Aster looked up at the sky with annoyance. The weather had not made the trip easy so far.

She looked out over Allegoth Basin and was not surprised to see its dark waters whip and crash into the rocky shore.

The damned road had turned into a insufferable mudtrap and every sane soul had long sought shelter.

Aster pulled her foul weather cloak closer to her and tried to sheild herself from the sudden and gale like assaults of raw pelting rain. She regretted departing from the forest, but she had business in the city tonight.

Above her, and off on its plateau she could make out Dor's crag, or at least some of its lights. The mammoth shelf of rock jutted out into open space from the side of the mountain range, lifted by unknown forces. Local legend said that the ice giant Dor had fought a great battle against some foe here, and in their struggle the mountains themselves were smashed into pieces, leaving the crag.

Regardless of how it was formed, the city was just as impressive as when she had last seen it, which, come to think of it, was a while ago. As she stared and slowly marched through the ankle deep mud, a sudden bolt of lightening lit the sky, striking off in the mountainous distance.

While she waited for the thunder, the sky was for a moment lit up in silluette, the carved edge of the city peeking out just slightly from the massive cliff it sat on. The main feature from her angle over the lake was the tall lighthouse right on the most extreme part of the ledge, almost overhanging the lake below.

The oddity had always been there, and no one could reason out why it had been built, or who had built it, especially since the river was unnavigable past Illithar. Whatever the reason, it was the defacto symbol of the city. Her city. Theoretically.

She sighed as the hood was once again torn from her head and trailed uselessly behind her. The rain beat down on her, seemingly aiming itself for her face. Even though it was not winter proper, the droplets seemed cold as ice. She clenched her fists, and continued forward through the horribleness.

Her hair, which she recently had styled, if only to help in negotiations, had freed itself from its binds and whipped behind her, following her hood, its long blond threads assuredly becoming a sopping mess.

She drew closer to the shore and despite the horrid weather, silently gave thanks that the storm hadn't hit when she was coming over from the islands. Although they were now her adopted home, she lacked the Shani's assurance when it came to ocean travel.

For this reason, and partly out of nostalgia, she almost smiled a bit as the wind tried to force her backwards down the road: Gods damn the weather, but it was Northern weather right?

The cold depths of the Allegoth Basin now were the closest the road got to the massive lake, and Aster could look across its expanse properly as she trudged by its shore.

She could make out the island in the middle and its useless rocky cliff shores through a gap in the trees. All along the shore there were wands of tall mash grass, an especially heardy variety that could grow in the north, but soon even they would turn brittle against the onslaught of winter. These she knew choked the south west exit of the lake, but it seemed also have grown up along the south of it as well, where the road ran.

In the south, the lake probably would have been an illdealic calm blue expanse, with lots of fish and plentiful farming area nearby. Unfortunately it was in the north, where the geography rarely seemed to cooperate. Like the weather, Aster reflected with a bit of annoyance as another gust tried to knock her around, the land itself seemed to actively work against the tenacious Northerns who tried to live there.

The lake instead was dreadfully deep and almost unbelievably cold, even during the summer. Its shores were bad as well, every inch of it was either insufferable vine and grass choked bog or deadly sharp rocks. The wind didn't behave well on it either.

Every couple of years some enterprising individual would try to fish it, or try to build a house on the island in the center but none had succeeded, and in fact the hulls of the last endeavor lay right ahead of her, their skeletal white remains strewn along the shore, much further up than one would expect.

Gods, if it wasn't for Haverson she never would have come back to this place, birth town or no.

She trudged through the last few yards of muck and was at last comforted by the large copse of trees through which the road now ran. The tall, sturdy trees still had their leaves and she was glad of this fact as the heard another gust hit, the forest around her groaning in protest.

She checked her pack for a moment, and the sword by her side and continued onward.

Emerging from the trees, she crossed the Arnon at the base of the plateau where it etched the corner of the rocky expanse. Below her, the sturdy bridge sat not quite as reassuring as it should have been. Beneath it ran a torrential amount of water, churning white as it raced itself towards the choppy depths of Allegoth Basin.

