crest a hill and the ponds come into view. Vibrant green vegetation surrounds them, but only in those solitary rings.

“It’s only when it rains that the plants come alive. For now, their roots are kept safe by the mushrooms beneath.”

Dovri looks down, reminded once again of the massive superorganism thrumming beneath his feet. For a moment, he feels as if he were an ant on the back of a cow. Simply traversing the body of an unfathomably larger, more complex, and more ancient organism. Dovri shoves the realization down, focusing on guiding Alnir to a resting spot near the pond. They find a shady area with a patch of trees, and lay down near the pond.

“Are there any other oases in Shiln? The trip to Sindal after this will be harrowing.” Dovri asks.

“A few small springs near the mountains of the west. But those mountains are dangerous. There are strange people dead set on preventing anyone else from stepping on the land. And high Elemental activity, too.”

“Nothing to the east?”

“Not as far as I know. Wasteland into the mountains of Dundyr. Doubt there’s many trees on this side, either.”

Dovri sighs and leans against the cart in the shade. He quenches his thirst and eats a small meal before going to sleep for the day. The journey continues at dusk, but with it comes worrying clouds in the eastern sky. Dela examines them while Dovri steers Alnir. He shoots a few looks in the warrior’s direction to check her expression. Each time he does, she looks more worried.

“Do we stay in Nulin until this passes?” He asks.

“That would be safest. What worries me is this is not isolated. The storm is long. Look at that dune in the distance.” Dela points. A thin rim of green crowns the dune, and spreads down its length. Deep indigo clouds move low, guiding the green hell towards the travelers. Within a few minutes, the storm reaches Nulin. It is not a monsoon anymore, having almost exhausted its supply of water. The rain turns to a drizzle, but to the east Dela insists the storm is continuing, and will be for a while. The group take advantage of the temperate conditions and continue their travel through Nulin. Upon reaching the southern end, though, they find slowly drooping walls of rain vines blocking their way.

“We must head west. The vegetation will be less overwhelming there. Then we can veer eastward as we near Sindal.” Dela states. Dovri nods, and directs Alnir west. The group pass trees they just recently had scavenged for fruit. Though fully green and vibrant, their boughs stand bare of such prizes. Outside Nulin, the rain vines’ walls droop further down, eventually becoming a familiar floor of tangled green. Further west, Dela sees plain sand, and suggests they move to completely avoid the dangerous plants. The rain vines precipitously fall into nothingness just a bit further to the west, making for easy travel. The dichotomy of the landscape is something to behold, as well.

The east are fields of inviting greenery. If Dovri squints his eyes he can almost mistake it for Ordori fields. To the west rise mountains, beyond the rocky hills. The wasteland rises up to the skies like buildings built by ancient gods. One stands atop them all and can be seen from any angle. The clouds, rising high after the rain, are parted by the peak’s immensity.

“What in the world…” Dovri says, craning his neck to see the vastness in its entirety.

“In Sindal we call that mountain Avum. It’s beyond massive.”

“Hang on...I think that’s only part of it. King Ruku tells tales of a massive mountain to the north of the old village in Rutyr. And that village is on the west side of Rutyr!”

Dela looks over at Dovri, intrigued.

“I’ve only heard a few mentions of the barrier at Rutyr. It showed up after a huge battle?”

“Mhm. King Ruku won’t go into too much detail, but he was injured in the battle and flung out of the area just before the barrier formed. He says the area is incredibly dangerous, and from how many have gone missing there, I’d wager he’s correct.”

“Wow...Wait, flung? As in, thrown? Doesn’t the barrier cover a huge chunk of the land?”

Dovri thinks, scratching his chin.

“To be honest I’ve never given it that much thought, why did he use the term flung?”

“Surely he wasn’t thrown that far!” Dela laughs. “I’ll bet the tale is real, but he’s making it taller!”

“No! He wouldn’t...I don’t think anyway. Maybe he said that just to make it scarier, to make sure people don’t go there and get hurt. He wouldn’t lie for nothing.”

“That’d make sense. But wow, you’re defensive of that king, huh?” Dela teases.

“I just think the King deserves the respect he’s earned.” Dovri says carefully, controlling his pouting. “He’s given his life to defend the Builders and Ordor.”

“The Builders...Those’re the people that built the walls?”  
  
 “Indeed. They were nomadic, but King Ruku convinced them to settle down, and protected them from Elemental attacks while they built the most massive defenses!” Dovri stops, thinking back to Melen’s equally towering walls. “Of the time, anyway. Melen hadn’t grown quite so large yet. And they only built their walls with information gleaned from Ordori traders!”

Dela laughs at the obstinate merchant, so desperate to defend his city and pride.

“As if you wouldn’t defend Sindal to the death!” Dovri cries.

“You’re right there! That’s my job!” Dela cackles. Dovri realizes the meaning of what he says and tries to hold it seriously, but Dela’s surprising joy at the joke is infectious

By now, the clouds have cleared overhead, but persist in the east. The night is chilled, so the travelers take a short rest. Dawn is delayed by the eastern clouds. The warmth of the day only barely reaches the ground until midday. With direct sunlight comes the horrid humidity. Dovri suddenly remembers the awful allergies he suffered, and draws Alnir further west.

“I’ll be damned if I’m going through that again.” He mutters.

“Heading further west won’t help, the winds blow seeds far. We’re getting too near the steppe. Here.” Dela rips off a bit of cloth and pours water on it. “Wrap that around your mouth and nose.”

Dovri follows her directions, requiring help to tie a good knot behind his head.

“Do we have enough water for that?” He asks.

“Shouldn’t need to redo it. My mother told me the water catches the sand in the wind and forms a barrier to the pollen.” Dela reassures him.

Sunset happens suddenly, and Dovri looks around before realizing it’s been swallowed by the towering mountain they stand at the foot of. The intensifying heat of the day evaporates all at once. The clouds in the east finally begin to break up, showing stars behind their cover. Warm, gusting air flows westward, battering the cart. The group eventually takes a rest, not because of the cold, but because of the wind. Dela makes sure to tightly tie the sheets to the cart to keep them from blowing away, but still has to hold down the sides when moving so it doesn’t generate lift.

As day returns, Dovri awakes with the makeshift mask over his face, and finds his eyes watering. His head pounds from his sinuses, but it certainly doesn’t feel as bad as it did before. He wonders if he’s just growing resistant, or if the cloth did help. Regardless, he gets up dizzy, hopping aboard the cart and rejoining the trek. In the green distance of the east, literal waves of yellow pollen can be seen rising and falling, pressed along the land by the generous wind. Though the allergies aren’t as bad as before, Dovri still finds them unbearable. Finally, in desperation, he wraps cloth around his entire head loosely, tying it off at his collar.

“You’ll need to steer me, Dela. We’re just heading south, so I should be able to keep us straight. But if I veer too far, let me know.” He says, muffled. Dela grins, holding back her laughter.

“What in the world? Did my mother’s solution not work?”  
  
 “It may have, a bit. But my head’s still killing me. I’m gonna give this a try.”

“Huh. I never actually had to use the water mask trick. I wonder if it worked for Nelri...She taught it to me when I was young, we went north to see the rain vines once.”

“Do they not affect you at all now?”

“I get a bit of a headache. But it’s almost...nostalgic?”

Dovri gives her a confused look that can be seen even through the folded cloth.

“I mean, it’s one of the memories I have of my mother acting like a mother. She tried, but guarding Sindal consumed her time.”

Dovri checks himself, focusing more on squinting at the ground ahead through the cloth. “I see. That must have been difficult.”

“Well, it pushed me to join the guardforce!” Dela puts on a smile. “How about you? How’s your mother?”

“Never knew her.” Dovri says simply.

“Oh! Um...I’m sorry, that was rude of me.”

“Ah! No, sorry you’re fine. I get a little curt about it by habit. You wouldn’t believe how many Dundyrans inquire about your familial history. It’s like a status over there.”

“Huh. Well, you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“I suppose I could.” Dovri readjusts in his seat and takes a moment to organize his thoughts. “I grew up in the outskirts of Ordor with my father. He never spoke about my mother much. I don’t have much to go on, but given how my father treated me, I think he and she had a falling out. I was sort of a project to him, it seemed.”

The merchant heaves a sigh. It’s been years, he thinks, since he’s spoken of his father and mother so frankly. Dela listens intently, leaning on her spear while sitting on the right side of the cart.

“He was mostly kind to me, but seemed outright rude to others. Taught me a lot about what a name can do. When I’d explain I was his son, people suddenly would treat me differently. Also taught me a lot about how to present yourself!” He chuckles. “He tried to teach me a lot of things himself, but I think I mostly learned what not to do by watching him.”

Dovri spends a while silent, indicating he’s done telling his story. Dela perks up.

“Well, I’m in a similar boat, somewhat. Never knew my father. Nelri said he was a traveler that came through. He left on his way after just a few nights.”

“How rude!” Dovri scoffs.

“Ahah! Well, Nelri also told me he wasn’t the one that instigated the night they spent together. She was very...forward. She seemed to think of the encounter as a victory.” Dela laughs.

“Oh! Hah! I see.”

With rest at midday, their journey picks up again at night. The steppe to the west can be seen clearly from where they ride. Dela keeps a keen eye on the scattered rocks and isolated bundles of shrubs. She notes that the wild men could appear at any time, that they’re known to come out into Shiln.

“What could they want from Shiln?”

“Nothing. They come out to scare travelers that get too close. Or, if you don’t go fast enough, they’ll kill you.”

“What in the world could be worth so much effort to protect?”

“Most people in Sindal think they’re just defending their lands and building a kingdom. Mulu holds the opinion that they simply don’t want people to traverse that land. He reasons that if they wanted to demand the land to be their own, they’d build with the massive stores of stone they must have in the mountains. Walls certainly aren’t unique to any one city here.”

“Hmm...What do you think?”

“I agree with Mulu. Their actions seem to betray that whatever lies in the mountains is extremely dangerous. What I don’t understand, if that’s the case, is why they can live there just fine. They’re human, too.”

“Maybe after King Ruku is done dealing with the barrier, he’ll be able to figure out what’s going on up there!”

“He’s dealing with the barrier? How?”

“I’m not totally sure of the details of what he’s doing in there, but apparently he’s able to control a Nature Elemental remotely. I’ve heard that he does so with a crystal that the Builders pour their energy into. He’s said there’s still a threat--”

Dela interrupts him by looking at him with a serious face.

“That crystal…” She trails off. She thinks for a moment before starting again. “Listen, I don’t know the specifics, but that sounds dire. Crystals like that are only used in extremely dangerous situations.”

Dovri ponders the information. He shrugs.

“I trust King Ruku’s judgment. If using that is what’s needed, he’ll do so. The Builders have used crystals like that for generations. I hear there’s a collection under the castle.”

Dela’s jaw falls but she shakes her head, smirking and turning away in assured disbelief.

“So are they like that crystal Mulu gave you? They just have a ton of Elemental energy, then?”

Dela shoots him a quick look, and he shuts his mouth. A much more awkward silence passes over the group, and continues for the rest of the night. The chill becomes strong, and wordlessly the travelers come to a stop to rest. The night passes very slowly. Dovri falls in and out of sleep, turning and twisting. Dela sits and keeps watch a ways away. In the moonlit darkness her eyes shine out, stoic and strong. She keeps an eye to the west, focusing in on any movement. Dovri sees her out there a few times when he briefly awakens, quickly rolling back over. Dela stays motionless until the slightest pink touches the eastern sky.

Dovri is awoken fully by Dela prepping the cart for travel. He eats a quick meal and drinks some water before dawn, and they set off again. The silence persists for about an hour. Dovri is about to speak up, but Dela does so first.

“You cannot be blamed for not knowing, I’m sorry.”

“Ah?”  
  
 “So…” Dela sighs, getting her thoughts straight. “Those crystals are only made when great warriors grow too old to effectively fight. They still produce elemental energy though, which usually is just wasted. The technique is to pour your soul into empowering a crystal like that. It’s known to shorten the lifespan of those that do it, but another can absorb the energy from the crystal to accomplish great feats, Elemental in scale. Or larger.”

Dovri processes the information, looking at Alnir plodding along in front of him. “So, it’s not just a crystal. It’s years of his life in that stone. I didn’t know it cost life to infuse.”

“Yes, and I’m uncomfortable knowing that Ordor is using it in such a strange way. The thought that Ordor trusts one man with the power of so many is worrying.”

“Trust me, you can rest in good faith that King Ruku bears no ill intent.”

“I don’t believe he does. But having something like that requires no ill intent to do harm. And I can’t help but wonder if it’s a good idea to stray into such dangerous lands as Rutyr.”

“Well, he has no choice but to venture in. The barrier’s weakening, and there’s rumors that whatever is trapped in there will come out once it fails. Better to fight it while it’s trapped than when it can invade Ordor itself.”

“I suppose I don’t know enough to comment on his decision. I would like to meet this man, one day, though.”

“Oh, he’s a sight to behold! I saw him in combat before I departed Ordor, a Fire Elemental was trying to get into the city. He was wreathed in green flame when he leapt upon it, his hand shone so bright I could barely look! It was like leaves reflecting light in the heart of the forest. The beast was naught but a smoking pile of bones after he battered it outside the walls.”

Dela looks fascinated at the recounting of the battle.

“How big was it?” She asks excitedly.

“It was a massive thing, the size of an inn! It had two heads with spines that twisted around each other at the base, like snakes, and many arms!”

“He dealt with it alone?” Dela asks, amazed.

“The guards couldn’t even get near it. Ruku simply strode down the main road and kicked it out of his city!”

“Now I really want to meet him! Nelri told me of Sindalan guards from generations ago that could do similar feats, but I had no idea people were still around like that!”

“Really! Huh…So are guards getting less powerful as time goes on?”

“Nelri told us it’s due to us doing less fighting overall. The guards years ago would fight Elementals every day, nonstop. And they’d get pretty beat up while doing it. No defensive walls set up yet, and all that. All that fighting made their strength increase rapidly.”

“So with this increased Elemental activity, will warriors start to grow more powerful again?”

“Maybe. We’ll need to if we want to survive. But there’s no guarantee the Elementals won’t outpace us.”

Dela starts to look off towards the distance again. The cart creaks for a while, sunrise making seeing much easier. It’s a clear day. No wind at all. All of a sudden, Dela starts, and taps Dovri’s shoulder.

“Speed up, push Alnir as fast as she can comfortably go. Turn to the east a bit, too.”

Dovri complies, sneaking a look to the west. Initially, he sees nothing. As he looks a few more times, he notices a glint moving for a split second. It’s extremely far, and Dovri has to squint to even get an idea of what it is. Dela pushes him forward, doubling him over, as a projectile passes right through where his head was.

“Wha--” He manages to sputter out before Dela jumps off the cart, stomping a foot down and slashing upwards with her spear. A wall of stone rises from the sand, and several thumps can be heard from more attacks impacting the other side. Dela runs along the accelerating cart, raising more walls as she goes. The thumps increase in frequency and intensity as Dovri urges Alnir onward. He looks behind him, and sees a glint, ducking just in time to avoid another shot.

“We’re leaving! We have no interest in the mountain!” Dela screams out. The attacks suddenly stop. Dovri slows Alnir as Dela jumps back on the cart, breathless. “Keep going, don’t stop yet.” She says.

Dovri continues pushing Alnir onwards. Dela catches her breath while looking to the northwest. However, it’s Dovri that notifies her of the danger. A rumbling travels along the ground, increasing in intensity until it’s vibrating the two’s entire bodies. Dovri veers to the left as a massive cloud of dust rises from the mountainside. Racing down the incline, massive boulders tumble at breakneck speeds. Dela situates herself at the back of the cart as it turns away from the rockslide, feet spread in a wide stance, spear held aloft.

Alnir’s speed is no match for the inertia of the stones, and they advance. As they cross into the green fields of rainvines, Dovri yells out for Dela to do something. At the back of the cart, she has her eyes closed, the crystal atop her spear glowing brighter and brighter. Dovri yells Dela’s name again, screaming at the top of his lungs. With an equal yell, Dela smashes the spear into the ground, leaving it behind the racing cart. Rows of stone rise behind them, encircling the empowered spear. The rockslide smashes into it, easily breaking through more than half of the walls. Rocks behind the first slam into each other, and deafening cracks emanate from the epicenter of the collision. Dela falls backwards against the rack of oil, holding tightly to it as Alnir throws everything she has into running.

After a few minutes more, Alnir slows to a stop, huffing rapidly. Dovri turns to find Dela awake but exhausted in the back, and asks if she’s okay.

“I’m...Alright. Just winded.” She assures him. “We should be safe here. I don’t think they’ll chase us into the rain vines.”

“Damn them! Do they not know Nevorian?!” Dovri curses the mountain-dwellers with every word he knows as he detaches Alnir from the cart and helps her lie down, giving her plenty of water. Dela drinks some as well, lifting herself with a groan. Looking over, Dovri sees a line on her chest glowing through the leather breastplate.

“I’m okay...I’m okay. I’ll be alright, I just--ss!” She hisses as she moves in the wrong way, sitting back down quickly and holding a hand to her chest. “This is okay. It’s what happens when I use too much energy. Not enough left in my system to fight this damned thing off.”

“Take some of the energy from Mulu’s orb!” Dovri begs her.

“NO!” Dela yells before doubling over in pain once again. “I can deal with this. Without my spear, I’ll need--ss! ...I’ll need it if we get attacked again.”

