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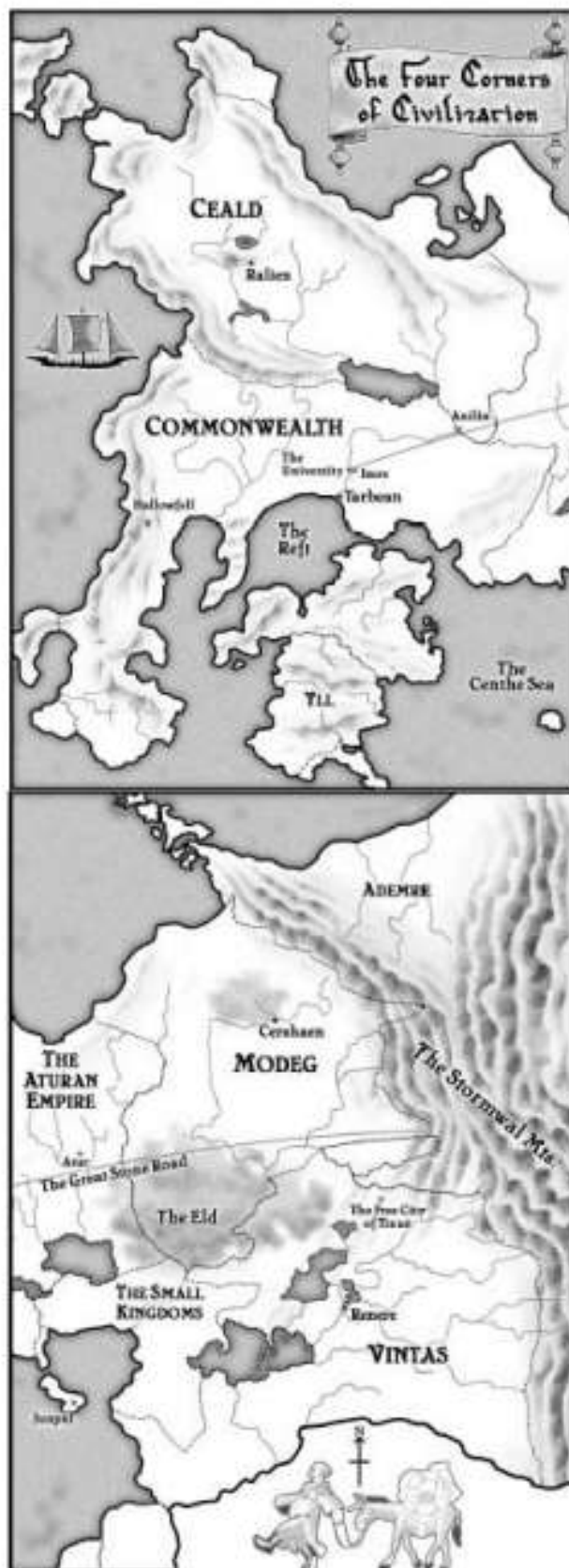
Worthy of Pursuit

CHAPTER NINETY-TWO

The Music that Plays

EPILOGUE

A Silence of Three Parts



PROLOGUE

A Silence of Three Parts

IT WAS NIGHT AGAIN. The Waystone Inn lay in silence, and it was a silence of three parts.

The most obvious part was a hollow, echoing quiet, made by things that were lacking. If there had been a wind it would have sighed through the trees, set the inn's sign creaking on its hooks, and brushed the silence down the road like trailing autumn leaves. If there had been a crowd, even a handful of men inside the inn, they would have filled the silence with conversation and laughter, the clatter and clamor one expects from a drinking house during the dark hours of night. If there had been music...but no, of course there was no music. In fact there were none of these things, and so the silence remained.

Inside the Waystone a pair of men huddled at one corner of the bar. They drank with quiet determination, avoiding serious discussions of troubling news. In doing this they added a small, sullen silence to the larger, hollow one. It made an alloy of sorts, a counterpoint.

The third silence was not an easy thing to notice. If you listened for an hour, you might begin to feel it in the wooden floor underfoot and in the rough, splintering barrels behind the bar. It was in the weight of the black stone hearth that held the heat of a long dead fire. It was in the slow back and forth of a white linen cloth rubbing along the grain of the bar. And it was in the hands of the man who stood there, polishing a stretch of mahogany that already gleamed in the lamplight.

The man had true-red hair, red as flame. His eyes were dark and distant, and he moved with the subtle certainty that comes from knowing many things.