Before her was the cliff itself. It loomed nearly two hundred feet of solid rock above her, its face drenched with run off. The stone was a dark color, known for its usefulness in construction, and its bountiful ores. The many faces of the cliff flashed as another lightening bolt split the sky, this one closer, booming almost palpably through the air.

Aster looked up quickly. Rock falls here were rare, which was why the winch was here, but the did happen, and when they did they were usually quite large…

Luckily, no potential bounders caught her eye. Instead, her eyes caught sight of the winch, slowly, painfully slowly in this weather, descending down the cut in the cliff.

Haverson better be here. She had been somewhat glad to see him after so long in Mellont, but regardless of the job he had set up, if he didn't show, she was going to stay the night and be off as soon as she could, whether or not the rain had stopped.

However, as she got closer to the cut, traveling along the bottom of the cliff on another mud doomed road, she caught sign of another person.

Haverson sat sullenly, drenched as well, on a rock looking up at the winch with palpable contempt. As he watched it, Aster could have sworn it slowed.

He ran a hand through tangled greying hair, before spying her.

Despite the weather, he rose with a smile and a shout, waving his hand at her.

As Aster closed the distance with the older man, she couldn't help but feel guilty, even if her actions had been justified. By the looks of things, the last year had not been as kind to him as it had been to her.

“Some weather huh?” he said with a grin, holding out a hand to catch the rain as it fell. “What a setting for a reunion!”

Now it was aster's turn to run a hand through her hair. “Gods, what a drag. You should have scheduled better weather old man. I didn't come all this way to get rained on you know!”

Haverson shrugged and sat back down on his rock, gesturing at another near him. Despite the pooled water on its surface, Aster sat. It had been a long several days from Harsos in the hills, and even she felt the exhaustion now that the call of a warm bed was just several feet above her.

“So how have you been doing?” Haverson asked.

“Not bad. Except for this shit of course. Harsos was a success. I must admit, your feeling was right, the Sherrif did want to secure futures on the harvest. Of course, the Shani I represent want their ceramics just as much. It was a profitable transaction, well, it will be when the good actually get to their respective places.”

“Good, good. I'm glad I didn't waste your time.”

“No, everything went well. Thank you for the tip. But… Haverson, you don't want to talk about business, I know. How have you been? I won't lie you don't look well.”

Haverson caughed and spat to his side, apparently a new habit.

“Well, I can't say things have gone too well for me. The group I told you about turned out to be a bunch of theives. Literally. They got away with half of my gold before I was able to land one in jail.”

“Have you seen any of our old friends? Germain or Meridia?” Aster asked, but felt as if she knew the answer.

“No.” Haverson said, shaking his head. “Germain's still off doing his soul searching and Meridia is still training recruits, by your way in Swan last I heard.”

“Hmm. How about any of the others?”

“No. But I've been roughing it more than not.”

“Yeah. I can tell.”

“There's a nice town now where Wildermark used to be. But they've got some strange weed problem, the crops didn't come up good this year because of it. I stopped there for a month or two, but it wasn't really something I could help with. The mayor wanted nature walkers, not my kind of adventurer.”

“I see.” Aster said simply, realizing that her short response would stifle the conversation, but was unable to think of any response other than that.

“How uhh, how is Ellis?”

“You don't really want to know.” Aster snapped before she could stop herself. She regretted the outburst instantly.

Haverson looked wounded, but recovered quickly, his face slipping into the more emotionless state Aster hated.

“Sorry.” She said, softly. “I didn't mean it to come out like that. He's doing well... I'm doing well. The islands are rich with trade, even in this political climate. You should think about taking the ship out as well, there's more than a few big whigs who need bodyguards.”

“Mabye.” Haverson said, looking up at the winch.

Aster knew there was no chance of that happening.