Dovri looks at her, exasperated.

“I need to return it to him...I said I wouldn’t use it, anyway. I’m okay...I’m okay....” Dela mutters to herself as the glow slowly fades. The sun stands high in the sky for what feels like forever as the group rests. Dovri examines the area for thistles and gourds, finding nothing. Dela sits against the cart, slowly breathing. Dovri provides her with water and food, which she accepts graciously. Once able to stand, Dela tests her movement slowly. Raising her arms too far causes some pain, and she has to stay upright as well. Too much curving of her back makes her wince and stumble.

“It’s basically a burn. That charred bone lodged inside me got really hot, and burned. Usually my latent energy’s enough to keep it inert.”

“Do you have anything that could treat burns like that?”

“Not really. There’s one type of plant that has a liquid that can help a bit, but it’s most likely wilted and dead by now.”

“Hmm...Well, do we head south now? West is out of the question.”

“It’s our only choice, yes. The rain vines shouldn’t extend too far south.”

The group continues on its way come sunset, going slowly. Dela walks beside Alnir, watching the ground closely. Mercifully, the moon assists in the search. Its full brightness lights the landscape as well as an overcast day. Dela does indeed spot a patch of gourds that the group circles around at a large distance. Distantly, Dovri can hear a pulsing sound from the patch. Dela explains that the gourds are sucking up all the water they can to produce the pressure needed to burst.

The group continues throughout the pleasantly warm night. Though exhausted, Dela wishes to escape the dangerous vegetation before a repeat of last trip’s wound. As the moon sets and the sun rises, they finally reach an area of vegetation that lays patchy and dry. Sand fills large gaps between wilting rain vines. The cart comes to a stop. With a thump, Dela falls against the cart. Dovri reaches out to her, but she waves him off.

“I’m just gonna sleep a bit. I’m okay.” She says drowsily through her heavy breathing. Dovri nods and tends to Alnir before turning in as well. He hears Dela’s haggard breath slowing until it’s a solid pattern of in and out. The beat brings sleep to him as well. When the two wake up, the sun is almost set. Dovri rubs his eyes to get his bearings as Dela lets out a hoarse laugh.

“Well, I’m rested. How about you?” She says, smiling.

“Ah...I could use another day or two.” Dovri says sleepily. Together, they load up the cart and continue onwards. Alnir seems exhausted still, so Dela continues to walk beside her, feeding and giving her water.

“Have any idea how far we are from Sindal?”

“My judgment’s a bit messy after the move west and then east again, but I’d say we’re a day or two away.”

Dovri cheers, feeling himself wake up more with the good news. He thinks for a moment, calming down.

“Do you think we’ll still beat the Melenite troops?”

“I think so. Hopefully.” She says, obviously unsure. “My estimates are all off. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be! You’re fine. Still leagues better than my estimates, hah!” Dovri assures her.

While the journey continues, Dovri gazes at Alnir. He notices the white of her underside hair has crept upwards. When did that happen, Dovri wonders. He leans forward to give her a pat on the butt, and receives a bray in return.

“You okay?” Asks Dela. “Something wrong with Alnir?”

“Just noticing that she’s aging. I’m definitely not taking her across Shiln again. But the journey to Dundyr is getting more dangerous, as well...I’ll need to pay for protection to get across there now.”

“Ah, I see. From Ordor to Dundyr...Is that the forested path the Nature Elementals attacked you on?”

“Mhm. It’s a winding path through the forest into the mountains. There’s one passage through the Dundyran Peaks, and then more forest on the far side. Heading up north to Dundyr it turns to grassy plains.”

“Why doesn’t Ordor clear a better path? Or Dundyr?”

“The path is long on Ordor’s side. The guardforce doesn’t want to risk losing people in the effort. Plus, the forest is not something to be easily trifled with. During the building of Ordor’s walls, many trees were cut down for wood. The Nature Elemental attacks grew much more common. There's a legend that King Ruku stayed up for five nights straight fighting them off. Untold hordes of them.”

“And Dundyr’s side?”

“Dundyr seems to have little care for the current path. They’re trying to find a different passage across the mountains, more towards the north. Right now almost all of their trade goes through Ordor, when they know their metalworks could get better profits from Melen directly. A few brave traders make it through the northern passages, but it’s far more dangerous..”

“Hmm...I see.” Dela furrows her brow while thinking about the situation.

The chill of the night is minor, so the group continues onwards through it. Their long rest has proven worthwhile for this day of travel. Come sunrise, they come to a stop for a short meal and drink. Dovri tends to Alnir, feeding the resting donkey and giving her plenty of water.

“Dela--Is it alright if we rest for the day again? Alnir needs another break.”

“That’s fine, we should get to Sindal after another night’s travel.”

And so they rest. Dovri takes a few naps, and Dela dozes off for a short while before resuming her watch. She stares north, slightly east, with a hand over her eyes to protect from the sun’s glare. Dovri reorganizes the empty water jars in the back of the cart. Alnir lays in the sand, obviously thankful for the rest. As the sun begins to set, they pack up and resume their journey. Dela directs Dovri slightly more eastward, and he complies. In the dying sunlight, she stares north still. With another start, she urges Dovri onwards.

“I see them.” She says quickly. “The troops, they’re only a ways away!”

Dovri urges Alnir to go faster, but she is still not at her prime.

“Will we make it?” Dovri asks, swinging his head around to squint at the horizon.

“If we go through the night. We’ll have less than half a day before they arrive.”

“The going will be slower than usual. Alnir’s on her last legs. I can’t push her more or we’ll be really stuck.”

“We have to get there by midday tomorrow.” Dela says, stone faced.

“We’ll try our best.” Dovri says.

Alnir valiantly presses onward through the night. Dovri monitors her breathing in the pitch black darkness. Her huffs grow closer and closer together as the night wears on. Eventually, the moon peeks its head from the horizon, providing some light. Dovri looks at the moon for a moment, but the cart suddenly shudders to a stop. He jumps off to check on Alnir, who gets on her knees, beyond exhausted. Dovri pets her head and gives her water, which she accepts with an ear flap.

“I’m sorry, Dela. She needs to rest for a few hours at least.”

“It’s okay. We can still make it. Alnir will be treated to the finest feed we have. I'll even give her a thorough wash!”

Dovri smiles, holding Alnir’s head tightly. The group rests and tends to Alnir. Dela checks the mushroom pads on her hooves, finding them heavily worn. She still thinks it will be better to have them on until they get to the rocky lands of Sindal. As the moon hangs high in the sky, the eastern horizon blushes pink. Alnir gets up on her own, and the two travelers quickly pack things onto the cart as she takes off. She seems to know the urgency they wish to move with.

With daylight comes a glimpse of light brown on the far south horizon. The hills south of Sindal can be seen! Dela examines the surroundings and concludes they need to head east to get to the path leading to Sindal. After a quick stop to remove Alnir’s mushroom pads, they’re off again. The donkey trots faster than before, getting readjusted to walking without the pads. The road finally comes into view in the late morning, Alnir happily plodding along the much more comfortable surface.

After barely any time on the path, though, Dela turns north to see the Melenite troops nearing the beginning of the path as well. Alnir follows the twists in the path, heading down into the canyon. The rumbling footsteps of the troops grow louder behind them. They curve and twist through the rocky valley, and suddenly the gateway to Sindal comes into view. The dozen guards-in-training stand at the gates. They stiffly tremble as the thundering troops grow closer. Dela jumps off the cart and races into the town square.

“Mulu! Mulu I’ve arrived!” She calls out. The elders emerge from the orange stone house, stress lining their faces. Dovri passes through the threshold of the village, but turns to the side of it as Melenite troops flow in right behind him.

“Melenites?! Is this an invasion?” Mulu demands. Dela stands between the reorganizing Melenite troops and the retreating Sindalan guards, who hold their spears tightly and shake.

“It’s okay! This isn’t an attack. Melen sent aid!” Dela quickly explains. Mulu’s eyes dart from Dela to the troops to Dovri. The merchant guides Alnir to the well to drink her fill, trying to shrink away from the awkward debacle. Riv, the guard captain of Melen, steps forward.

“Greetings, Sindal. Dela, your guard captain, informed us that you were in need of protection.” He says.

Mulu’s eyes switch from shock to confusion. He stays silent, thinking to himself.

“We asked for two guards to train our new forces. We never asked for this much.” He says carefully. Dela approaches him as the Sindalan guards lower their spears.

“I’m sorry, Mulu. I need to explain to you what happened. Riv, would you follow us to the council room?”

“Mm.” Riv nods, turning to face his troops. “Form a perimeter, identify weak points of the vassal surroundings, and watch for Elementals. We will eat at sunset.”

“Vassal?!” Mulu erupts. “I agreed to no such--” He’s interrupted by Dela escorting him into the building. The other council members chatter nonstop, grumbling and decrying Dela. Riv follows them in, and the curtain closes abruptly.

Dovri tends to Alnir, letting her rest and feeding her slowly. The Melenite troops spread out across the village, examining the carved rock walls and the entrances. Most exit the village and patrol the canyon and cliff top above the village. Sindal’s villagers hole up in their houses, peeking from their curtained windows and doors. Dovri sits alone in the village square as the sun begins to set. He uses a small knife to clean Alnir’s hooves, cutting away overgrown hoof, rocks, and sand. Alnir nuzzles him as he works.

As darkness overtakes the village, the moon provides a light alabaster glow. With a sharp woosh, the curtain to the council room opens. Mulu and the elders exit, followed by Dela and Riv. The elders part, a few going to the caves, a few to the houses, and Mulu to the village square. Soon, all of Sindal is gathered in the square. Mulu and the elders stand clustered together, while Riv stands separate. The Melenite troops return to the village, their dozens gathering in a cluster near the arch entrance. Dovri makes his way over to Dela in the crowd of Sindalans.

“Today, Sindal became a vassal of Melen.” Mulu says plainly. “It is not what we set out expecting, but it is apparent that our village must work with Melen in order to prosper. The attacks of Elementals left us nearly defenseless, and these attacks will become no easier to deal with in the coming years.”

The council of elders cast their eyes down as Mulu stands in front of them. Riv looks to his troops, stone faced. The villagers whisper and chatter, uneasy and unsure of the sudden prospect.

“In return for Melen’s aid, we will provide a portion of our produced crystals. This means we will need to increase mining. Melen is also working to provide a safe trade route through Shiln, which will expedite exports.”

At this, some of the miners grow angry. They yell out their distaste for the agreement, but stop as Mulu raises a hand.

“It is either crystals or food. We have a much larger surplus of one than the other. I truly believe the export of crystals is our village’s best option.”

This quells the outward anger of the miners, but Dovri can feel them seethe near him.

“We must provide housing to these troops. For the next week, they will camp outside the village. In that time, we must expand the village to accommodate them. We will be making a new barracks on the western side. With the Melenite aid presence, we also must feed them. Miners and Tsen farmers, we will need you to combine your strengths. Until the trade route is complete, we have no need for extra crystals--Food is of the utmost importance.”

“How long will this last?” Asks a middle aged woman.

“The bulk of the troops will remain for one year. In half that time they expect to have a trade route set up across Shiln. From then on, Melenite troops will station for a year. Once the year is up, new troops will arrive from Melen and the others will return.”

The crowd grumbles, some chattering more understandingly. They seem happy that there will still be space between Melen and Sindal.

“Finally, a few of the Melenite troops would like to stay with us permanently. We will accept them with open arms, as they have accepted us in kind. Their assistance will allow Sindal to survive. If you believe these terms are unacceptable, you may speak to the council any time during the day. Captain Riv will be in the council room during the day as well, if you have questions for him. I thank you all for your understanding.”

Mulu backs up to rejoin the rest of the council members, and the Sindalans give a halfhearted clap. Some are ecstatic, namely the trainee guards and mothers. Most have their brows furrowed, deep in thought. Dovri casts a look at Dela, who is transfixed on the ground. She seems most concerned of all. The crowd dissipates, people returning to their homes. Dela guides Dovri to the caves. The walk is silent. Dela gestures to a small, dark room lit with a blue, luminous mushroom cap.

“Thank you, Dovri.” Dela says as she’s about to leave. Dovri, walking through the portal, turns to accept. He stops.

“...I--I’m sorry. I feel like I let you down..” He stutters out. Dela gives him a faint smile. It’s all she can seem to manage.

“Don’t. You shouldn’t.” She assures him.

“It’s just--I didn’t do much. To help.”

“You came up with the plan in the first place, though. I was planning to just raise the trainees as quickly as I could, and hope for the best.”

“I wish I could have helped more, though. It feels like I just slowed down your traversal of Shiln.” Dovri sits on the edge of the raised shelf of dirt that makes up the bed, leaning forward with his hands clasped, elbows on his legs.

“Your aid in Melen was very valuable.” Dela says, patting his shoulder.

“I helped a bit there, but I wasn’t there to join in the discussion of aid! Riv and the commander still tricked you!”

“Stop. I said before this situation was most likely inevitable. Sindalans aren’t too fond of permanent outsiders, but soon these outsiders will not be so. They’ll be Sindalan-Melenites. And a few, like Fon, will just be Sindalan, soon. These tensions will alleviate, I’m sure.”

Dovri looks up at Dela, standing tall above him. Her eyes catch in the dim blue light, and as she turns Dovri knows he saw tears. She exits the room, saying good night. Dovri stares at the dirt floor and thinks to himself. Her words said confidence and assuredness, but under the surface she’s torn. Again and again, Dovri cycles through that day in Melen in his head. A pointless celebration, heavy drinking, and letting down Dela. It comes back again and again to the drinking. Cursing, Dovri opens his notebook and scribbles a quick message to himself. Laying down, he thinks of tomorrow. He decides to go see Mulu and apologize for not upholding the deal. He is disgraced as a merchant, and as a man of his word.

Come day, Dovri wakes early. He steps out of the caves to see troops milling about the town. Sindalans cluster around the council room, one let in at a time by the elders. The troops are moving supplies, gifts of food and tools, to a storage house on the south side of the village. Dovri spots Dela, along with the trainee Sindalan guards, moving crates as well. Fon stays near them, talking to the trainees and getting to know them. Looking at the long line of Sindalans with questions for the council, Dovri sighs and decides to tend to Alnir instead this morning.

Alnir is resting by the well, being entertained by the Sindalan children. The children brush her with coarse combs, decorate her mane with small gems, and feed her small handfuls of grass. Dovri greets Alnir and the children, and they all turn to face him.

“Thank you all for treating Alnir so nicely!” Dovri says, chuckling heartily. He pets Alnir’s head and gives her a scratch behind the ears.

“Is that her name?” One of the children asks.

“Indeed. She’s named after a goddess in Dundyr.” Dovri says, taking a seat to check Alnir’s hooves in the daylight.

“What’s Dundyr?” Another child asks.

“A city far to the east, past a forest and tall, tall mountains. They have lots of metal there.”

“A forest?”

“Ah--A place with many, many trees. The tops of them are so close together that it’s almost always dark inside.”

The children sit in a cluster in front of Dovri, and he finds himself in the role of a storyteller.

“What’s Alnir the goddess of?”

“Her domain is the fields and pastures. The rolling hills with no sand or trees or rocks. Just grass and earth.”

“Like the south!”

“That’s right.” Dovri smiles. Such simple, friendly conversation is astonishingly refreshing to the merchant.

“There’s an ancient tale in Dundyr. That the mountains to the east used to extend all the way to the coast. No one could live there, it was all rock and spikes. Alnir reached down and used her hand to brush the mountains flat. She then went about walking through the land, planting one seed of grass for every mountain peak she sacrificed.” Dovri regales. He stops, thinking about what the moral of the tale should be. All stories to children need a moral. “You see…The sacrifice of the mountains was necessary to live on the land. But we cannot forget--” The merchant is interrupted by his donkey.

Alnir brays, flapping her tail as one of the children tries to braid it. The child falls backwards and the others laugh. Dovri gets up and refreshes Alnir’s bowl of water, telling the children to be careful with Alnir. They respond affirmatively, and go back to decorating and brushing her.

Dovri looks at the line again. While shorter, it still looks like a few hours will pass before he can get in. With nothing else to do, he approaches Dela and Fon as they race back and forth from caravans to the storage room. With little time to stop, they note that they’re nearly done. Dovri goes to the caravan with the two and helps by carrying a crate of bread. He immediately falls behind the fit soldiers, but as they return they thank him for his assistance. After five more trips, Dovri collapses against the outside wall of the storage house. A handful of troops bring the last few crates in, and Dela and Fon approach the exhausted merchant to thank him.

“This is what I was talking about.” Dela notes.

“Eh?” Dovri asks, putting a hand to his chest to feel his heartbeat, his breathing quick.

“If there’s something he can help with, he’ll help until he becomes exhausted. But then he becomes a burden, undoing the help!” Dela laughs. Fon giggles and takes a seat next to Dovri. Dela joins them, and they share a drink from a canteen.

“Better to help than to not.” Dovri says after gulping down his drink.

“Better to not exhaust yourself! You can help without dropping dead at the end of the day.” Dela scolds him, only half-joking.

“Hm...Suppose it’s an Ordori thing.” Dovri shrugs, deflecting the direct assault.

“Ahh whatever, quit fightin’!” Fon says. Dela lays off and Dovri pats her shoulder.

“You’ve got a valid point. Sorry about that.” He says.

“It’s fine.” Dela responds.