The Waystone was his, just as the third silence was his. This was appropriate, as it was the greatest silence of the three, wrapping the others inside itself. It was deep and wide as autumn's ending. It was heavy as a great river-smooth stone. It was the patient, cut-flower sound of a man who is waiting to die.

A Place for Demons

IT WAS FELLING NIGHT, and the usual crowd had gathered at the Waystone Inn. Five wasn't much of a crowd, but five was as many as the Waystone ever saw these days, times being what they were.

Old Cob was filling his role as storyteller and advice dispensary. The men at the bar sipped their drinks and listened. In the back room a young innkeeper stood out of sight behind the door, smiling as he listened to the details of a familiar story.

"When he awoke, Taborlin the Great found himself locked in a high tower. They had taken his sword and stripped him of his tools: key, coin, and candle were all gone. But that weren't even the worst of it, you see..." Cob paused for effect, "...cause the lamps on the wall were burning blue!"

Graham, Jake, and Shep nodded to themselves. The three friends had grown up together, listening to Cob's stories and ignoring his advice.

Cob peered closely at the newer, more attentive member of his small audience, the smith's prentice. "Do you know what that meant, boy?" Everyone called the smith's prentice "boy" despite the fact that he was a hand taller than anyone there. Small towns being what they are, he would most likely remain "boy" until his beard filled out or he bloodied someone's nose over the matter.

The boy gave a slow nod. "The Chandrian."

"That's right," Cob said approvingly. "The Chandrian. Everyone knows that blue fire is one of their signs. Now he was—"

"But how'd they find him?" the boy interrupted. "And why din't they kill him when they had the chance?"

"Hush now, you'll get all the answers before the end," Jake said. "Just let him tell it."

"No need for all that, Jake," Graham said. "Boy's just curious. Drink your drink."

"I drank me drink already," Jake grumbled. "I need t'nother but the innkeep's still skinning rats in the back room." He raised his voice and knocked his empty mug hollowly on the top of the mahogany bar. "Hoy! We're thirsty men in here!"

The innkeeper appeared with five bowls of stew and two warm, round loaves of bread. He pulled more beer for Jake, Shep, and Old Cob, moving with an air of bustling efficiency.

The story was set aside while the men tended to their dinners. Old Cob tucked away his bowl of stew with the predatory efficiency of a lifetime bachelor. The others were still blowing steam off their bowls when he finished the last of his loaf and returned to his story.

"Now Taborlin needed to escape, but when he looked around, he saw his cell had no door. No windows. All around him was nothing but smooth, hard stone. It was a cell no man had ever escaped.

"But Taborlin knew the names of all things, and so all things were his to command. He said to the stone: '*Break!*' and the stone broke. The wall tore like a piece of paper, and through that hole Taborlin could see the sky and breathe the sweet spring air. He stepped to the edge, looked down, and without a second thought he stepped out into the open air...."

The boy's eyes went wide. "He didn't!"

Cob nodded seriously. "So Taborlin fell, but he did not despair. For he knew the name of the wind, and so the wind obeyed him. He spoke to the wind and it cradled and caressed him. It bore him to the ground as gently as a puff of thistledown and set him on his feet softly as a mother's kiss.

"And when he got to the ground and felt his side where they'd stabbed him, he saw that it weren't hardly a scratch. Now maybe it was just a piece of luck," Cob tapped the side of his nose knowingly. "Or maybe it had something to do with the amulet he was wearing under his shirt."

"What amulet?" the boy asked eagerly through a mouthful of stew.

Old Cob leaned back on his stool, glad for the chance to elaborate. "A few days earlier, Taborlin had met a tinker on the road. And even though Taborlin didn't have much to eat, he shared his dinner with the old man."

"Right sensible thing to do," Graham said quietly to the boy. "Everyone knows: 'A tinker pays for kindness twice.'"

"No no," Jake grumbled. "Get it right: 'A tinker's advice pays kindness twice.'"

The innkeeper spoke up for the first time that night. "Actually, you're missing more than half," he said, standing in the doorway behind the bar.

*"A tinker's debt is always paid:
Once for any simple trade.
Twice for freely-given aid.
Thrice for any insult made."*

The men at the bar seemed almost surprised to see Kote standing there.

They'd been coming to the Waystone every Felling night for months and Kote had never interjected anything of his own before. Not that you could expect anything else, really. He'd only been in town for a year or so. He was still a stranger. The smith's prentice had lived here since he was eleven, and he was still referred to as "that Rannish boy," as if Rannish were some foreign country and not a town less than thirty miles away.