And yet she also hated to see the man like he was. It was clear he'd been drinking and Aster could tell he'd lost muscle mass by just looking at his arms.

“What kind of job you got for us?” She asked, also looking up towards the winch, its glacial movement finally moving it close enough for Aster to make out the details on the platform. The gears on the side spun slowly, throwing water off with every revolution. The many, many ropes which held it in the air vibrating, but never tangling in the violent weather.

“Nothing special I'm afraid, but I thought it would be fun nonetheless. Some of the mine owners want us to check out some new caverns they found. Apparently two their tunnels happened on the thing at the same time and they want someone to see how big it is and where it goes.”

“Huh. I haven't done any caving in a long time. Is it a lot of climbing?” She asked, still looking up at the platform.

“Won't know until we get there I guess.”

“And its not...” She asked, going silent and letting the implications of her question voice themselves.

“No. It not your father's mine, its two small players. I wouldn't bust something like that on you.”

“No I guess not.”

“But now that you mention it, when was the last time you were here? You know, you could say hi to the family, right? I mean, its been years right?”

Aster exhaled sharply, and she suppressed a frown. “I mean… I'm sure that...”

“How long has it been?”

“I don't know, two years I think? I never saw them once when I was with you, you remember, the family was out the one time I tried.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

Aster snorted. “Nothing you could have done about it.”

“But you're right, I should see how they are doing,” She said, softer, “Its funny, I never thought it would end up like this, but I'm basically doing my father's business after all. All this negotiating and trading? Why did I ever leave?” She said dryly.

“How about you?” She said, reversing the question back at Haverson.

Haverson shrugged a bit. “Brother is doing well. Everything is still good for him. He and his wife have three… no four, now. The old two are able to help them out in the fields and he's got two others working for him. He talked over buying out the neighbor's farm as well when the old man passes.”

“I… I stayed there for a bit as well, helped him out. It was good, but...” Haverson broke off, and looked away from Aster for a moment. “Well, you know… Its just not *me.*” he said firmly, suddenly staring at her as if trying to convince her of something.

She didn't quite know how to react.

The moment passed. “It was just too much. The farming is boring but not bad, and it helped me get back in some shape, but its just too… I can't really describe it. Its like, I sat there on the farm on the fence and looked out at what he'd done with that land and saw the kids running around and it just felt so foreign, like we were back in the South, like I was looking through some mirror of another life, or another world. I… had to leave after that month, I couldn't bear it.”

Aster again didn't know quite what to say, so she just nodded, as if she understood. For all her practice negotiating with mercants, mercenaries, haggling over bars of iron and wheat and labor, it seemed like she still couldn't hold a conversation with Haverson anymore.

It was a shame. There was something wrong and broken about it really. They had been close for years, hells, he had basically raised her. So for the words to just trap themselves in her mouth when usually they came so easily…

Thankfully the platform came to a struggling halt next to them.

“I guess we should get on.” She said, gesturing to the winch.

He muttered a reply that Aster didn't hear. But followed her onto the platform.

The winch was almost twenty feet long and ten feet wide, made out of the sturdiest trunks the foresters could find that year. The logs were lashed together tightly, rope running arround and also in between the logs. However, the most impressive feature of the winch was of course the winch mechanism itself.

The platform ran up and down on metal wheels arrayed horizontally which ran in grooves set into the stone side of the half shaft.

Legend said that the shaft used to be just a simple crack in the rock up which adventurous and fearless children used to climb, some without the assistance of ropes. Eventually this caught the attention of an ecentric man who used to design the tracks for the mines. He thought he might be able to make a simmilar sort of system. After two years of cutting it had been completed.

Whenever it had been made, since then it had been destroyed no less than ten times, a couple due to greedy merchants overloading the platform with heavy wagons. However, others were just twists of fate. It took nearly a day and a half to hike through and around the Allegoth Basin via the old unkept southern road, especially now that the old bridge had fallen a decade or so ago. Everyone took the winch now.