“Well, I wanted to go talk to Mulu and apologize for this turn of events, but I may not get to see him today.” Dovri gestures towards the line of villagers outside the council room.

“Still don’t think you have anything to apologize for.” Dela remarks.

“At the least, I want to extend my help as much as I can. This place has grown on me quite a bit.”

“I know I asked before, but are you still comfortable with the military presence? You and the townsfolk looked disturbed yesterday.” Fon asks.

“As long as we don’t lose who we are.” Dela says. “Sindal will be safer this way. I just hope the Melenite influence doesn’t overwhelm our Sindalan identity.”

“The journey across Shiln is transformative, I’d say. Those that make the trek may find themselves more akin to Sindalan by the end of it.” Dovri adds.

“Speaking from experience?” Dela smiles, leaning forward to look at him around Fon.

“Hah! A bit, perhaps.” Dovri grins in response.

“I meant to ask you, Dovri!” Fon joins in. “Dela said Alnir’s age is showing. How much longer are you going to be doing merchanting?”

“Well...My reserves in Ordor are nearly what I need them to be to retire. I’ve told Dela before about my plans for retirement--I want to facilitate local trade in Ordor and provide a place for Alnir to roam with others of her kind. A few more trips to Dundyr and back to Ordor could provide enough. But while that trek isn’t like crossing Shiln, it’s still not easy. I’ll need protection, which would limit my profits. That’ll make for more trips…Which Alnir can’t do…” Dovri trails off.

“What about letting Alnir rest in a stable and buy another pack animal to trek with?” Fon asks.

“Hm...Could do that. It’s not too simple to build trust with an animal like that, though. Especially when putting them through the struggle of pulling a cart through a forest and over mountains.”

“True, true...Makes sense.” Fon admits. The trio spend a few minutes in silence. The sun grows lower in the sky, and the clouds to the west create a spectacular sight. Purples and indigos float above the fiery reds and oranges of the flaming clouds near the horizon. Thin, high clouds act as a canvas for lower clouds. Massive, natural shadow puppet shows ensue, and the children chatter about what shapes are forming. The line at the council room slowly finishes, and the elders exit soon after. Captain Riv exits as well, heading towards the town entrance to meet with the troops. Fon gives a quick salute to Dovri and Dela before heading off to rejoin with the Melenites.

The elders are hunched and exhausted, and shuffle towards their houses. Dovri is about to get up when he sees the state they’re in, and decides against approaching them just yet. Tomorrow will do, he thinks to himself.

“I’m going to turn in, thank you both for sitting with me.” Dovri turns to the duo.

“Oy! How much longer will you be around, Dovri?” Fon asks, getting up and stretching.

“Ah, I’m not sure yet. I need to talk to Mulu tomorrow, then buy some supplies to make it back to Ordor. Could be a day or two, maybe more.”

“Sorry if our setup here delays ya, it’ll be calmed down here soon.” Fon grins widely. Dela grins at her infectious enthusiasm.

Dovri waves as he walks back towards the village center. Passing Alnir, he gives her a scratch behind the ear. The pampered donkey is radiant with crystals, and seems very pleased.

Returning to his room, Dovri sits on the bed and opens his notebook. For a moment he thinks it has been vandalized, then he remembers writing the note. “***No more drink!***” is scrawled upon a page, so deep that the impression of it can be seen on subsequent pages. So it must be, he thinks to himself. To save on money and be of sound mind is essential at this point of his life. He lays down and thinks of Alnir. The poor girl has been worked to death in Shiln. She went once before, up at Dundyr Pass, but that was merely a brief jaunt when compared to this trip. The prices for horses in Ordor aren’t cheap, so that’s out of the question. Not only their price, but bonding with a horse would take weeks, if not months. The Ordori ones know the dangers of the forest.

Could he start his trading idea in Ordor now? Maybe. The stores of funds are there for the carts and office. For manpower, he’d need to shop around. Alnir. The name echoes in his mind as sleep takes him. Dreams of the donkey when she was but a foal swirl together. Dovri sees the plains of eastern Dundyr, rolling and broad. The temples dotting it are tall stone spires, elaborately engraved. Some display water rolling down their sides, filling grooves and splashing into the flow beneath. Fields of vegetables surround them, and robed women carry grain in a basket. Suddenly, the plains are covered in deep snow. The trees around Dundyr’s walls stand stark and barren. Trails twist and turn through the snow of the plains, belying the fact that even in this season of death, life continues its stalwart push. The mountains to the west rise above the steppe and the city, imperious. Their snow-capped peaks breach the sky and threaten the city with destruction at all times. Deep rumbles from below seem to rhyme with the thrums of Sindal.

The merchant awakes suddenly. The blue cap in his room glows brighter than before. Dovri surmises it to be daytime by that change. He gets dressed and walks out of his dim room. Walking out into the morning light, Dovri sees a considerably less long line to the elders council. Near the village entrance and extending towards the square, the Melenite troops are doing warm ups. Clustered near them, the Sindalan trainees and Dela mimic them. Alnir stands by the well with fewer children praising her today.

Dovri is suddenly pushed aside by a group of miners running out from the caves. They drag a limp man between them, geared much differently than the Sindalan miners. The line at the council room briefly disperses as they demand to be let in. A medic is called, and two rush in after. The villagers stare at the council room for a while, confused. Dela calls out to Dovri.

“Hey old man! Feel free to join us if you’ve nothing better to do!”

Dovri shrugs and approaches the Sindalan trainees.

“Promise not to laugh, now.” He says.

“Of course! Don’t worry if you can’t keep up. You’ll know you’re done when you can feel your muscles hum like the earth!”

Dovri follows the stretches, finding them none too difficult for a while. He can’t quite reach his toes, but the simpler standing stretches feel good. The ones where he lays on his back are also quite refreshing. Soon after he joins, though, the Melenite troops begin a series of extremely intensive exercises. They drop to the ground to push up, then jump up to jump from one leg to another as fast as they can, then fall back to the ground, catching themselves with their hands to repeat. Dovri does a few push ups before collapsing, standing up and lifting his legs one after another for a bit. He’s embarrassed, but sees the Sindalan trainees struggling as well. One by one, they drop off, breathing rapidly on the ground. Dela goes the longest of the Sindalans, but also falls behind.

At the leader’s mark, the Melenite troops stop. Dovri can hear their heavy breathing though they stand stiff. The training leader approaches Dela, who stands up and salutes.

“At ease, you’re fine.” The leader says. “I’m Lev. I wanted to tell you that you shouldn’t have all your troops do this whole routine every day. Everyone does some stretching, but the harder stretching and exercise is only performed by half.”

“Ah! Of course, that makes sense. I’ll remember that, thank you.” Dela says quickly, her eyes darting to avoid contact.

The awkward interaction is interrupted by a commotion from the council room. Dovri turns to see Mulu barging out, followed by two elders. A few other elders from the council poke their heads out, calling for the leaving ones to return. Their requests go unanswered, so they go back in with a huff. A few villagers go to the angered elders and inquire as to what’s going on. A swell in the chatter around them causes Dovri to approach.

“There’s no way!” One villager says.

“That cannot be, he’s lying!” Another adds.

“As far as I can tell, his story is true. His gear is Dundyran, Riv confirmed it.” Mulu says quickly.

“You can’t trust the captain yet. What if they’re from Melen?”

“He looks like no Melenite I’ve ever seen. The area the miners found him in was yet to be explored, as well.”

The crowd chatters some more, and Dovri joins in.

“Is there a man from Dundyr here?” He asks. Mulu turns to look at the merchant. Dovri is surprised to see no anger in the old man’s eyes when laid upon him.

“Yes--Possibly. A group of miners found him collapsed in the mines.”

“Does he have any metal tools on him? If so, I can identify Dundyran metal. Er--I suppose Captain Riv could too. But if you need a second opinion, I could--”

Mulu nods quickly, grabbing Dovri’s arm with surprising strength and pulling him back towards the council. Dovri sneaks in a question as he moves.

“Why did you walk out?”

“You’ll see, I’m sure.” Mulu puts him off.

The two enter the council room, a room Dovri has never seen before. Red rugs and banners hang on the walls, while a gorgeous table made of white, translucent crystal sits in the center. Chairs set into the ground surround the table, also carved of crystal. Papers cover the table in stacks. Most likely Melenite, Dovri assumes. At the right side of the room sits the Dundyran, clad in dusty gray gear. He sips water from a water sack, and is surrounded by the elders, medics, and Captain Riv. Dovri hears a notable accent in his voice, and approaches.

“Ah, hello. Um, I can tell Dundyran metal from a glance. If you all need a second opinion as to whether he’s truly from there.”

“Yes, that would help.” Captain Riv says, moving away from the man. One of the medics picks up a pickaxe from the splayed out tools of the man’s coat. The item of clothing is spread out on the ground, and laden heavily with tools of all kinds. Dovri takes the pick and examines the base. There used to be a metal cap on it, but it has fallen off. Turning the item around, he looks at the top and bottom of the head for signature.

“Ah, there it is!” He places his finger on it to feel the indents. “Impressions of Dundyran metalworkers. As far as I know, no other metalworkers fashion their metal in this specific way. This is from Gano, a blacksmith I’ve worked with.”

Dovri shows the elders and Captain Riv the impressions forming the signature. The elders nod, seeming more downtrodden that he truly is Dundyran. Captain Riv nods and puts his hand to his chin, stroking his beard while gazing at a paper on the table. Silence overtakes the room, broken only by the miner’s intermittent coughing and sipping of water.

“What…” Dovri starts to ask, but stops as many faces turn to him. “Uh. He came from the caves?” He asks meekly.

“Yes.” Mulu says, getting on one knee to talk to the Dundyran. “Sir, did you ever surface in your travel from Dundyr?” The miner coughs a few times before clearing his throat and answering.

“No, never. Went to Mount Kaval’s southern side cavern, and it kept going down and down. Then myriad tunnels split off. I followed the rightmost path every time. After a long while, I was there. Must have been a week or two.”

“What maniac goes caving for multiple weeks alone?” One of the elders asks.

“A Dundyran, apparently.” Dovri says. “They’re desperate to find alternate passages through the mountains. Did you map the path?”

“I mapped what I could. It may not be complete, but it’s the turns I took.”

“We will need those.” Riv says, covering his mouth as he looks at maps on the table.

“Not just gonna give ‘em up!” The miner protests before coughing. A medic hands him fresh water. Riv turns and approaches him, stooping to rustle through his jacket that’s splayed on the floor.

“You just discovered a new trade route, friend. Here in Nevoria, we do not place personal ownership on routes. Your knowledge is public now, and Sindal will be the first to take advantage of it.” Despite the miner’s continued protests, Riv picks a sheaf of papers from the jacket and places them on the table to examine.

“Withered moon!” Mulu curses at Riv. “Money hungry cretin!”

“Remove yourself again if all you have are insults.” Riv says, not looking up from the maps. Mulu takes the advice, and storms out once again. Dovri follows quickly.

“Mulu! Mulu, why are you so upset? This is amazing news!”

The old man keeps walking, shoulders raised in contained fury.

“With this, Sindal can start to be a trade hub between Dundyr and Melen!”

“We are unprepared! And that is the least of the issues!” Mulu turns and yells at Dovri. “Sindal just became a vassal of Melen. We were a valuable source of crystals and foreign food. Now, we’re a prime target for assimilation--From Dundyr and Melen! We face the loss of Sindal from two sides now!”

Dovri is taken aback by the outburst, but comes back swinging.

“Melen is in no position to assimilate this village. Shiln still separates you from them! But travel across Shiln is safer than those damned mountains. And, who’s to say this cavern route is even safe? It may prove worthless! Calm down and think!”

Mulu steps back a bit at the merchant’s fervor. He mumbles a bit before turning and marching back into his room, flourishing the curtain behind him. Dovri looks around at the villagers staring at him, and suddenly feels very meek. He rushes to the fountain to tend to Alnir.

It is midday. The sun gleams down, imperious and humid. Dovri’s mind ties itself in knots thinking about the matter as he brushes the donkey. Again and again, he attempts to move his mind away. It rushes back without fail. Agonizingly slowly, the sun creeps past its highest point. Villagers have abandoned the line to get into the councilroom. Shuffling of papers can be heard in the quiet day, echoing from the councilroom off the rocky walls of the village. The Melenite guards are apparently absent, but on a hill in the distance--Just cresting the eastern wall--Dovri spots several small figures keeping watch. Mulu suddenly exits his room. The elder’s posture carries no anger, just a twinge of exasperation. He closes his curtain and approaches Dovri.

“I apologize for the outburst. I’d like to speak on better terms.” Mulu says, somewhat curtly.

“Ah, y-yeah, that sounds okay.” Dovri stammers, not expecting such a turn.

The two enter the caves and take a few turns through the halls. They end up in a room lit with many blue mushrooms, all at full brightness. Dovri is surprised to see mushrooms able to cast a noticeable shadow. A desk formed from raised stone and topped with a thin sheet of crystal lies in the center, circular, with two chairs on opposite sides. Mulu sits on the far side and Dovri takes a seat on the near side. Mulu picks up a crystal in an iron holder from beside his chair and places it in the middle of the table. Dovri stares at it for a bit, waiting for it to do something, but nothing happens. The merchant surmises it must be ornamental. Mulu starts after a pause.

“You raise good points. I appreciate you voicing them, even in the wake of fury.” He states plainly. Dovri looks from Mulu to the table, to around the room, before coming back to the old man. His voice has left him. Mulu does not look at Dovri, the elder’s hands are clasped and his forehead lays against them, elbows pressed against the polished table.

“The man from Melen, Riv. His ambition bothers me. I can handle Sindal becoming a vassal of Melen. We need the assistance. But I believe Riv sees an opportunity to remake Sindal. I found disdain in his words about our council. He referenced a monarchy that ruled with nothing but blood.” Mulu goes silent. Dovri waits for what feels like forever. Just as he’s about to speak, Mulu sits back.

“And yet. He speaks truth about the Dundyran and his passage. The miner has little option to return home in his current state, and we cannot pretend to not know of the passage. This discovery could afford us many things. I just fear for what we may lose. Things move so quickly nowadays. Ten years ago I could sit and think on a matter for a week before making a decision. Now it’s two great changes split over a day.” Dovri now sits forward, giving a nod to make it clear he’s listening.

“I’m too used to life in Sindal...How things have been. I knew it’d have to change one day, but so much so fast…”

“Your people came from a nomadic tribe, right?” Dovri finally pipes up. Mulu turns his eyes towards the merchant and gives a slight nod. “So did Ordor. I’m sure the elders of that tribe went through similar strife with the Elementals.” Mulu looks back at his desk, contemplative.

“Indeed. Weeks of battle. Dozens of warriors lost. All to protect those that could not fight. The founders of Sindal withdrew deep into the caves during times of high Elemental activity. We can no longer do so, there are too many of us, it’s too dangerous.”

“Really…Huh. The caves seem plentiful to me.” Dovri wonders aloud.

“We take only what we need. The balance between the growth of crystals, the Tsen slugs, the water level, the Funga--It’s all extremely delicate. Too much of our presence down there could destroy our subsistence. It will be difficult enough to scale up mining and farming…” Mulu’s brow furrows and he leads forward, putting his clasped hands against his mouth as he stares at the crystal on the table. “To create a trade route through the caverns…”

“I still have doubts as to whether a pitch-black, winding system of caves will be a more popular trade route than trudging through snow and forest.” Dovri reminds him. Mulu looks at him and nods.

“Indeed. That’s a good point. …Still, to have Melenites dig deep and light the caverns is dangerous itself.” Mulu breaks his still posture again, sitting back and then standing up. He circles the table, taking a slip of brown paper from a shelf on the wall and placing it on the table. He writes for a moment before pausing. Dovri shifts a bit in his seat, unsure of whether he should leave.

.

“I need to talk with Dela about Riv. Regardless of the Dundyr passage, we need to keep an eye on him.” The old man says. Dovri gets up, groaning from stiffness as well as from the reminder of Riv’s persuasive tactics.

“He will try to get you to agree to things in a sneaky way. It’s my advice to keep your mouth shut tight until you’re absolutely sure you know the terms. They’ll pressure you, too. Be careful.” Dovri advises him.

“I appreciate it. The other elders will appreciate this advice too, I’m sure.”

“Oh!” Dovri jumps. “I nearly forgot--I wanted to apologize!”

Mulu waves him off.

“No--I mean, not about the outburst. I feel rather vindicated in that.” Mulu frowns but lets Dovri continue.

“I wanted to apologize because it's my fault Sindal became a vassal of Melen. I wasn’t there when Dela met with Riv and the Melenite general. They pressured her and tricked her to agree to this. She sought aid, stood before them, and they asked if Sindal would be accepted as a vassal. She said yes, not fully knowing the terms. She’s been saying she’s comfortable with the decision, but she’s not. Under the surface she’s conflicted. If I had--”

Mulu looks him dead in the eyes.

“Do not take fault for Dela’s mistake. She’s made a fair few.”

“No I’m--Hey, what--” Dovri tries to interrupt, but interrupts himself at Mulu’s attack on Dela.

“She comes back from them, learns from them. Do not take this from her.” He says with steel on his tongue.

“Ah. R-Right. I see.” Dovri says, backing down.

Mulu circles the desk, picking up a scroll laying on a shelf near the door. He goes back to the far seat and unwraps it, setting the crystal in the holder on the top of it. So that’s what it’s used for, Dovri thinks. Mulu frowns after reviewing the writing on the scroll. Dovri is able to make out a few words--It seems to be a list of laws, with a leadership log on one side.