"Just something I heard once," Kote said to fill the silence, obviously embarrassed.

Old Cob nodded before he cleared his throat and launched back into the story. "Now this amulet was worth a whole bucket of gold nobles, but on account of Taborlin's kindness, the tinker sold it to him for nothing but an iron penny, a copper penny, and a silver penny. It was black as a winter night and cold as ice to touch, but so long as it was round his neck, Taborlin would be safe from the harm of evil things. Demons and such."

"I'd give a good piece for such a thing these days," Shep said darkly. He had drunk most and talked least over the course of the evening. Everyone knew that something bad had happened out on his farm last Cendling night, but since they were good friends they knew better than to press him for the details. At least not this early in the evening, not as sober as they were.

"Aye, who wouldn't?" Old Cob said judiciously, taking a long drink.

"I din't know the Chandrian were demons," the boy said. "I'd heard—"

"They ain't demons," Jake said firmly. "They were the first six people to refuse Tehlu's choice of the path, and he cursed them to wander the corners —"

"Are you telling this story, Jacob Walker?" Cob said sharply. "Cause if you are, I'll just let you get on with it."

The two men glared at each other for a long moment. Eventually Jake looked away, muttering something that could, conceivably, have been an apology.

Cob turned back to the boy. "That's the mystery of the Chandrian," he explained. "Where do they come from? Where do they go after they've done their bloody deeds? Are they men who sold their souls? Demons? Spirits? No one knows." Cob shot Jake a profoundly disdainful look. "Though every half-wit *claims* he knows...."

The story fell further into bickering at this point, about the nature of the Chandrian, the signs that showed their presence to the wary, and whether the amulet would protect Taborlin from bandits, or mad dogs, or falling off a horse. Things were getting heated when the front door banged open.

Jake looked over. "It's about time you got in, Carter. Tell this damn fool the difference between a demon and a dog. Everybody kn—" Jake stopped midsentence and rushed to the door. "God's body, what happened to you?"

Carter stepped into the light, his face pale and smeared with blood. He

clutched an old saddle blanket to his chest. It was an odd, awkward shape, as if it were wrapped around a tangle of kindling sticks.

His friends jumped off their stools and hurried over at the sight of him. "I'm fine," he said as he made his slow way into the common room. His eyes were wild around the edges, like a skittish horse. "I'm fine. I'm fine."

He dropped the bundled blanket onto the nearest table where it knocked hard against the wood, as if it were full of stones. His clothes were crisscrossed with long, straight cuts. His grey shirt hung in loose tatters except where it was stuck to his body, stained a dark, sullen red.

Graham tried to ease him into a chair. "Mother of God. Sit down, Carter. What happened to you? Sit down."

Carter shook his head stubbornly. "I told you, I'm fine. I'm not hurt that bad."

"How many were there?" Graham said.

"One," Carter said. "But it's not what you think—"

"Goddammit. I told you, Carter," Old Cob burst out with the sort of frightened anger only relatives and close friends can muster. "I told you for months now. You can't go out alone. Not even as far as Baedn. It ain't safe." Jake laid a hand on the old man's arm, quieting him.

"Just take a sit," Graham said, still trying to steer Carter into a chair. "Let's get that shirt off you and get you cleaned up."

Carter shook his head. "I'm fine. I got cut up a little, but the blood is mostly Nelly's. It jumped on her. Killed her about two miles outside town, past the Oldstone Bridge."

A moment of serious silence followed the news. The smith's prentice laid a sympathetic hand on Carter's shoulder. "Damn. That's hard. She was gentle as a lamb, too. Never tried to bite or kick when you brought her in for shoes. Best horse in town. Damn. I'm..." He trailed off. "Damn. I don't know what to say." He looked around helplessly.

Cob finally managed to free himself from Jake. "I told you," he repeated, shaking a finger in Carter's direction. "There's folks out lately that would kill you for a pair of pennies, let alone a horse and cart. What are you going to do now? Pull it yourself?"

There was a moment of uncomfortable quiet. Jake and Cob glared at each other while the rest seemed at a loss for words, unsure of how to comfort their friend.

The innkeeper moved carefully through the silence. Arms full, he stepped nimbly around Shep and began to arrange some items on a nearby table: a bowl of hot water, shears, some clean linen, a few glass bottles, needle and gut.

"This never would have happened if he'd listened to me in the first place," Old Cob muttered. Jake tried to quiet him, but Cob brushed him aside.