Normally there was an operator at the bottom and some guards as well, but Aster supposed that they didn't expect anyone in this weather. She frowned.

“Did you call the winch?”

“Yeah. You just have to jerk the rope a couple of times.” Haverson said, pointing to an additional rope that always ran the full length of the cliff face. “Its a good thing we got a response. I half figured that they wouldn't send it down in this weather.”

“Seriously!” Aster agreed, realizing how unsafe the whole damn contraption was now that it was starting to lift off the ground. The gears behind her groaned and the damn contraption started its long, long journey upward.

The stood awkwardly looking out on the rushing river below them. As the platform clinked its way up the mountain, its metal wheels squealing even through the sound of the storm, they broke tree height and were able to make out the assortment of farms to the North East.

In front of them, the road branched with the southern facing section being the one that Aster had taken on the way here. The northern branch ran by a farm house, just barely visible in the storm. Aster could make out a fence and some presumably soggy crops. To the south of the house, there was a further branch from the crossroads that went east.

This road was wider than its northern and southern compatriots and ran all the way to Mellont. To the south of this road, the scenery gave way to tall trees, swaying erratically in the gale. These got denser until it became proper forest that lead into heavily forested hills, the closest of which she could see.

“You like the work you're doing?” Haverson asked, breaking the silence, and turned to Aster.

Aster wiped the drenched hair out of her eyes and glanced back at him.

“Yes. Its going quite well. It turns out that all my years of adventuring with you give me quite the leg up over the usual merchants. Most of them have never experienced this world. I wanted to thank you for that, by the way. I can't remember us staying in one place for more than a week!” She said, a sliver of a smile forming on her lips.

Despite his best efforts, Haverson mirrored the expression. “Well, you know, we were just following the contracts. You can't stay in one place for long. It becomes… too familiar.” He said, trailing off as he finished as if he were suddenly remembering something.

“But its going well. That's good. I was always a bit surprised you stayed for as long as you did.”

“Really?” She said, shocked and a bit hurt. She frowned. “What else would I have done? Gone back home?” She said, a frown appearing.

“No, not like that. Just something different. You were young, you could have done everything, anything… Adventuring might be glamorized but its for the desperate. Only when you can't do anything else, you know? Only desperate people wager their lives.” He said.

Aster listened, but didn't really agree. “Is that true? I don't think I ever thought of what we did as a job. We helped people. We took care of tasks. Yes, some of them were dangerous. Yes some people didn't walk away form it, but we did, right? In that sense it was liberating, living on the edge of life.” She said, surprising herself with nostalgia. For a moment, the old places floated up in her mind, some of them had faces with them as well. She grabbed the railing.

“I won't lie, that is one privileged viewpoint. You were a kid. Did you really understand how close we got sometimes?” Haverson said, growling. “You could have done anything...” He repeated.

“Did I understand?” Aster asked, voice growing louder. It had been a while, but it seemed like Haverson still knew ho to push her buttons.

“Of course I understood! Do you think I was playing a god damn game when I slid that sword into other people? Or how about in that library? I still don't know what on earth went down there. That was the turning point I think, both the beginning and the end. I knew I had to get better at adventuring at life, or it was going to eat me.”

“So don't act all forced either. You could have done anything as well! You and your damn talk of threads, and forces, and your damn mysterious 'master'. You could have gone back to the military, you could have become someone's bodyguard, you could have been a settler. Hells, you could have gone back to your brother. I'm sure he found it hard to explain to those kids why their uncle left!” Aster said, again, regretting the words as they escaped her mouth.

Haverson stiffened and looked like he had been punched.

The platform rumbled on, picking up speed a bit. Perhaps the operators wanted to get the damn thing up and done with so they could finally go home.

“Huh.” Haverson said. “You've certainly gotten older Aster.”

That was not the response she had expected. He took a step towards her.

“I guessed I always hoped that you would be able to do what I couldn't get myself to do, to live a normal life.” He admitted.