“I know this is not the end of this period of change, just the beginning.” Mulu rubs his chin, transfixed on the scroll. “With a situation like this…I doubt our council can continue. We won’t be able to handle too many more villagers here.” Mulu writes at the bottom of the scroll, crossing some things out. Dovri looks around, a bit confused that Mulu is sharing this with him.

“You can go.” The old man says, looking up. “Thank you for speaking with me. Your position is unique here, and valuable.”

“Ah! Okay--Thank you for talking with me as well!” Dovri says. He feels markedly less welcome as Mulu scribbles away. He quickly pulls the curtain aside and exits the room. It takes a few wrong turns to dead ends, but eventually the merchant is able to twist his way out of the caves. Outside, the sun has begun to set, and the village council has resumed its line. Dovri isn’t sure where the Dundyran went--perhaps a medical room in the caves? Regardless, he goes to check on Alnir. The donkey is doing well, walking idly around the town to stretch her legs. She gleefully accepts Dovri’s pets and scratches. Dovri looks to the south sky and thinks to himself.

An idea has been forming in his mind. A concept of a ranch in the grassy plains north of the Nevorian ravine. Close enough to visit both Sindal and Ordor, and act as a rest stop for those traveling from Ordor to Melen. Perhaps preparing travelers for a trip through Shiln. Would he have the money for such a ranch? Possibly, for materials. For labor, surely not. He puts the idea in the back of his mind for now, and goes back to his room in the caves.

Walking in, he sees a medic rushing with a bucket to fetch water. The Dundyran must be here. For a moment he feels bad for the man, having just spent days underground. But he reminds himself that the adventurer went in of his own accord, planning to spend days. Dovri wonders how many had perished on similar treks. Then, he thinks of how many perished exploring the mountains for passages over top. Perhaps it doesn’t seem that insane to search below. Walking into his room, he shakes his head to rid himself of such gruesome pondering. He sits down on his bed and thinks once more of Alnir. The pesky recurring thought of the ranch returns in the void of thought. He does a rough estimation of the money the labor would take, and how many trips to Dundyr and back he would need. More than the poor donkey could handle. Laying down, sleep takes him quickly. Rest grants him no great visions in dreams on this night.

---

Dovri awakes in what feels like minutes, but the shroom cap glows a bright blue. Just as he’s getting up, a commotion can be heard in the tunnel. He grabs his things and exits his room to see medics running from deeper in the cave, out towards the village. He follows them and comes out into the morning light to the scene of a battle. A Fire Elemental writhes outside the city gateway, the arch demolished. A familiar figure--Riv, gets up from a kneeling stance to rush towards the many-armed beast. Scorch marks line the fountain square, and it seems to Dovri that the Elemental was inside just a few moments before.

Riv stops just before the flaming behemoth, landing in a battle stance and transforming his momentum into a sharp gust of wind pulled in from the village. The wind rushes past the Fire Elemental, briefly quelling its flames and stalling it. Above, on the cliffs surrounding the canyons, dots that Dovri assumes are Melenite troops stand. With resounding cracks, chunks of the canyon fall loose. A loud thump follows each one as they’re accelerated downwards along the curve of the canyon walls. Soon, the Fire Elemental regains its balance, but is drowned in stone. Riv focuses strikes of wind on exposed parts, blowing out the flames before they’re covered with more stone.

With a raspy scream, the Fire Elemental collapses under the weight. Black smoke pours from the pile as it falls inward, the Elemental’s outward pressure now absent. Riv stands up straight, surveying the situation for a moment before raising his hand in a gesture. The troops atop the cliff come sliding down, and begin picking the rocks off of the ashes of the Elemental. Looking to his left, Dovri realizes Dela is right next to him. The look on her face strikes cold into his heart. Instantly, Dovri knows what flows through her mind. Thoughts of uselessness, inadequacy, endangerment.

“Dela--” Dovri starts, but stops as she turns swiftly to gather the trainees from the barracks. She walks in, and just a few seconds later back out with the scrambling guards in tow. The Sindalan troops assist with the cleanup of the Elemental. Dela’s eyes have hardened. She lifts stones as big as she and tosses them to the side of the road with such fervor the Melenite troops give her extra space. Dovri watches, paralyzed. He wants to approach her, maybe he could help. But it seems impossible, useless.

Soon, a glow from Dela’s chest becomes visible. She visibly winces more with each toss, but continues. She speeds up, even. Rola speaks up, asking her to slow down. Dela delivers her a look so venomous she flees to the other side of the road to work. Riv watches Dela work. Her arms have begun to tremble with each throw, steam billowing from her chest and mouth. By the time the sizzle is audible, the job is done. Some of the Melenite troops comment that something this big usually takes half the day. Dela walks past Riv, not making eye contact. She goes back into the village and straight to the barracks.

After a short period of silence, the villagers come out of the caverns they had taken shelter in. Medics check on villagers that were still in their homes. The Melenite troops do some more cleaning of the road, and Riv goes to the council room as well. The Sindalan trainees look at each other before returning to the barracks.

“Returning to the mines would be a blessing...:” One mutters.

“I’d sooner lift water to the farms all day than be embarrassed like this.” Another agrees.

Dovri suddenly realizes Alnir was out during the attack, and turns rapidly to find her. She’s nowhere to be seen. He rushes to a Melenite guard and asks if they saw where a donkey went. He shrugs and continues marching to the village walls. Dovri asks a few villagers, but none were out to see. He checks the caves before realizing she would never run into a cave. His worry begins to transform into panic. She may have run out of the southwest gateway, as the Fire Elemental was near the southeast one. He takes a few steps outside the gate, but quickly turns back as he realizes the danger he would put himself in.

Dovri sprints to the barracks. Barging in, he sees the trainees carrying gear and supplies, downtrodden. Rola and a few others tend to Dela. She lays on a bed, her shirt torn up. Tears stream down her face as Rola applies a light green gel to the black chunk sticking out of the wounded woman’s sternum. Gritting her teeth and breathing hard, Dela winces and looks like she wants to scream with every application. A few guards hold her open palms, and Dovri can see a faint blue glow flowing from them into her.

Slowly, the pain fades from excruciating to terrible. Words coming back to her, Dela resorts to cursing.

“Damn it--Damn it all.” She repeats. The guards not directly assisting her avert their gazes. A while passes in relative silence. Dovri takes a seat on one of the beds, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Dela’s breathing slows, but still hitches with defeated grief. The searing chunk of burned bone has fully cooled by now. She slowly sits up, being careful not to bend her back. Rola packs more gel onto a bandage and wraps it around Dela’s chest.

Dela grits her teeth and adjusts the bandage so she can move easier. She takes a few breaths, just sitting on the bed. She stares forward at empty space, her face soaked with tears. Rola hands her a wet cloth, and Dela is knocked out of her stupor. Wiping her face, she thanks Rola. The guards that infused Dela with energy assist her in putting on a robe and her leather breastplate over it. They keep it loose to prevent any pressure from being applied to the wound.

Turning to stand up, Dela takes a few hesitant steps. She has no trouble walking, but any bending of her back makes her wince. Keeping a careful posture, she walks back and forth a few times. Rola helps keep her steady, and eventually she’s able to take confident steps.

“The merchant came running in. He probably wants to talk with you.” Rola notes, gesturing towards Dovri. Dela nods and approaches the sitting man. Dovri stands up, his panic suddenly returning.

“Alnir--I can’t find her. She must have run during the attack.” Dela’s expression transforms from depressed to determined in an instant. She rushes out past Dovri as the merchant spins and tries to keep up. “I-I think she went out the southwest gateway. I’ve no idea how far…”

“I’m going to notify the Melenite troops. Then we’ll grab some resources--Ss!” Dela is interrupted by her chest searing. She grips the painful area but does not break her stride. In a shuddering voice, she continues. “We’re going to get resources and head out that way. Enough for two nights.”

Dela waves over a guard and notifies them to keep watch for a donkey. If they see it, don’t try to capture it, just relay its position back to her. The Melenite nods and goes to inform Riv. Next, she grabs Dovri two satchels full of rations and grabs a waterstick for each of them from the supply ditch beside the barracks. Dovri dons the satchels, ignoring their weight as they head out into the afternoon. They walk through the winding canyon paths, Dela keeping an eye on the ground for traces of Alnir. She confirms a few hoofprints, but they’re infrequently laid, making exact tracking difficult. Every once in a while they pause as Dela takes a few breaths, having to correct her posture and wait out the heat of her wound.

“Dela, are you okay to do this so suddenly?” Dovri asks.

“My chest? I’m fine. It still hurts like hell, but it’s ignorable now.”

“Okay.” Dovri says, somewhat unconvinced. The two continue on for a while, winding around the descending and rising edge of the canyon.

“Has she run off before? I don’t know how fast she is unburdened and panicked.”

“She’s run off a few times. She knows to sprint when Elementals are near. She really can get some speed, surprisingly. You’d think she was all brawn--” Dovri’s voice cracks a bit. Dela glances in his direction, worried. Dovri gestures to keep going.

“It’s okay. I know it’s stressful, but she can’t have gone too far.” Dela assures him. Dovri nods, stuffing down his emotions to focus on the search. A while longer passes, quiet. Dela takes a few more breaks--Some to breathe, some to examine tracks. During one of the stops, Dela has to hold on to the rocky wall to keep herself up. Dovri speaks up.

“ I was worried, you know, watching you work like that.”

“Your worry should have been with the villagers.” Dela takes a breath and gulps. “Today proved exactly what you were worried about. I knew it was true as well, that we wouldn’t be able to handle another attack like that. But to see it so plainly laid out in front of me is unbearable.”

Dovri shuts his mouth again. Broaching the subject so soon was a bad move. The walk continues. Dovri shifts the packs of food on his shoulders.

“Here, let me carry one.” Dela says, extending a hand.

“No, it’s fine. You’re still in pain--I’m not. Yet.” Dovri gives a smile, but Dela does not return it. Another long pause occurs. Dovri speaks up again as a realization occurs to him.

“Wait--What about your spear? You don’t have a weapon--What if we get attacked?”

“It’ll be fine. The Melenite troops are patrolling. If we run into trouble we can fall back...To them.” She hesitates as she finishes her sentence. Dovri looks at her from the corner of his eye. “We’ll be okay.” She finishes curtly.

The canyon begins to flatten out, and the two emerge from the shadows of the valley into the dying evening light. Dela examines the dirt, finding tracks in a small muddy puddle. She notes Alnir was still moving quickly by the distance between the tracks. Dovri’s stress redoubles. The tracks lead further west, so they continue on their way. It’s not long, though, before they come to a stop. Dela can no longer identify tracks or traces of Alnir in the darkness of evening, so they sit next to a protruding rock and rest. Dovri chugs one of the water sacks and hands Dela one her favorite mushroom bars.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Dela asks.

“Don’t feel like it.” Dovri says, staring at the ground. Dela stares at him for a moment before turning her gaze downward as well.

Slowly, the sun’s glow fully fades from the flat horizon. Stars begin to fill the sky, fading in from the dying blue. Dovri shifts his position, sitting with his knees up and back against the rising stone. He still wears his packs, as if he’s ready to continue the trek at a moment’s notice. Dela sits a short ways away, around the corner of the rock. She presses her back up against the wall to keep her posture correct, and takes a breath.

“I understand how you feel. But if you want to keep your energy up you need to force something down. Swallow your grief for the moment and let it out later. Now is the time to have a hardened will to right your wrongs.” Dela says, almost scolding.

Dovri sighs and digs out a bar for himself as well, eating it quickly. He keeps his gaze on the ground, focusing on having sleep come to him. As he begins to doze, Dela speaks up. In a cracked voice, she sputters.

“No--I misspoke. You have done no wrong--It’s me. I didn’t...Damn it!” Dovri turns in her direction, but she has moved beyond his vision around the rock. Dovri’s stressed and sleepy mind struggles to think of a comforting phrase.

“I should follow my own advice. Hardened will. I’m trying to, but I hear Nelri’s voice yelling at me. My mistake--I...I messed it up. And now I’m messing up her command to swallow your grief until the task i-is done. I’ve let her down. The village--You. Mulu. It’s all compounding and pressing d-down on me I just…”

Dela’s form shudders as she cries. She makes no more sounds, only her tears hitting the ground do. Dovri feels tears well up in his tired eyes. He thinks for a while, what to say. He picks himself up, shuffling through the bags, producing another mushroom bar. The least I can do, he thinks, is remind her that I’m here. Dovri rounds the rock and sits down next to Dela. Her knees are pulled up to her chest, and she lays her head on them, arms covering her face. Putting the bar in his other hand, Dovri places a hand on Dela’s back. He feels residual heat, unnatural, through her back. A thought comes to him suddenly.

“Nelri told you...Swallow your grief until the task is done. Did you...After Nelri died, did you grieve? Or did you follow that advice?”

Dela has stopped shuddering, but the drops on the ground continue to spill. A long silence sits between the two. Cold wind bites their exposed skin. It feels like Dovri is being pushed away by it, but he pushes back to stay in contact with Dela.

“I never cried until tonight. I cried when they brought me back, after I was wounded. I cried for days while falling in and out of consciousness. But it was all from the pain. I couldn’t think of anything else. When I was finally present enough to talk, they told me about Nelri, and the rest of the guards. Then it just...became my job. This is my task. A punishment for my mistake.”

Dovri takes a breath, in and out, thinking.

“That’s no way to live.” He settles on.

“It’s how I must.” Dela says, venom in her voice. “Nelri wanted to protect Sindal. I need to do so now, in order to make it up to her.”

Dovri leans back. He decides to leave it for tonight. Thinking to himself, he makes a note that Dela needs to talk about this to Mulu. He hears Dela shuffle as she lays down. The two fall to sleep in the bitter cold night, and dream of nothing. Dovri is awakened by the morning sun blinding him. He nearly falls down from his sitting position as he wakes so abruptly. Dela is up and examining the nearest tracks of Alnir. Dovri gathers the satchels and his waterstick, hefting himself up and approaching her.

“Still headed west.” Dela says quickly. She takes off in that direction, and Dovri follows. “She’s slowed now, must have calmed down. But she seems lost.”

“How much further do you think she could have gotten?”

“Not far, we should be nearing her.”

The two continue in silence, occasionally stopping as Dela examines the ground. Dovri feels his muscles ache, but he presses on. By midday, they’ve entered a bushy shrubland. Brown, stickly shrubs tremble in the wind. The ground is more dusty than sandy. Large cracks crisscross the parched earth, making it clear the dry season has arrived here.

Dela stops as she hasn’t found a track for a while. She examines the area closer, and Dovri looks up at their surroundings. With a jump and a cry, he runs past her. There, in the distance, a gray-brown equine stands on the bank of a low pond, sipping water.

“Alnir! Alnir!” Dovri cries out, and the donkey raises her head. She takes a moment to see that it is indeed Dovri before letting out a bray and trotting around the pond to meet him. Dela keeps up with Dovri and embraces the donkey with the merchant.

“Alnir, are you hurt?” Dovri asks, examining her legs and stomach. She is indeed a bit scratched up, possibly from the spiky shrubs in this area. No blood though, only missing tufts of hair and a few red marks on her legs. “Oh honey, I’m so sorry. We’re gonna get you back to Sindal, okay?”

With one hand each on the donkey’s mane, the two begin walking back east. The sun begins to set, but Dela assures Dovri that they can press on safely. She knows the way back to Sindal well. They stay above the canyon, walking far from the edge. Moonlight glazes the landscape bone white, like a ghostly shadow of day. In the silence, Dovri decides to bring up his idea.

“You know...I’ve been thinking. I had an idea. For a ranch somewhere out here, or maybe a bit further south. Somewhere near Ordor, but not far from Sindal, in the grasslands north of the ravine. Just a…A shack and some fences. And a barn. I think that would be a wonderful place for Alnir, and I could take care of travelers.”

“That sounds fantastic!” Dela says, giving Alnir a scratch. “I would love this sweetheart to be near enough to visit.”

“I’ve got the funds for the materials, I think. But I can’t put it together myself. Not good enough to withstand a stray wind at least, hah!”

“Hmm…” Dela thinks. “That’s definitely a problem. How much more do you need for labor?”

“More trips to Dundyr than Alnir can take.”

“What about trading locally in Ordor?”

“Setting that up might take a lot of money, too.”

“Hmm…” Dela twists her nose in thought.

After a bit of silence, Dela has an idea.

“I know! I could talk to the gem cutters and see if they could strike a deal with you.”

“Ahh no need for that, Dela. I don’t want to put pressure on Sindal right now.” Dovri waves her off.

“No, truly! We don’t usually sell many gems, but we’re going to have to, now, with Melen. So might as well see if they can thank you for your assistance.” Dela assures him.

“Well...Okay. We’ll talk to them.” He pauses, wondering if this is the right time. “Um...Dela. Can you…Will you talk to Mulu about Nelri? And this attack on Sindal?”

Dela shuts down. She turns away but keeps walking with Alnir.

“I know it’s difficult. But please. You need to voice these thoughts.” No response. Dovri waits. Dela stays quiet, her walking suddenly near silent.

“Will you do it?” Dovri begs.

Dela turns back, facing to the front. She’s chewing her lip. Her eyebrows furrow in worry. Through their shared hold on Alnir, Dovri feels her shudder as she takes in and lets out a deep breath.

“Fine. I’ll talk to him tomorrow. Though I’m sure he doesn’t need extra stress right now.” Dela finally acquiesces.

“Thank you.” Dovri gives a soft smile.

Soon after, they descend into the gaping canyon. Some parts of the trail descend lightly, but others suddenly. A protruding rock catches Dovri’s foot and he stumbles forward, getting a faceful of red dirt as he slides to a stop. He groans as Dela slides down beside him. The warrior helps the merchant sit up and dusts off his face. A few small cuts, but his pride is wounded more than his body.

“Let me carry one of the bags. We know we won’t need them now, anyway. And I’m feeling better.” Dela assures him.

“Ah, well. Here you go.” Dovri slips one pack off and hands it to Dela. She slings it over her shoulder and stands up, extending a hand to help Dovri. He takes it and tries to lift himself, but finds his legs have given out. They suddenly feel numb, jelly-like. After a few more attempts to stand, Dovri sits back on his hands.

“Well, guess I’m stuck!” Dovri laughs, jolly at the situation. Dela looks worried.

“We’ll rest for the night, hopefully you’ll feel better in the morning.”

“Doubt they’ll *feel* better, but they might be usable!” Dovri says, laying back with his food sack as a pillow. Dela gives a smile at the ever-positive merchant. Alnir lays down carefully on the incline, next to Dovri. Dela sits at the foot of the path, in the bottom of the canyon.

Sunset and night pass as one, sleep finding Dovri surprisingly easily. Once again, the merchant is jolted awake by the blinding sunlight in his face. On the east horizon, the sun mischievously pokes through clouds before hiding again. His back aches to hell, but his legs obey him once again. Dela walks back up the path to assist in guiding Alnir down, and the journey back resumes.

After winding through the canyon at Dela’s direction for a few hours, the village gateway suddenly appears again. Life at Sindal has resumed easily. The black scorch marks in the center have been cleaned, the western arch still broken but cleaned, and the path outside maintained. Dovri heaves a sigh of relief upon returning, handing the other bag of food to Dela.

“Thank you, so much.” Dovri says.

“Ahh, I’m just glad Alnir is alright. I’m glad I could help.” Dela gives a smile, but it fades rather quickly. She moves to the barracks with the leftover supplies without another word.

Dovri looks on at her for a moment before walking to the well with Alnir. Over the next few hours, he examines each foot and applies some light bandaging from the cart. No serious cuts, even at a closer look. When he finishes, night is falling, and the Melenite troops are swapping out shifts. An area of the village’s eastern wing has been marked out with crystal stakes, lines drawn in the sandy dirt between them. Villagers survey the area, their numbers dwindling as more turn in for the night. Dovri follows their lead and moves to the caves, stuffing his continued fear of another Elemental attack down. It’s unlikely for such an extreme attack to happen again so soon, he reminds himself.

Dovri returns to his room in the caves, the now-familiar blue glow greeting him. He sits on his bed and takes out his notebook. He thinks to himself about Dela’s offer. Should he stay for a while longer, waiting for gems to buy? Or just go back to Ordor in a few days and buy some wood to bring to Dundyr? He weighs the options for a while. His mind continues to go back to Alnir. He doesn’t want to push her too soon. Regardless of his final choice, he’s going to let her rest here in Sindal for a while longer. The merchant lies down, but sleep does not come. His nerves are still frazzled, his whole body on edge after seeing Alnir missing. For a while he stares at the slowly pulsating glow of the blue cap.

A knock comes from outside his room, and he sits up. Parting the curtains, Dela steps in after Dovri welcomes her. She’s hard to see in the dim light, but her usually glowing eyes are somber and obscured by puffiness.

“Are you okay?” Dovri asks quickly, getting up and approaching her. He hands her a cloth and she wipes her eyes.

“I feel okay...Tired. The tears won’t stop, though.” She lets out a hoarse laugh. “I guess everything built up is finally coming out.”

“Ahh...I see. Well if you need company, I’d be happy to provide. Can’t sleep at all, I’m still stressed from Alnir’s escapade.”

Dela accepts the merchant’s offer and sits at the desk while he sits back on the edge of his bed. On her way, she squeezes the stem of the blue cap, and its light brightens considerably. Dovri looks in amazement, and makes a mental note.

“Well...I talked to Mulu.” Dela says, leaning forward with her arms on her knees.

“Oh? That’s…Quick!”

“He called me into his room to talk a while ago.” She pauses. Dovri waits for her to continue, but she does not.

“Well, how did it go? What did you talk about?”

Dela sighs heavily, deep in thought as to how to word it.

“We...Talked about Nelri. Mulu’s perspective was very…unique. He got to see her from both an outsider’s perspective and as her superior. He was, um, pretty surprised to see me cry.” Dela lets out a small laugh.

“I’d imagine, after all this time.”

“He had suspicions that I was holding things back. The...Grief and all. Dealing with the tragedy. He didn’t want to bring it up though, for a long while. He was worried I’d fall back to the wound again if I got too emotional. Falling to my emotions is what caused all this in the first place, anyway. But...He said things have changed now. The Melenite troops have shown they’re extremely capable of protecting the village.”

Dela pauses again. Dovri listens intently. The faint thrum of the crystals below takes the place of the conversation, and carries it along by itself for a while. The pattern of the thrumming begins to lull Dovri into a doze, but suddenly Dela straightens her back and looks him in the eyes. He pops back awake, listening intently once more.

“We’re going to dissolve the Sindalan guardforce.”

“Oh! That’s...Well, I guess it’s not that extreme.”

“It’s clear we’re not able to keep up with the Melenites. And we need more miners and farmers and builders now.”

“How did you bring that up to Mulu?”

“Ah...I--I told him that I saw leading the guardforce as my punishment. He didn’t take well to that, and suggested we dissolve it.” She laughs awkwardly. “He wasn’t too nice about it, but that’s how he shows his concern.”

“Rough around the edges, yeah.” Dovri agrees.

“He also said...He said that he wanted to take me as an apprentice. He wants me to lead Sindal. A sort of layer of leadership between the people and the council.”

Dovri’s eyes widen. So soon! He thinks to himself: He didn’t seem to want this to be known to Dela so soon. Was it just that she expressed this depression to him? Perhaps...But suspicions plague his mind as well. He wonders if Mulu expects to go sooner than he lets on. For the council to dissolve sooner, perhaps. He decides to keep that part to himself.

“That’s wonderful, Dela! So...Will the council stay the same?”

“There’s going to be a rework. The council will be composed of the heads of mining, farming, building, all the things we do. It’ll be hierarchical. He showed me the plans. They were pretty old, but he had just started updating them since the Melenite troops arrived.”

“Ahh, I see.” Dovri says, thumbing his chin. He leans forward, genuinely excited. “Well, I’m ecstatic for you to do this!”

“That’s good to hear. I’m a bit worried. It’s a big change. And, I’ve still let all the Sindalans down. Twice, now. Some hate the Melenites, and see three failures. I don’t know what they’ll think if they see me working closely with the council and Mulu. From their perspective, the Melenites arrived, the Sindalan guardforce proved to be inept, gets dissolved, and now their leader is being trained to become part of the council. Mulu mentioned that there will be rumors of favoritism.” Dela pauses, thinking. “I think…Is it favoritism? I suppose it is…”

“Someone needs to take the position. And in my experience, rumors only take hold when the victim cannot speak to all those spreading it. Sindal is still small. Work to really get to know everyone here, and I think you’ll be free of those.” Dovri assures the faltering warrior.

“Right.” Dela nods. The tears have stopped now, but she still sniffs and wipes her eyes now and then.

“And don’t over-promise! That’s the worst thing to do. In Ordor you always know a merchant is suspicious if they continually under-deliver on their boasts. Try to compromise.”

Dovri and Dela talk for a while longer. The subject shifts to Alnir, Dovri’s dreams of the ranch, and what he could sell in Sindal for a profit.

“We always need wood. Of any kind, really. We have some types of strong mushroom, but they’re slow growing.”

“Slower than trees?” Dovri asks with a smirk.

“I think so, hah! I’m no forester though.” Dela’s mood has improved considerably, Dovri notes. “But Melen also needs the wood. Bringing it here, you could technically sell it to them, right?”

“I think so, once the trade route is set up. It won’t be quite as much money as if I brought it to Melen myself...But factoring in the trip cost for crossing Shiln...Eh, I bet it’d be about equivalent!” Dovri makes a quick note on his booklet. “That’s a good point, thank you! Maybe I’ll be back around more than I expected.”

“Trade’s going to be a big part of Sindal soon. And Melenite immigrants. We’ll need housing.”

“Speaking of! How is Fon? I haven’t seen her.” Dovri inquires.

“She’s been working hard with the troops. She put in her application to stay permanently, but it hasn’t been reviewed yet.” Dela says, a smile playing on her lips as she thinks of her.

“Ahh...Any idea how long it’ll take?”

“Possibly weeks. The captain wants to keep the Melenites strictly working as troops until the trade route’s path is confirmed and they get another caravan from Melen.”

“That’s probably a good move. Integration too soon could cause tension.”

“Agreed.” Dela nods.

“Ah! I nearly forgot--Did you hear about the Dundyran?” Dovri adjusts his sitting position to lean forward.

“Rumors only. The council has been keeping information quiet on it. The Melenites at large don’t know much at all, as far as I can tell. I’ve heard doubts that it was a Dundyran at all, just a Melenite spy.”

“Well I can tell you that it's true. A Dundyran entered into a cave in the south side of the mountains near Dundyr, and emerged here in these caves.”

“What?!” Dela raises her voice as Dovri shushes her. She sits back down in her seat and whispers loudly. “Why did he travel here? What was his goal?”

“Dundyrans have started looking underground for paths across the mountains further north. Who would have thought, they’d need to go south, first!”

“This...This changes a lot. Gods, a passage all that way?” She asks, incredulous.

“I saw the maps. They’re rudimentary, but Captain Riv took a special interest in them. Mulu didn’t like his quickness in seizing the maps and planning for trade expansion. Personally, I don’t know if a cave passage will prove safer or faster than just crossing the mountains.”

“If the way can be reinforced and lit, it’s very possible. That is a lot of ground to cover, though.” Dela furrows her brow in thought. “And Riv’s reaction…We will need to take charge from him. It sounds like he believes he owns Sindal.”

She looks up suddenly. “I’m sorry to keep you up so late.”

“Not a problem at all! Are you getting going?”

“Mhm, I’m going to rest so I can talk to Mulu about this tomorrow.” Dela stands and takes a deep breath, stretching her arms. She walks towards the door, squeezing the blue mushroom’s top to decrease its light.

Dovri bids her farewell, then realizes something.

“Ah, Dela? Is it okay that I told you about that? The Dundryan passage?”

“Should be.” Dela answers. “Why?”

“I didn’t know the council was keeping it quiet. But--No, it’ll be okay. You’re Mulu’s apprentice, he’d tell you soon, I’m sure.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to worry about, Dovri.” Dela reassures him. “I appreciate your company and your aid.”

Dovri relaxes back in his bed, slowly quelling his mind of such worries. It’ll be okay. He decides, finally, that he will stick around until he has gems to trade to Ordor. Tomorrow, he can talk with the gem cutters and see what supply they have. His mind drifts further from duty, to friends. A weight from his heart feels lifted with the news that Dela will no longer be forcing herself to fight. Seeing her release her pent up emotion brings Dovri relief as well. With this thought fresh in his mind, he falls to sleep.

Mixed dreams visit the merchant. Ordor in summer, the green fields north of the ravine, and a desire to find a spot for the ranch. While somewhat relaxing, he’s troubled by his inability to find a good enough spot to start building. He moves so slowly, and the sun sluggishly falls from its highest point, the day never ending. He visits the same spot several times, frustrated. Alnir walks with him stalwartly, though. She seems happy just to graze and journey with the merchant. Dovri notes this, but can’t get his mind off of the desire to find the perfect spot. As the sun fully sets, the last glowing bit of life swallowed by the horizon, Dovri is engulfed in a sweeping darkness. With this, he awakes.

Groggy, he takes some time to just sit in his bed. No real thoughts come to his mind, just general feelings of his body aching. Eventually, he gets up and goes outside. He finds it to be late morning, and the Melenite troops are delivering stone and aiding the repair of the gateway that was damaged during the Elemental attack. A section of the troops are also doing exercises in the main square. To the west, Dovri is surprised to see stone buildings already standing. He assumes some villagers with earth elemental powers assisted. Maybe Dela? He looks around and sees Mulu and Dela together, talking with a group of miners. Mulu seems to be mediating discussions, and Dela takes rapid notes. He decides not to intrude on the interaction.

Instead, he checks on Alnir. The donkey sits comfortably next to the well as usual. She’s munching from a clay pot filled with yellow grasses. He wonders where the grass could have come from. Further south? Surely the children didn’t venture that far. He ponders the pot as he brushes Alnir. A few children approach with braided straw dolls. They make them dance on Alnir and she seems to enjoy the scratching they provide.

“Where did you get that little doll?” Dovri asks one of the kids.

“Her name is Felu!”

“Ah, Felu! Where did you get her?”

“My mother made her.” The child grins.

“Where did she get the grass for it?”

“She got it from the farmers. They pull it out of the underground!”

Looking closer, Dovri realizes it does indeed differ from normal grass. It’s thinner and wrapped much more tightly around itself.

“Does it come from mushrooms?” Dovri asks, intrigued.

“I think so. The mushrooms underground, in the dirt. One of my friends said their mother brought them down there to see. They said there was really tall grass that reached towards the roof! The farmers pulled it out of the ground and stomped the dirt back flat.”

“Wow!” Dovri intensifies his excitement to appeal to the helpful child, though he is genuinely shocked. “Sounds amazing. This little village keeps surprising me.”

An hour or so passes, Dovri telling stories to entertain the children. He brushes Alnir and gives her hooves a check for adverse wear when his crowd disperses. A small crack here or there, but nothing to worry about. He removes the old bandages on her legs and finds the cuts to be healing. Still, he takes the time to re-apply bandaging.

Dovri looks back over at Mulu and Dela. They’re sitting in the shade of the wall, eating. He probably shouldn’t intrude, still, Dovri thinks. He remembers that he should talk to the gem cutters, and reenters the caves to look for them. He passes a small room with four weavers working hard under bright white mushroom caps. Turning right, he descends some stairs and passes a few levels of what appear to be the farms. Different types of mushrooms grow large, and the farmers are currently harvesting. The deeper he goes, the more humid and warm the caverns get. A few farmers ascend the hallway carrying pots full of processed shrooms. They brush past Dovri with a quick greeting.

Descending deeper, he finds himself at the end of a long tunnel. The hall is lit with mushrooms placed at regular intervals, and corridors to many rooms dot the walls. The sounds of metal clanging against stone ping from down the hall, echoing many times. The walls are no longer compacted dirt, but solid stone. Vertical lines rise in regular intervals, revealing them to be shaped by elemental energy. Dovri considers turning back and asking for directions, but as he takes a few steps down, he sees a room to his left with workers cutting gems. He enters and approaches one of the workers.

“Ah, hello. My name’s Dovri, I’m a merchant from Ordor.” He explains.

“Hello, friend. Are you looking to buy cut gems? We’re not sure how much we need to produce for Melen, yet. But we’d be happy to trade some.”

“Yes, I’d like to! What are your prices?”

“Ah, I’m sorry, we don’t usually take coins. Maybe once the trading with Melen is set up. But we don’t have much idea of their worth yet. Do you have any food or wood to trade?”

“Oh!” Dovri exclaims. Of course, he thinks. The Sindalans usually just stick to themselves. “Err, not yet. I have a cart of oil I’m going to bring to Ordor. I think I’ll buy some food there and come back to trade. Sorry to intrude!” The merchant’s face reddens as he walks out of the room. The gem cutters offer him a friendly farewell, apparently bearing no hard feelings. Dovri makes his way back up the stairs, stopping by his room. He writes a note in his journal to buy food in Ordor and return to Sindal with it. Flipping quickly through the pages, he finds his map of southern Nevoria. He notes his route to Sindal last time wouldn’t work for a while, courtesy of his breaking of the bridge.

Examining the map, Dovri begins planning his route back to Ordor. It will be the start of winter when he returns. No food will be produced for months. Counting up his money, and factoring in the profit he’ll make, he should be good on finances for the winter. He won’t be doing much, as usual for the snowy conditions. It’s too hard of a journey across the mountains to Dundyr. He supposes he could sell some wood to Sindal. He makes a note to contact that carpenter he bought the soaked wood from last time. Perhaps the good impression will lead to a profitable relationship.

With his planning done, he exits the caves to see the village bustling in the afternoon sunshine. The damaged gateway has been repaired, and the path leading out looks even better than it did before. The scorch marks outside the village have been cleaned, and the Melenite troops are patrolling. The extra buildings are being loaded with wood and stone by both Melenites and Sindalans working together. It’s quite a sight to behold, Dovri thinks to himself. He wouldn’t have expected any of the Sindalans to take so quickly to the foreigners.

Wondering where Mulu and Dela are, Dovri circles the village. With no luck, he asks one of the Melenite guards on a patrol if he’s seen the village leader. The man shrugs, but notes that there was a gathering beyond the western wall, surveying. Dovri exits the southwest gateway, and takes a right after the twisting path. He sees the council of elders, Dela, and Riv standing beside the tall stone wall of Sindal. Dela holds a stick, digging deep lines into the ground. Dovri hesitates. It’s quite a band of important people. But…Maybe he could help. Or maybe he’ll be intruding. Finally building up his courage, Dovri approaches the group.