“What I do is not exactly normal.” Aster said, biting her lip. “The company puts a great deal of responsibility my way. Its been only two years, but I think they're considering be to take over for the old man when he decides to give it up.” She said, diverting the conversation purposefully.

“Fine. And what exactly is it that you do for them? You just asked for business opportunities earlier.” He asked, allowing her diversion.

“Well, I investigate and counsel them on… business opportunities. I do transactions, I haggle and negotiate contracts. And sometimes, rarely, I kill assassins that they send after the company.” Aster smiled.

Haverson looked at her, trying to figure out whether she was serious or not.

“I'm joking damn it!” She said, throwing up her hands. “What happened to your sense of humor?”

“Heh, I don't know. I guess I just haven't had anything to laugh about in a while.” Haverson said.

They were almost up the cliff now, and Aster took the lull in the conversation to glance upward.

A head peaked over the cliff back at her and then vanished. The rain slowed, but it was growing darker.

“Hmm. How much is this damn thing again?” She asked, changing the subject again.

“For us? Ten gold. They know we can pay. They may even make it more since they had to operate in this storm.”

“They charge more based on who they bring up?” She asked.

“Yeah, didn't you grow up here?”

“Yes, but I don't ever remember the pricing model of the damn winch. And I haven't been back in a while and when I did I came from the west.”

“Well, they charge what they know you can pay. Some people try to disguise themselves sometimes but it usually doesn't go well for them.” Haveson added, also looking upwards.

The winch creaked upward.

As they ascended, Aster took in how tall the plateau really was. Two hundred feet was rather tall: enough to make the houses look like ants, and the bridge they passed like a twig. She wasn't afraid of heights usually, but the storm may have factored into things. She backed away from the edge and paced closer to the cliff.

Several minutes passed, Aster clearly thinking about something with Haverson merely watching.

Finally as they were approaching the top he suddenly stood up.

“Look, Aster, there's something I want to talk to you about.” He said, grabbing her attention as she paced.

She stopped but didn't say anything.

Haverson inhaled, and scratched the beginnings of a beard.

“I guess… I guess I wanted to say I was sorry.”

“Sorry?” Aster asked, eyebrow raised.

“Yes. I wanted… You know… All about Ellis.” He waited a moment for her to protest. But she didn't.

Instead she just sighed.

“Before you say anything, I just wanted to say that with the benefit of some time, I realize I acted immaturely. I was just so wound up with, well, protecting you, that I never realized that you didn't need to be protected.”

“No I didn't.” Aster said. “I've done well so far.”

“There's more to it.” Haverson said, raising a hand. “Its hard to describe, but ever since the incident, or no… ever since I broke that sword and decided to put that part of my life behind me, I have been looking for something, anything...” He stammered, clenching his hands.

“Looking?” Aster said.

“Not actually, more like spiritually. Or philosophically. Its just… You have to have a reason to do things right? Doesn't there need to be a reason for it all? I can't just move around from place to place like a leaf on the wind.”

“I couldn't stay with my brother. I thought I could, but it got too hard Aster. It was too hard. Something inside me cried out everytime I saw those kids. I-I couldn't help but think of all the horrible things I've seen, hell, that I've done… It was just so foreign, I couldn't bear it.”

Aster looked concerned. Haverson looked disheveled, but more so than his outward appearance was the force with which he was trying to make his case.

“I-I'm not sure I understand all of what you're saying Haverson. I know about the old war horrors, you told me about it all, remember? But I don't see how that has anything to do with now. I thought you said you put all that behind you? It seemed like you did when you were with me, for the most part at least.”

Haverson shook his head and seemed to withdraw a bit.

By now the rain had stopped.

“Sorry. I'm not making any sense.” Haverson said, shaking his head again. “I suppose I just wanted to apologize for our last conversation. There were things I said that I never should have. I got to know Ellis a bit when he traveled with us, I'm sure he is a fine man.”

Aster studied the older man. “Haverson. You said what you said. It happened a long time ago. If you want though we can talk about it more. To be honest I'm a bit concerned with what you've been doing since I left.”