“And how long will that take?” Captain Riv asks.

“With that many...Maybe a week. The wall itself would take two or three, though.” Dela answers. Mulu nods with her.

“It’d be a good start, I think. We can spare troops to patrol this area for the next few weeks.” Riv responds.

“Ah! Dovri! Been looking all over for you.” Dela says, turning to greet him.

“Oh! Really? Uh, I had assumed you all were too busy, hah!” Dovri controls his embarrassment.

“Of course, but having you along with us will provide a useful viewpoint. You’re the only Ordori here right now.” Dela flashes a grin that reminds Dovri of when he first met her.

“Well, Dovri. We’re planning to expand the walls of Sindal to encompass this area.” Riv talks to the merchant directly. “From here at the western wall, to surround the area over to the twin rocks over there.” He gestures quite a ways to the west, slightly south.

“Hmm...Well Sindal definitely needs more space for the Melenites. My only concern is unearthing Elementals, really. But the troops should be able to handle it.” The merchant scratches at his stubbled chin, looking over the area. The elders chat amongst themselves, but Mulu, Dela, and Riv look to Dovri. “Oh! Are the caverns under this area well mapped yet?”

“Hm! That’s a good point.” Riv says, shuffling through some papers.

“I believe so. We’ll need to talk to the miners though.” Dela says. “Good point, Dovri.”

The merchant smiles, happy that he was able to help in some small way. The rest of the short evening is spent drawing more lines in the dry ground. Dela tirelessly runs, digging the stick deep into the dirt to make long lasting lines. The walls will be raised around the area first, and then reinforced. After that, they will begin constructing paths, then houses.

“Is expansion underground a possibility?” Dovri asks.

“Somewhat. We’re planning to make more room for gem cutters and farms. But digging is a lot slower than building.” Dela explains. Mulu looks at her with a glint of pride.

“And remember, the life down there is fragile.” The elder notes. “Too much change could lead to unforeseen effects.”

“Ah, right! Makes sense.” Dovri nods. Riv does so as well, perhaps hearing of this for the first time.

As the day ends, the group returns to Sindal proper. Passing through the southwestern gate, Fon approaches from the barracks.

“Hey all you! We’re going to have a feast tomorrow, a proper celebration!” She cheers. A group of farmers walk away from her, looking stressed.

“That’s a great idea!” Dela says. “Tomorrow night?”

Fon confirms, and Dela separates from the group to talk with her more about the preparations. Mulu and the elders return to the council room, and Riv returns to the encampment outside the village. Dovri stands alone once more. He walks by Alnir, who is sleeping peacefully. Shrugging, he returns to his room to eat, and promptly falls asleep.

---

Upon waking, he takes another look at his notes, and confirms he can head out tomorrow. A bit earlier than he had initially thought, but he can’t do much without food and wood to trade. Perhaps he can beat the first snow back in Ordor. The morning is early, still, so Dovri goes out to find Dela. Luckily, she and Mulu are speaking in the village square. They stand near Alnir, petting her fondly. Dovri approaches them.

“Hi, Dela, Mulu.” Dovri waves. “And Alnir, of course!” He gives her a pat.

“Morning Dovri.” Dela says with a smile.

“I’m planning to leave to Ordor tomorrow.” Dovri says plainly. “I was wondering if I could buy--” The merchant is interrupted by an energetic Dela.

“You shouldn’t spend a coin!” She exclaims. “I’ll have some rations and a few watersticks delivered to your cart by the end of today. It’s the least we can do for your help.”

The merchant tries to fend off the aggressive offer, but Dela is stalwart. Mulu smiles and agrees that they should give back to Dovri for his aid. Still not fully accepting the value in his role, Dovri eventually gives in and accepts.

“I will be back, though. I’ll be traveling back here with fresh lumber from Ordor. As well as some food--I’d like to buy some gems to sell back home.”

“Food would be perfect, and lumber will help immensely. Soon, you should be able to buy gems with coins. Ah, we’ve gotta get that set up!” Dela takes a quick note.

“Your cart should be loaded by this afternoon.” Mulu assures Dovri.

“That’d be perfect. Thank you two, so much.”

The three chat away in the morning, Dovri mostly just hanging by while Mulu tests Dela’s knowledge on specifics of the village. She rattles off every villager’s name and current role like nothing. Dovri assumes she already mostly had that down. The trio go into the caves and take a quick inventory of tools. Pickaxes, pots, sacks, hammers, and nails fill one of the storerooms. Another holds hundreds of mushrooms, dried and preserved. Some sit in jars, drenched in a broth. They pass a room full of clothing items and leather armor, and finally a room full of mushroom spears similar to Dela’s old one. Reminded of something, Dovri speaks up.

“Oh! Mulu, did you get that crystal you gave to Dela out of my cart?”

“I did, yes. I thanked Dela for not using it, but only after she explained the entirety of the journey to me.” He looks at Dela. “If you had run into a situation that demanded using it and still returned with it in hand, I would have scolded you sore!”

“I knew we wouldn’t encounter anything too bad!” Dela laughs.

“Not even the wild men by the mountains?” Dovri asks.

“Dela told me about that--It sounded like she had it fully under control.” Mulu answers.

“It was a shame to lose my spear, but it was less valuable than the crystal.” Dela reasons. “I only spent a few years empowering it. Mulu’s is much older.”

“Indeed. That crystal wasn’t originally mine. It was my grandfather’s. One of the nomads that settled here. He said that the night they set up camp here, he found a crystal and began focusing his energy into it. Then, when he passed, it went to my father. From him, to me.” Mulu regales.

“Huh...Do you not have children?” Dovri asks.

“Not of blood, but of bond.” Mulu says succinctly. He looks at Dela, who smiles in response. “And by now, it is more Sindal’s itself than mine alone.”

The trio take a break to eat an early afternoon meal. The villagers and some Melenite troops have set up a few tables in the main square. Two campfires are set up nearby. Melenite guards tend to them as a few Sindalans watch. It seems fire is relatively rare in Sindal. The cooks experiment with holding different types of mushroom over the fire for different amounts of time. One puffs up massively, shooting steam from numerous holes. A pleasant smell fills the village as the cooking for the feast ramps up.

Dovri watches the slowly darkening sky for a bit, the happy chatter around him soothing his stressed mind. He remembers a winter a few years back, in Ordor, like this. Besides the heat, of course. He stayed in an old longhouse to the southeast of Ordor. It was once a temple, but had been repurposed. The building was essentially a hallway, with a long table running down the center. At the back was a kitchen, where cooks feverishly went about their craft. Candles hung heavy on the walls, producing a brilliant orange-yellow glow. At times it was too warm, and too raucous, so Dovri would go out to stand in the snow. To the side of the building were barrels of alcohol. Sweet wine and sweeter mead, he remembers. So sweet you could feel it in your teeth. Meat of turkey and swine, butchered in all fashions, glazed with syrup and roasted.

Coming back to Sindal, Dovri finds himself homesick. Sindal is wonderful, he thinks to himself. But he cannot wait to return to Ordor. The feast goes on into the evening, the celebration kicking off. The Sindalans bring out posts of glowing mushrooms and crystals of various colors. They hang them on the walls of their houses, next to the doorways, and dance in the multicolored lights. The Melenites join in as well, for a while. As the sun sets fully, though, they swap with the patrolling units. A fresh batch of troops enter the party, and the fervor is renewed.

Dovri talks with Dela and Fon. The two dance the night away, but have to take breaks once in a while. Dovri sits and drinks a fermented broth brought out by a farmer. It’s earthy and meaty, definitely unique. He feels a slight buzz, and decides to stop for now.

“I think I’ve learned my lesson about drinking.” He says to Dela. “Never getting like I did in Melen again. Can’t afford to at this point.”

“Good!” Dela cheers over the raucous celebration. A few Melenites bring out their stringed instruments and begin playing away. Dela leans in. “I’m proud of you.”

Dovri smiles, glad the alcohol made his face a bit red already, hiding his obvious blush.

“Mark my words, I’ll be back here before winter’s end. I’m sure I’ll need a break from the cold!” Dovri laughs. Dela and Fon laugh with him.

“Are you gonna spread the word that Sindal has become a vassal? We could use the trade here.” Dela asks, still stuck on work.

“Not at all!” Dovri jokes. “I’m keeping this secret all to myself.”

Dela gives him a bop on the shoulder and laughs.

“I’m kidding, of course. I’ll be sure to drop a few hints.” Dovri relents.

The two look towards a ruckus at the end of the table. Fon apparently heard the talk about work and escaped. She’s currently engaged in an arm wrestle with one of the miners.

“No elemental powers!” The miner yells, straining.

“What do you take me for, a cheat?! This is all brawn!” Fon roars with a cackle.

Dela gets up and walks over to the small crowd gathered around. A few mothers bring their children away from the perceived violence, chiding them to never do such things. Fon notices Dela cheering for her and renews her effort. With immense effort, she slowly brings the miner’s hand shaking to the table. The miner gives out and leans back with a sigh. Fon stands up and cheers as the villagers clap for her.

“You know the bet!” Fon reminds her bested opponent.

“Yeah, yeah…” The miner gets up and talks to one of the Melenites playing instruments. The guard nods with a massive grin, and begins playing a song composed of a progression of chords increasing in tempo. The miner begins to dance to it, having to speed up with the player. The crowd cheers him on, and a few join in, Fon included. The rest of the band picks up the tune, and Dela joins in as well. Dovri sits nearby at the table, entertained thoroughly. But Dela points to him, gesturing for him to join the rapid dance.

“Join in! C’mon, follow for a round!” Dela says. Dovri turns a bit red and shows his palm to say no politely. Dela breaks away from the group to approach him. “Come on Dovri, I want your last day in Sindal to be full of joy! Could you join for a round?”

“Ahh jeez, when you put it like that…I suppose I’ll give it a try!” With a roll of his shoulders, Dovri gets up and awkwardly makes his way over to the group of revelers.

Slowly, out of tempo, he gets a feel for a dance. He feels many eyes on him, but as he speeds up he starts to feel the pressure lift. He doesn’t care much if others are looking. In fact, as he spins with Dela and Fon, he hopes everyone watches. He hopes they remember him fondly here. With a spin and a whoop, Dovri falls to the ground, exhausted. He sees Dela and Fon continuing for a while, but even they eventually give in. Rolling over, he sees the miner, red-faced and drenched in sweat, dancing with unmatched vigor. Finally, he’s the only one left dancing. With a musical flourish, the band completes the song, and the miner laughs victoriously. He reaches a hand to Fon and helps her up, and the two shake hands with no animosity.

Dela helps Dovri up, and assists him to the caves. His legs feel like jelly, his arms like planks of wood. But he’s deeply, thoroughly happy.

“I’ll be leaving in the morning, need that daylight as I go back south.” He tells Dela.

“We’ll be seeing you off.” Dela responds.”Rest well. And thank you, again. You’ve helped us a lot.”

“Ahh, it still feels like I didn’t do much. If anything, I--”

“I’m proud of you for dropping the drink, but the next thing you should work on is that humble streak!” Dela laughs. “Accept my thanks, please.”

Dovri pauses.

“I...Yeah, I’ll be working on it. It just feels odd to say ‘You’re welcome’.” He averts his eyes.

“Perhaps it’s odd in Ordor, but here it’s just fine.” Dela assures him.

“Hmm. Well, how about I accept your thanks with a thank you of my own?”

“Good enough!” Dela says.

“Then, thank you.” Dovri says with a smile.

“You’re welcome.”

The merchant retires to his room, and quickly falls to sleep. Dreams visit him, similar to those before. Revelry in Dundyr and Ordor and Melen mix together. In the relaxing chaos, he sits in his cart with Alnir. They walk through flowing fields of green. To the north is the hot, sandy wasteland, impossibly close. It is somewhat less threatening than it felt before, with Sindal’s canyon village providing a beacon of safety and comfort amidst the harsh environment. To the south stands deep, emerald forests and fortified, stony encampments. They surround the stalwart city of Ordor, standing guard over the deceivingly dangerous land. Dovri lays down in his cart, like he used to when he was a young adult. He closes his eyes, feeling a deep peace.

Early in the morning, Dovri wakes and gathers his things. Loading up the cart, he attaches a giddy Alnir to it as well. Hopping aboard, Dovri feels much more at home already. He looks in the back and finds three watersticks and an entire crate of prepared mushrooms. Dela and Mulu wait at the southeast gateway. Dovri guides Alnir towards them, and they turn to face him.

“It’s been much more eventful than I expected.” Dovri says with a laugh.

“Indeed. But the village feels much safer than when you arrived. All the trouble was worth it, in the end.” Dela says.

“I appreciate your assistance. I wasn’t quite sure what to make of you when you first came in. Bloodied face and shirt, and all!” Mulu gives a rare laugh.

“Ah, I forgot about that! Apologies again.”

“That bridge you broke will be repaired in a few weeks. A band of masons from Melen are coming down to have a look soon.” Mulu explains.

“That I--Listen, it was damaged already!”

“You just worsened it?” Dela covers her mouth to laugh quietly.

“I may have!” Dovri says indignantly.

“I'd still recommend going east. Just a bit further past the bridge, around the ravine. As long as the snow isn’t too deep.” Mulu says.

“You think it’s snowed already?” Dovri asks, tightening one of the covers on the oil in the cart.

“It may have. Go slow, and be safe. You should have enough water and food for a week. Oh, and the water sacks don’t freeze as easily as glass jars. Just move them around once in a while and they’ll stay liquid.”

Dovri takes out his notebook and scribbles a few notes down. He flips to his map and outlines the path east, adjusting his plan for the length of the trip. Finishing up, he stashes the book in the back and hops off the cart.

“Well, I think that’s about it.” Dovri says. Dela crosses the short distance to him and embraces him tightly.

“We’ll be waiting for your return!” She says. No trace of tears line her sparkling eyes, only gratitude. Dovri hugs her back, feeling the hint of tears tugging at his own.

“Have a safe trip, Dovri. You are welcome back anytime.” Mulu says, grasping Dovri’s hand with both of his. The merchant feels a slight thrum of energy go up his arms. Somewhat like the thrum of the crystals, but with a direction rather than radiating outwards. Dovri hops back on the cart, feeling invigorated. The pain of his back is minimized, and he feels a sureness in his grasp of the reins that he hasn’t in a while. With a light pat, he directs Alnir onwards, out to the canyon path. He turns to wave at Dela and Mulu, who wave back. He turns the corner and Sindal is suddenly out of sight.

On his way out of the canyon, Dovri notices a few Melenite guards atop the canyon walls. They wave at him and look around his location. It certainly feels a bit safer with them around. Continuing on, the cart clatters over small rocks and sandy ground, heading southeast. Slowly, the ground transforms; going from a rocky brown-yellow to more grassy. The grass is dead and withered, but spots along the path sport tiny splashes of green. Small, young shoots of grass peeking out from the ground in the technical winter.

As the sun sets behind the distant mountains, Dovri pulls Alnir to the side of the path and sets up camp. He lights a fire for the first time in what feels like forever. It takes a few tries, but finally his tinder catches and he piles sticks on top of the smolder. He munches on a mushroom bar as he tends to the fire, looking up at the starry sky. The same sky those in Sindal can see--And those in Melen, he thinks to himself. Alnir takes a rest near Dovri, and together they sleep.

The next day of travel, the first trees come into view from over the rolling hills. Some hang onto their leaves stubbornly, but others have given in, bearing their barren branches for all to see. The path becomes dirt, just dry enough to not be mud, but signifying a recent precipitation. Dovri wonders if the first snow has already arrived and melted. Alnir plods along, apparently gracious for the ground to finally be so forgiving to her feet. The cart passes a few puddles that Dovri lets Alnir splash through. He smiles as the donkey rejoices in the even temperature and cool water. In the evening, Dovri sees the black chasm of the ravine come into view as they crest a hill.

Descending the hill, Dovri peers further east, trying to spot the edge of the ravine. No luck, though, as the horizon rises to swallow the view. Following the path, they arrive back at the broken bridge. It seems much the way Dovri left it, and a spike of panic runs through him as he hears the creaking of the wood. He moves on quickly, pointing Alnir due east and heading off the trail. Dovri looks across the chasm to the other side, carefully keeping his gaze from drifting too far down into the seemingly endless darkness. The angled sunlight makes a few crags sticking out bright, but any light that dodges them dies out in the inky black depths.

The sun dips its feet below the horizon, and a chill wind blows up from the south. Dovri pulls the cart away from the ravine a ways, and comes to a stop in a thicket of trees. He makes a small fire in the dying afternoon light. The bare trees provide little protection from the gusting, freezing wind. Taking a note from his journey across Shiln, he pulls a cloth from the cart down to the ground, making a makeshift tent. The fire sits nearby, smoldering in a small ring of stone. Inside the tent, Dovri is able to reach out and warm his hands. He drinks a water sack and bites into a hard, cold mushroom bar.

The night passes quickly, Dovri’s dreams absent once more. He wakes up surprisingly cozy. The sun shines warmth down upon the cart, and Alnir sits comfortably amidst the frosted dew. The donkey seems to glow in the bright morning light, and Dovri gives her a hug and a pat on the head. He puts out his fire, loads up the cart, and heads out once more. Back along the ravine the cart creaks and clatters. The ground is rougher here, and Dovri keeps a good long distance from the massive fissure. Alnir treads carefully, as well.