“Sure. We can talk at the tavern I guess.” He glanced up again at the sky.

“Hey, at least the rain has stopped, right?”

Aster looked up as well.

“Huh. I suppose it did.” She grinned at Haverson.

The world shuddered.

“What the!”

Haverson saw the winch twist underneath them as it came to a sudden stop. They lurched, the assembly groaning. Rope fell around them. The platform shuttered again.

Both of them grabbed the railing as the winch slipped a notch and then locked in place, letting out a screeching noise as the winch skewed and lodged in the teetched rails that it normally traveled in.

“God damn it.” Haverson said, straining to hold onto the rope from falling over.

The two brushed themselves off and looked around.

“I'm not paying them that ten gold, let me tell you.” Aster said.

Haverson merely shook his head.

“Somethings off. It looks like we're stuck.” He walked closer to the platform. “The mechanism looks like its still intact but the whole platform is lodged at a slight angle in its track. I can't see a way that we can right it, short of magic. You haven't picked up anything from Ellis have you?”

“No. You know it doesn't work that way.” Aster said.

“I don't know about you then, but I'm not going to stand here and wait for them to figure out the messed everything up. Lets just climb up.”

“Climb up?” Aster asked.

“Sure. Look, its only a bit to the top anyway. You're still in shape right? Better than me for sure.” He said, pointing upwards at the cables that lead to the top.

He produced a strip of cloth and tossed a piece to Aster.

They looped the pieces around the cable and used the friction to climb the rope, bracing their feet as they went.

Although the trick worked, they were soon panting. The rain had made the travel poor, and neither of them were quite as up to the climbing as they might have been two years ago.

When they finally made it over the edge, they had to roll themselves over it. They lay there for a moment breathing hard, before getting to their feet.

“Oh!” Aster said. The color from her face draining. Then her expression changed, becoming harder. She let out a small hiss, and her hand flung itself to her sword.

Haverson's smile from climbing together vanished instantly, and his sword appeared in his hand.

In front of them, at the edge of the cliff, were the two operators, their bodies cut to pieces. From the still pooling blood, Haverson could tell that it was recently. Very recent.

“You're armed right?” he asked, taking a quick glance back at Aster.

“Yes.” She said darkly, drawing her own weapon. “Something went wrong here.”

“Sure looks like it.” Haverson commented, the two of them slowly approaching the gate.

The mechanism for the winch was a piece of rotating metal which spun in place, secured into the ground. Around it was a track for oxen, and it took four usually to pull the winch upwards. Off to the side there was some other mechanism that played some key part.

Both of these mechanisms looked undamaged, and the oxen, trained to stop if the load was too forceful, looked at them dumbly. However, one of the four massive lines that ran to the winch had been severed. The twisted pieces of trailing rope were still wrapped around the spinner, but one end was trodden into the mud by the oxen, its far end cut through.

Past the winch spin was the gate to the city itself. Since the winch could be raised in times of war, creating a wall far larger than any that a human could build, it was nothing like those of Illithar or even Dor's Crag's other side, where the plateau lowered into a rocky plain.

“There are no guards. That doesn't seem right.” Haverson said.

“No. Its doesn't. Where is everyone?” Aster asked, glancing at the bodies. “These men were killed viciously. Gods, it looks like they were just cut down.”

“I saw.” Haverson said, voice lacking emotion. “I've seen wounds like that before many times. Come. I think the gate might even be open.”

Even after all the events that had transpired between the two, and their two year estrangement, she followed him, just like they used to do. Some things changed about a person with time, others didn't. She knew that when he got like this, when his smile faded, and the creases started forming along his too-old face that he usually knew what he was doing.

They approached the door from the side, careful not to make any loud noises, or stand in front of an opening where an attacker might see them. As Haverson readied himself to open the door, Aster checked the wall above them. No one was there.

“Wait. One second.” She whispered. “Do you remember someone looking down at us earlier?”