Dovri breathes in the crisp winter morning air. It stings in his chest, but he relishes in the nostalgic feeling. The faint scent of pine trees to the south mixing with the sounds and smells of leaves crunching underfoot and underwheel. A deep sense of relief emanates from Dovri’s heart to the rest of his body. To be back in his true element is something he dearly missed. Finally, at midday, the end of the ravine comes into view. Dovri notices that the sun, dipping from its highest point, lights up part of the ravine’s eastern tip. Just a little ways down, though, it rears back into the darkness. It seems the end of the ravine is just a facade for a cavern beneath.

Taking note of this, Dovri guides Alnir far past the end. The mountains of Dundyr can be seen in the distance, tarnished blue by the sky. Cresting a hill, he’s able to get a better look. The sheer rock stands stark and sinister. The snow caps have expanded downwards in the winter, encompassing much of the mountains. Even the green coats of pine are swallowed by the snowfall. Turning right, Dovri heads straight south. The sun has begun to set, and every step south seems to intensify the chill in the air. Dovri makes camp by an outcrop of rock, resting for the night. Alnir manages to get under the makeshift tent, and Dovri welcomes her in with a shake of the feed bag. Together, the two keep warm and safe from the chill winter winds.

The journey continues in the morning. Larger and larger groups of trees begin to appear over the horizon, eventually overtaking the plains’ rule and dominating the far landscape. Dovri turns a bit more to the west, hoping to find a trail again. Pretty soon, though, he’s forced to head directly west. The wall of trees prevents even an attempt to be made of traversal. The lack of leaves lets Dovri see rather far into the forest, but the sheer multitudes of branches still results in an opaque view. No snow can be seen, but the wet mud under the trees reveals that snow had recently fallen.

To Dovri’s right are open plains, rolling and tan. Some tall hills sport small white caps of lingering snow. To his left, the forest of Ordor stands tall. The line demarcating the two is thin, as the forest seems to sprout suddenly like a wall. The sun falls once more, and Dovri breaks to rest. The chill is still bitter. In the dying sunlight Dovri attempts to light a fire, but the cruel wind repeatedly puts out his tinder. Frustrated and numb in the fingers, Dovri calls it and wraps an extra cloth around himself and Alnir. Donkey doesn’t smell good, but it’s better than freezing, he thinks to himself.

With morning comes a relent to the cold. Dovri curses himself for not taking a winter coat with him, leaving Ordor in such a hurry was foolish. Dovri keeps his blanket tucked tight around himself, guiding Alnir along the edge of the forest. The stark line begins to fade after a while, and only thickets of trees stand--The bulk of the forest seems to retreat south. The path is better here, more packed with at least some semblance of traffic.

As Dovri passes another thicket, he looks left and sees a small cabin huddled amongst the trees. He stops Alnir and examines the house. It’s small, just a single room. Built from logs, rough-hewn. Firewood lines the side of the house, and a hatchet is stuck in the stump of a once-great tree. Smoke puffs from a gray stone chimney, indicating habitation. He sees a lantern out front hanging from a post. It’s lit, a sign that visitors are welcome. Dovri decides to stop in, not having seen this cabin before. He draws Alnir closer to the house, pulling the cart to the side and tying it to a thin tree.

A face peers out of an opening on the side, emits a quick greeting, then quickly closes the cloth curtains over the window. Moments later, a large, burly man emerges from the wood plank door. Barrel-chested, his brown beard runs long and contains red and black beads along its braids. His brow is bushy--in fact, his whole face is. This is balanced by his head being completely hairless. As he steps out, he tugs a cap out from the pocket of his long, tan apron and plops it on his head.

“Hey there!” He hails Dovri with a wave of his massive hand.

“Hey, sir.” Dovri returns the greeting. “Name’s Dovri. Headed to Ordor, but was charmed by your little home here!”

“Ahh, a merchant I take it? My name’s Drun.” The man eyes his cart. Dovri follows his gaze, and it’s actually towards Alnir. “Who’s that charmer?”

“That’d be Alnir. She’s been leading this operation for the last...My, I was about to say ten, but it’s going on fifteen years!”

“Well come on in for a bit, if you’ve the time!” Drun welcomes him, opening the door. Dovri steps through to see Drun’s living quarters. A wooden bed sporting deep blue sheets to the left, gray stone fireplace to the back, and a dark brown, treated wood basin filled with water next to the window letting the light in. A thick table hewn from a stump adorns the middle, covered with clothing and various tailoring implements.

“You a tailor by trade?” Dovri inquires.

“How could ya tell?” Drun laughs. “One of my hobbies, at least.”

“Why live so far from Ordor? You must be three days away by foot. More, even, if you traverse the forests.”

“Oh, I don’t live here all year, I just come to stay during the winter. Lets me get away from the bustle of Ordor.”

“Ahah! Makes sense.” Dovri takes a seat at the table as Drun clears a spot. The merchant adds that to his idea for the ranch in the northern plains.

“Got some tea ready, if you’d like a cup.” The tailor offers. Dovri graciously accepts, and receives a mug full of umber water. The scent of cinnamon wafts up from it, and Dovri carefully lifts the cup to his lips. The tea is hot, but fills a warmth in his chest he didn’t realize was missing. Drun pours himself a mug and takes a seat at the table as well.

“What brings you out this way?” He asks.

“Ahh now that’s a long story...I’m returning from a trip to Sindal and Melen up north. The bridge out there--That big wide wooden one? That was the only one big enough to allow Alnir and my cart through. Well when…” Dovri trails off. “Uh--It was damaged, so we went around the eastern end of the ravine. Never been around this area much, so I was just following the trees west, hoping to hit the trail to Ordor.”

“I see, well traveled! I’ve been around Ordor’s forests, but never to another city. Well you’re on the right path. Just keep following the treeline and you’ll find the path just a half day’s travel down that way.”

“Appreciate the help! And the company.” Dovri takes another sip of his tea, relishing in the warmth and spice. He looks around at the cabin for a moment. It truly is cozy. “Say, I’ve had this idea floating around in my head for a while. My girl out there is getting towards her elder years, and I want to give back to her for all her work. Was thinking about building a little ranch just north of Ordor, up in the fields out there. Maybe north of the ravine.”

“Ahh, so you’d like some advice!” Drun leans back in his chair. “Truth be told, I didn’t build this dwelling all by myself. Don’t tell the tavern regulars in Ordor!”

“Hah! Your secret is safe with me.” Dovri chuckles. “Did you just pay for laborers from Ordor?”

“A few carpenters. Work was slow, but they were extremely helpful.”

“Huh! The carpenters themselves. I was just going to buy the materials from them and hire some farmers from the fields.”

“No no no, I wouldn't recommend that. No scorn to them, but the carpenters just know the wood better.”

“How long, in the end?” Dovri asks, taking a quick note.

“Took about two weeks to get the base done. I had quite a few trips on my own to bring all the knickknacks down. Made the table and bed myself. Don’t look too close at ‘em or you’ll see my shoddy handiwork!” Drun lets out a boisterous laugh. Dovri chuckles as well.

“Hmm. Well I’ve got a few friends in the carpentry field down in Ordor. Perhaps I’ll call in some favors from them.” Dovri scribbles a few more notes. “The reason for my journey to Melen was actually because of a chance run-in with a carpenter. His apprentice didn’t cover a batch of lumber and it got rained on. I rushed as quickly as I could to get it into the dry climate up north, and it turned out fine. Got a good price on it as well.” Dovri looks up to see Drun looking out the window. “Ah, sorry for going on and on.”

“Not a problem, friend.” Drun’s attention is brought back to Dovri. “You plan to have any other equines there at the ranch?”

“Definitely. Can’t have Alnir be all on her lonesome.” Dovri turns around in his chair and looks out the window. Alnir is munching on some wet grass by a tree. “Hoping to make some money through breeding or just holding stock of horses. Sindal is about to become a much larger trade hub, and soon there’ll be a better trade route across Shiln.”

“Sindal...Can’t say I’ve heard of it.” Drun brushes his beard with one massive hand.

“It’s a real small village right now. But recently was taken in as a vassal of Melen. It’s quite the unique little place. A bit warm, though.”

“Ahh, not my kind of spot! I come from a village by the mountains of Dundyr. Cold and snow is my lifeblood!”

“I see you there. Ordori native myself. That trip across Shiln was rough. Not just on me, either.” Dovri gestures to Alnir. “She had a rough go of it. That’s why I want to hurry up and get that ranch set up.”

“Well, I’ll wish you luck. Swing back by sometime and tell me where it’s at, I may come pay a visit!” Drun gets up and opens a dresser drawer. Dovri leans to the side to see it, having not noticed it under the many layers of scrap cloth. Putting clues together, he realizes the dresser wasn’t built by Drun, but brought to the cabin. The image of the burly man carrying the two-hundred-pound chunk of wood on his shoulder for three whole days flashes through his mind, and he widens his eyes in amazement.

“Should I get on going?” Dovri asks. “Don’t want to bug.”

“If you’d like, just hang on a second. I know merchants are on rather tight deadlines, and yours speaks to me! Alnir and all. Got something here for ya, if I can find it.”

Dovri gulps the rest of his cooled tea and sets the mug aside. Getting up, he whistles out the window to Alnir, who’s getting rather far from the cabin. She turns and starts heading back. Drun lets out a whoop as he finds what he was looking for, quickly stuffing everything into the dresser once more and turning to Dovri.

“Here we are! Now I know this is something to ask, but I’d really appreciate it.” Drun turns, holding a small wooden coin. It’s engraved intricately, a whole forest visible on it, extending to the horizon with mountains holding the setting sun. It’s an absolute work of art, and Dovri is mesmerized. “Could you bring this to Retu in Ordor? It’s been a few years since I’ve seen him, so I’ve no idea where he lives now. You’ll have to ask around a bit.”

Dovri lets the coin fall into his hands, and he feels the surprising density of it.

“Sure thing. Should I expect something to ferry back to you here?” He says, accepting the additional leather bag Drun offers him. He carefully places the coin inside and pulls the rope at the opening taut, placing the bag in his pocket.

“Oh no, nothing like that. This is an old message I’ve meant to send to him. He’ll know what it means.”

“Got it. Retu in Ordor. Does he have a profession?”

“Hmm...He likes to switch what he does now and then. The one I know will probably be far outdated. The name should ring some bells in someone, I’m sure.” Drun smiles widely, as if he’s holding back laughter.

“Alright then, I’ll be off! You’re quite the host, you know? Appreciate the tea, tips, and talk!” Dovri chuckles and heads for the door, and Drun follows. Alnir is reattached to the cart and Dovri hops aboard.

“Stay safe! Keep to the roads. I’ve heard rumors of bandits skulking around, especially in the west.” Drun waves one of his bearish hands as Dovri departs, and the merchant returns the gesture.

“Thank you, sir! I will.” Dovri directs Alnir west, following the line of trees marking the edge of the forest. Not much of the day is left, though, with the sun dipping suddenly low. Cloud cover has rolled in and obfuscated its position to Dovri until sunset. The merchant pulls closer to the treeline, setting up a quick camp as the chill of night descends. Once more he cuddles close to Alnir, who accepts the warmth happily. The smell assails him harder this time. His nose must be spoiled from the cinnamon and nutmeg scent of Drun’s cabin. If he ever gets a cabin, he hopes it smells as nice.

In the morning, Dovri eats a light breakfast. He reviews how much food and water he has left. Far more than the journey demanded. He frowns as he thinks that selling it wouldn’t work too well, even if it was polite to sell a gift like this. Ordori probably wouldn’t like the mushroom bars, and the water sacks he wouldn’t be able to pay the average buyer to keep. He knows the water sacks begin to degrade after a week, but the bars should keep for a long while. It’s not bad, in the end, he supposes. It’ll help him save on food costs.

The rising sun provides little protection from the chill winds. The clouds block its warmth and hide its exact position. Greedily, they soak up the light and allow only scraps through. Brief, fleeting snippets of direct sunlight grace Dovri and Alnir as they continue westward. Dovri finds it difficult to judge the time of day. Somewhere around midday he sees a large area bearing no trees, and a well-maintained path leading south, down its middle. Finally, Dovri thinks to himself. He finds himself on a very pleasant ride. The dirt is packed hard here, and is well drained on the sides. The trees keep their distance on this path, not encroaching like the eastern path to Dundyr.

The path eventually merges with another, and a while after that with the much more familiar main path. A signpost on the left denotes Ordor lies to the south. Soon after, a few carts pass, heading in the opposite direction. Dovri waves at them as they go. He’s surprised by an entire caravan passing by, having to move to the far side of the road to let them through. The people aren’t dressed that heavily in winter clothing. He wonders why so many are heading north, until he realizes the only explanation. Word of Sindal’s vassalization has spread to Ordor already. How, he thinks, could it spread so quickly? And so convincingly, to make such a large load of trade get together so quickly. He wonders if some of the Melenite troops were sent down to Ordor to spread the word. The end of the caravan passes, and Dovri moves back towards the center of the path. He hopes Dela can handle the influx of traders. Sindal itself may have trouble, even.

Dovri’s mind wanders. He imagines Dela and the elders overwhelmed, unable to house the many traders. Would she curse him? Not for spreading the word, he’s sure, but perhaps she’s still conflicted within. It was a result of his failing…

“What do you think, Alnir?” Dovri asks his donkey. She raises her ears before flapping them back down, continuing to plod along. “Do you think I made a mistake?”

Dovri looks up at the gray, puffy sky. The clouds look ripe to snow, and he thanks the gods that he’s so close to Ordor. A bitter chill gusts from the south.

“I wonder what would have gone differently, if I had attended the meeting with Dela that day.” He muses. “I’d like to think I’d have prevented vassalization. Maybe...If they had asked the same way, that tricky way, I’d have fought back. But then, would Sindal be in worse shape?”

The thought of the Fire Elemental attack comes back to him.

“Would two or three guards brought back from Melen be able to handle that Elemental with Dela? Would such a trip back through Shiln even be safe?” He looks back to Alnir. She flaps her ears once more, and Dovri gives her a pat for her feedback.

“Maybe it was better that it ended up this way...It’s certainly more comfortable to think about.” Dovri takes a breath. “Still, though. No more drink.” He repeats his mantra.

Pressing onward, Dovri passes more roads leading away from the main path. Ways splitting off to the east and west, twisting and winding as if tormented by the forest. Their writhing shapes are formed from generations of nomads, feeling their way through the blind darkness of the forest. Dovri wonders what the land looked like decades ago, when Ruku unified the tribes and settled them onto the hill Ordor sits on. He wonders how the nomads survived the Elementals. Probably much the same way the Sindalan nomads did. Fight constantly, day in and day out. It’s an honorable life, Dovri reminds himself. After a mental pause, he connects the dots. Much like the monarchy, is the duty to defend the village just a process that ends with the death of the greatest?

Soon, the sky and land begin to darken. Dovri takes the message, and pulls to the side of the road to rest. As he gets his fire going, he looks across the way to see a snow covered cart rolling along. Looking south, he sees much darker, ominous clouds. He huddles up under the makeshift tent as the bitter wind blows frigid. He builds the fire as best he can, but cannot reach far from his shelter without the wind delivering his hand a hundred stings.

Rest comes easy with the cozy tent, at least. No sounds of peroga or corv can be heard. The night is calm and silent. Dovri slips into a deep sleep quickly after eating, and awakes to find the top of the tent touching his nose. Exiting, he finds an inch of snow layered over everything. A few flurries continue to fall as he shakes the ice from the cloth and cart. By midday, Ordor’s walls finally come into view. They do so suddenly, as Dovri advances south--their battlements rise tremendously over the high trees. Before he knows it, the massive wooden gates come into view. The doors have already been repaired. It seems to be business as usual around the entrance.

Getting closer, Dovri’s heart swells with love as he sees his beloved city, lightly covered in snow and looking right out of a tale. The snow-capped houses puff smoke from their chimneys as citizens sweep the snow from the streets. Some heavily dressed children play amongst the piles the sweepers build, cheering and guffawing. Dovri passes through the gates, the guards’ inspection finding nothing wrong and completing quite quickly. Dovri follows his well-worn path through the gray cobbled streets of the stone city. He makes his way to the tavern. Paying the stablemaster to house Alnir, he steps through the doors.

An intensely comforting warmth flows past him as he steps in. With it is the scent of a dozen types of sweetbread, mead and ale, and roasting meat. For a moment, his eyes water with intense nostalgia. He takes a seat before ordering anything just to soak in the warmth, scents, and sounds of the bustling tavern. The door to the bar opens and closes frequently. The civilians all grab a quick afternoon meal before rushing back to their work. The cold blasts in during these times, but the oven behind the counter roars back as the tavernkeep tosses more logs in. All around him, Dovri hears the chatter of a living, breathing, city. It’s similar to Melen’s tavern, in fact it may be identical besides architecture and cuisine, but something feels uniquely comforting about it.

Before he knows it, evening has come. Having spent the day talking with patrons, Dovri decides he’ll do just that for the early night as well. More people pack into the tavern as night falls, everyone attempting to escape the bitter chill sinking its claws into the streets of the city. Dovri talks with two merchants at his table as they drink and eat. One is an older man, more portly than Dovri himself. He sports trimmed reddish curls atop his head, and goes on ceaselessly about the state of breweries in Ordor. The other is a younger man, but his black hair is already graying. He stays much quieter than the redhead.Dovri partakes in some roasted ham, but keeps to unfermented apple cider for drink. He ensures the merchants are none the wiser, putting a tipsy affect on his voice and demeanor after drinking for a while.

“Any good carpenters ‘round nowadays? I’ve been lookin’ for some.” Dovri asks. His eyes are heavy from the redhead merchant’s endless control of the conversation.

“Ahh, I don’t deal much with ‘em. More of a metals man. Can tell ya about blacksmiths here and in Dundyr.” The graying merchant says, leaning back. He seems somewhat relieved Dovri wrested verbal control.

“Mmm…Just brew barrels for me.” The redhead says--Surprisingly succinct.

“Hm…Not quite the carpentry I’m lookin’ for.”

“Well that’s somethin’ to talk about as well. The brew barrels--I dealt with this carpenter to make ‘em for that brewery I mentioned. First day I went there…” The redheaded merchant starts up again. Dovri’s eyes glaze over as he thinks about who else to ask about…

Dovri’s eyes widen. He’s forgotten the name of the man he needs to give the coin to!

“Ah, sorry to sprint, but I’ve just remembered something--I forgot to do a favor. Excuse me.” Dovri quickly gets up and gathers his leftovers. He breathes a silent sigh of relief to escape the brew merchant’s tirades. Rushing upstairs, he checks into his room and opens his notebook. Retu! That’s the name. He reminds himself to ask around about him tomorrow. There’s no way he’s going back down to ask the other merchants tonight.

After tossing and turning for a while, sleep finally comes to the merchant. Early in the morning--Earlier than usual, Dovri wakes. Must be the residual habit from crossing Shiln, he thinks. The sun has not even risen beyond the walls, denoted by the dark, clouded sky above. The bitter wind seems to have calmed down, and only a slight chill in the air flows through the city. Looking down to the streets, all the snow has been swept into the drains. The streets are clear but unpopulated at this hour. A few windows below light up orange and yellow as some industrious individuals awaken.

Dovri walks down to the tavern, taking care to be quiet in respect of still-sleeping patrons. The tavernkeep is already up, washing glasses and dishes with a rag and soap. Dovri wonders when the man sleeps, if ever. Sitting down at a table with some tea, the merchant spends the waking morning relaxed. He looks out a frosty window as the streets slowly fill with life. The peppery tea eventually wakes Dovri fully, and he gets up to get on with his day. Going outside, he checks on Alnir before hefting his cart and heading to the market.

As the sun crests the eastern wall, he arrives. Some merchants have their stands set up already, but most are still in the middle of the process. Dovri sets up his stall with the jars of oil lined up neatly. Cracking one open, he lights the lamp at the stall to show how well it burns. Examining the burn for the first time, Dovri concludes it is about medium grade. Nothing that would amaze potential buyers, but he knows demand will be high today. Just after the first snow and a bitterly cold wind, citizens are sure to want extra oil. The winter has warned them of its wrath, and it surely has not been sated yet.

The end of the selling day comes in early afternoon, and indeed--Dovri’s stall stands empty except for a heavy purse. Sighing with relief, the merchant closes his spot and carries the lightened cart back to the tavern. Stopping in for a meal, he eats while listening to the idle chatter around him. Talk of the winter, of Elemental threats, and of the potential for food shortage inundate the tavern. The people are stressed, and rightly so. It’s been just a week or so since the Fire Elemental attack.

“Dovri!” A deep voice bellows out from the doorway. Dovri turns and sees the redheaded merchant striding through. His face is as red as his hair, and Dovri knows he must be drunk from his stumbling gait. “Where is that old boy, I’ve got quite a tale for him.”

The redhead begins talking to a barmaid, who affects a helpful demeanor. Dovri takes the chance to sneak out the door, making a gesture of thanks at the barmaid, who looks up for a moment. So much for a relaxing evening. A walk around the city, then, Dovri thinks to himself. The chill morning air has every citizen bundled up. Dovri, too, wears a thick brown jacket over his usual outfit. Red-nosed children run along the streets, hyper from being stuck inside the past few days.

The first place Dovri visits is the carpenter he bought the damp lumber from, Rena Mill. The open wooden building stands much the same as Dovri left it. A stone oven sits on the side, keeping the area warm. Many sawing workers take sections of tree trunks, shave off the bark, mark dimensions, and get to cutting. The man Dovri bought from sets down his work as the merchant approaches.

“Hail there! Made it back safely, I see.” The carpenter says, dusting off his apron.

“Indeed!” Dovri laughs.

“How can I help ya today? Looking to do another deal?”

“Not today, I’m afraid. I wanted to ask if you had ever heard of a man called Retu.” Dovri asks, pulling out the pouch with the coin from his pocket. He shows the coin to the carpenter. “I need to get this little thing to him. A tailor out northeast asked me to, name of Drun.”

The carpenter squints at the coin, leaning forward. A puzzled look appears on his face, and he looks at Dovri a bit differently. He leans back and scratches his beard, looking from the coin to Dovri and back.

“Hmm…Well that’s tough. I uh…” The carpenter hesitates, seeming not sure of his own words. He sighs. “Alright, listen. I don’t think I can help with that, sorry mate.”

With that, the carpenter walks back to his work with a wave and without another word. Dovri stares for a bit before pocketing the coin and turning around. Greatly confused, he walks aimlessly down the street. Why did the carpenter react like that to the coin? He must have recognized it. He seemed to know something, but didn’t want to share? Dovri wonders if the coin could be some sort of secret, or perhaps a message of some kind. His eyes widen as he wonders if he just shared the equivalent of a letter with a third party. His face reddens a bit, not just from the chill, and he decides to keep the coin quiet. Just ask for Retu the carpenter, he supposes.

Dovri finds himself in the middle of town. To the north, west, and east stand the wooden doors to the city. To the south stands the shining white castle of King Ruku. Dovri begins heading in that direction, thinking perhaps the guards could send him on the right path. Four guards stand out front, two are talking to citizens while the other two keep a lookout. Dovri approaches one of the talkative ones, a brown bearded man with a scar on his cheek.

“Excuse me, do you know where I could find a man named Retu? He’s a carpenter.” Dovri asks.

“Ahm…Retu. Yeah I think I’ve heard of a carpenter of that name. Gerun, was he one of the furnishers of the dining hall?” The guard turns to one of the lookout guards, an older man with a well-trimmed gray mustache.

“Who? Retu? Aye, I think so.” The graying man says.

“You know where he works nowadays?” Dovri asks.

“Hmm…He used to work over by Carn graveyard. But I think he switched sometime last year. Might check over there, still.”

Dovri nods and starts off in that direction. Carn is by the church, on the southwest wall. Dovri remembers attending the funeral rites for a long-lived general, years ago. Members of the family carved the man’s name into the stone slab by hand. The stacks of the slabs were much shorter, then. Dovri left a cinnamon stick on the grave, hoping it would bring the freed spirit to peace. Dovri makes it there as the sun is setting behind the western battlements. The graveyard is small, only about an acre in size. The graves, small bricks of stone, are stacked tall. Each one denotes the name, birth, and death of their patron. At the center, built against the massive stone wall, the church sits. Its polished white bricks match the castle’s, but its glittering multicolored windows make it quite distinct.

Looking north, Dovri sees a modest house beside the graveyard fence. Approaching it, he sees ‘Retu’ written on a sign hanging from the door. Ecstatic, Dovri knocks on the door. He waits. Not a peep from within. He knocks again--Perhaps the man is asleep after a hard day’s work?

“Excuse me, is Retu home?” Dovri raises his voice to call out.

No answer. Dovri curses and starts walking away. Where could he be, at this hour? The markets have closed. No business to be done at mills. The sun is set! After wandering this side of town for a few more minutes, Dovri resigns back to the tavern. He passes through the heavy oak door, and receives a blast of warm air from the oven. He didn’t realize how chilled he was--Or how sore his legs were--Until now. Sitting down with a groan, the merchant sips on a cup of tea. He wants to be satisfied with how the day went. A walk around the city after a successful sell of his goods. It was a fine day, too. Not too cold. But the frustration of being unable to find Retu weighs on him.

After wallowing in his failure, Dovri leans back. He looks out at the dark streets, lit with candles in lanterns at regular intervals. A day in search of a man with just a name isn’t too bad. He can just pay him a visit tomorrow. Dovri sips his tea for a while longer. A band begins playing music for the night. A sonorous strumming and deep, rich embouchure fill the tavern with a sleepy mood. After a while, Dovri’s eyes start to grow heavy.

The calm vibe is torn asunder by the thunderous entrance of several drunken men. The tavernkeep begins trying to force them out, their rowdiness stirring those sleeping upstairs. Dovri catches sight of a familiar red head of hair, and groans. He slips out again, cursing his luck. Outside is frigid. The merchant draws his cloak about himself and turns the corner. Hopefully the drunks will pass out or be thrown out soon. He wants no part of their revelry.

“Joinin’ me out here?” A deep, slightly raspy voice produces an echo in the alley. Dovri jumps.

“Ah! Oh, goodness. I didn’t even see ya there, sorry mate.”

Right next to Dovri stands a thin, tall man. His hair is red and curly, and his sideburns blend into his full face of bushy beard. He smokes on a pipe, which periodically lightens his face with a red glow. Dovri is worried for a moment, but the man sticks out his free hand.

“Tryin’ ta get away from those raucous ones in there, eh?” He says with a smile.

“Indeed. There’s a fellow that’s taken a liking to having rather one-sided conversations.” Dovri returns the smile and accepts the hand.

“Name’s Retu. Yours?”

“Dovri--Eh? Retu? Did you say Retu?” Dovri has a double-take. Retu laughs.

“Yes sir! Why, I didn’t think my name got around all that much.”

“Well, here--” Dovri scrambles through his pockets to produce the bag containing the wooden coin. “I met a man named Drun, up north, in a shack by the ravine. We had tea and--Here we go.”

Dovri places the coin in Retu’s open hand, and the carpenter slowly draws it near to himself. He gazes at it for a while, flipping it over and examining the handiwork.

“Drun gave me that, and said to give it to Retu. You’re a carpenter, I suppose?”

“...Huh. Drun certainly has a penchant for detail. Well, I suppose we should get to work then! Sorry, what’s your name?” Retu asks.

“Ah? Work? Uh, Dovri’s my name.”

“Hah!” Retu laughs. “Of course! That prankster. He didn’t tell you about this, did he?”

Dovri’s puzzled look is obvious. Retu leans in, covering his mouth.

“This coin is from the carpenter’s guild. One carpenter passing it to another with an intermediary signifies a recommendation for work.” Retu leans back. “Keep that a secret now. Drun decided you were trustworthy enough to keep it, but just so you know. Did you need something built, then?”

“Err…” Dovri pauses, taking in the information. “Yes, I uh...I had a plan to build a ranch north of Ordor, in the plains south of the ravine. For horses--And my donkey, Alnir.”

“Hm…Sounds manageable. Got a time frame? Probably don’t want to do all that in the winter.”

“Oh! Uh, yes, I was planning to source lumber in the winter and start work in the late spring.”

“Got it…There.” Retu flips through a booklet produced from his pants pocket. “Should be free around then. About how many horses you planning to keep? The ranch will need a barn or two.”

“Umm…Not sure yet, haven’t thought about that actually!” Dovri chuckles. Retu’s hand flies across his booklet.

“That’s all good.” He says, tucking it back away. “Sorry there, I get a bit into projects!”

“Oh, you’re fine. Um--What sort of price are we talkin’, for this job?” Dovri asks, a bit confused at the process still.

“Ah, we can discuss that tonight. I’ve a decent idea of what ya need. Why don’t we go in and do some estimates?”

Re-entering the bar, Dovri and Retu are assailed by yells from the drunks. The tavernkeep has turned red with yelling, and seems keen to throw them out at a moment’s notice. For now, they’ve sat down at a booth to keep mostly to themselves. The two go up the stairs, entering the hallway to all the bedrooms. Down to the end of it is a small nook, meant for reading. Two bookshelves sit perpendicular, a small wooden table with two felt chairs taking up either end. A lantern hangs from the wall above the table, casting soft yellow light. Taking a seat, Dovri takes out his notebook and Retu follows suit.

In the better light, Dovri recognizes the front of Retu’s book. It’s a complete version of the forest scene on the coin. Various types of wood are cut into small slivers and inlaid on the frame of the book. A deep, dark green species forms the pine forest. A gray hardwood from Dundyr’s tall forests creates the mountains, a varnished version creating the snowy peaks. Glowing hedge that seems to pop from the table forms the sun. Dovri is almost disappointed when Retu flips the book open.

“Let’s see...Go ahead and say something designed like this?” Retu flips through his notes before spinning the book around and showing Dovri a sketch of a cabin. It’s quite similar to Drun’s, but is slightly bigger. It’s got two more doors, one in the back and one on the side, as well as a fence that goes off the page. A barn sits at the far end of the fence.

“Something like that works perfectly. Though I’d want a pretty high fence.” Dovri notes.

“Perfectly fine. Let’s plan for…Twenty horses? Or would thirty be better?” Retu asks.

“Hmm…Don’t reckon I could handle more than twenty. Let’s go with that.”

“Allright, one second…” Retu scribbles down some calculations. He takes a few moments to tap his pencil on the book’s edge. “Okay, how’s this?”

Dovri leans in. Math beyond him, estimating lengths and volumes of lumber, fills the page. At the center, circled twice, is a number.

“What?” Dovri asks, amazed. “Is this--A monthly payment? No, it can’t--That’s the total price?”

Retu laughs at his incredulous face.

“Why, I don’t believe I could go much lower than that!”

“No! The price is--Are you sure? You pulling my leg?” Dovri stares at the figure. It’s well within his means. He may not have to take another trip at all.

“Those coins aren’t used everyday, you know. Now I can call the favor on someone else in the guild. You bringing me this coin is worth more than money could say.” Retu explains.

“Well...Then yes! This is fine--More than fine. You’re a lifesaver. I was going to try and make another trip, to Dundyr this time, to pay for this project.” Dovri is nearly breathless.

“Well, I’m happy to help, friend! You’ll still need to source the lumber, though.” Retu spins the book back around and scribbles away some more notes.

“Not a problem, I’ve got a contact at Rena Mill.” Dovri makes a quick note so he doesn’t forget. “What about the specific spot?”

“Ah, yep. Place a stake there with your name on it, give me directions, and I should be able to find it. I’d recommend taking some guards, just in case. Make sure there’s not too many Elementals in that area.” Retu rattles off some decent areas south of the ravine, mostly towards the Ordorian forest.

“Any north of the ravine?” Dovri inquires. Retu sits back, thinking. He flips through his book a bit, examining older maps.

“Afraid I’m a bit out of date on that. Moving the stuff across the ravine would be a challenge, too. Does it have to be north?”

Dovri considers. Further south it would be harder to maintain contact with Sindal, but it would be more akin to his favorite weather. It would also be safer, proximity to outposts in the forests and all. How likely is it that people would need a rest before the ravine? Possible, but much less than after crossing the ravine or the desert. He could still make it up by learning the pathways across the ravine, maybe he could help construct better bridges! He smiles at the irony of the thought.

“I think it’d be fine stationed south of the ravine. In the next few weeks I’ll try and get out and find a good spot.” Dovri decides.

“Sounds wonderful.” Retu grins. Dovri sits back and a yawn takes him. Retu catches it and mimics the yawn. “Well, I think I need to sleep on this before drafting up a more detailed design.”

“I could use some sleep, too.” The context of the meeting overwhelms Dovri again, suddenly. “Gods--Thank you again.” Dovri reaches out to shake Retu’s hand.

“You’re very welcome!” Retu takes Dovri’s hand and gives a shake. “Anytime you want to talk about this, come by my house. It’s over there by Carn.”

Dovri nods, pretending he didn’t already know out of ease. The two part ways tiredly, but amicably; with Retu heading to his room and Dovri going back downstairs. The tavern has quieted, the drunks apparently having departed. The merchant heads outside to take a steaming breath in the chill night air. Flurries of snow continue to fall, and the sky is pitch black against the glowing city lanterns. Around the corner sits Alnir. Her breath steams as well, and she shakes her head at the merchant’s presence. The stove keeps her warm, the stablemaster sleeping on a hay bed nearby. Alnir seems quite happy to be back home. Dovri gives her some brushing and talks to her for a while. He goes over the plans to build the ranch, his talk with Retu, and the deal they struck.

“By the gods, it’s come together.” Dovri says, choked up. His wet eyes sting in the cold, and his chest tightens with emotion. “You’ll be resting soon, darling.”

After brushing Alnir until he can’t feel his fingers, Dovri heads back in and pays for his room in the tavern. He reviews his notes, once again shocked at the price offered, and blows out his candle. The window facing out towards the northern wall is shut tightly, with cloth packed into its usually drafty corners. Frost outlines the panes of glass, and Dovri watches as reflections play across the ephemeral art from the lights moving in the street below.

Sleep takes him gently. A dream visits him, seeming more real than ever. Alnir’s braying wakes him in the small, but cozy, cabin; and he goes out to feed her and the horses. Looking north he sees a well maintained path winds along the hills, crosses the ravine at a stone bridge, and continues north into Sindal. An utterly peaceful feeling descends upon him. For a moment, he realizes the dreaminess of the experience, nearly jolting awake. But he calms himself. For he knows it is only a matter of time, now, until the dream is reality.

The End.