“Perhaps. Let do this quick. We may catch whoever it was by surprise.” Haverson said.

He lashed out quickly, slipping through the doorway with Aster right behind him.

Inside the walls, things seemed just as bad. There were four guards, all dead. Aster lifted up the first one from the sodden ground. He had his throat slashed right through his leather collar, the blood spilling over and losing itself amid his black uniform. She grimmiced and put him back down.

Haverson inspected the other two. These had puncture wounds to their skull, single blows. He got up slowly from his crouch, the bodies falling back to the ground.

As he walked to the fourth Aster looked further around down the street. Besides the lack of people in the immediate vicinity, there was nothing else that looked amiss. The city certainly hadn't been sacked. Such a thing would have been impossible, as well as loud. It was quiet. There were lights on in far away houses, but Aster couldn't see any other guards.

“What should we do?” Aster asked, looking again at the bodies with distaste. “There have to be guard around here somewhere.”

“I'm not sure we want to get the guard involved, if these bodies are any indication. Whoever did this was a killer through and through.” Haverson said, turning to Aster. “But that’s not the worst part. I have this feeling that whoever did this is still around.”

“What makes you say that?”

“None of their gold has been taken. None of these men hold any rank higher than just guardsman. None of them is likely to have had any intelligence on them.”

“So it wasn't a robbery gone bad or an assasination.” Aster said, following Haverson's line of thought.

“Well. Not quite. It means they weren't the target.” He said, eyes scanning the roads carefully. A movement caught his eye.

“If we want to run, we just missed our chance Aster. I...I think this was an assasination, there's no one skilled enough to do this otherwise. But they weren't the targets. Which means...the targets are us!” he said pointing his sword at a dark alley.

“Come out murderer.” He said, voice flat.

A man emerged from the alleyway. Despite herself, Aster took an invuluntary step backwards.

The man was about six feet tall and of medium build. He wore black leather and Aster could make out at least four knives and a sword on his person. He wore light boots, and Aster realized that although the man was walking towards them, he left no sound of footprints upon the stone street. His face was hidden by a hood but as he grew close he threw it backwards, revealing short black hair. His face was covered by a grey mask which not only covered his face, but was also somehow attached to it.

There was something off about the way he moved that Aster could not quite nail down. It was almost like he was limping.

“So w-what do you think of my handiwork.” The man said, pointing a gloved hand towards the bodies on the ground. His voice was just a hollow rasp, nothing like Aster had heard before. It was clear he had trouble talking.

“Well, to be honest, I'm disgusted.” Haverson said, still holding his sword. “You're not from here are you?”

“Hmm. I w-wasn't told there would be two… just the girl...” The man said, scratching his head. He still had not drawn his sword or knives. When he got almost thirty feet away, he stopped.

Aster grimaced and tightened her hold on her sword.

“What do you want from me?” She asked, but felt like she knew the answer.

“I must… apologize for the t-theatrics. I thought they would have gone in for the storm. I would have met...” he coughed somehow through the mask he wore,”...you at the bottom but I was a bit delayed myself. I don't get out much, as you can see, so I like to… spend my time. To answer your question, I am here to kill you Aster La Rouche.”

Aster's eyes widened, but she didn't back down.

“Perhaps we can talk this through. My employers might be able to arrange a better deal.” She said, trying to negotiate.

“Ah” Haverson said, exhaling suddenly. “That won't work with this one Aster. This man… he is like I was once.”

The man looked at Haverson. “You are quite right. I do not know you. You are not my target. You can leave any time you like. My business is with the woman.”

“It seem like my reputation does not precede me. I'm glad the years have grown and they have forgotten me. It is better that way.” Haverson said. “But I am not going anywhere. If you want to harm Aster you'll have to go through me.”

“I m-must admit. This might be a... deal more interesting than I originally thought. A rich heiress? You look nothing of the sort.” He said, looking Aster over. “Actually you look quite capable. As does your friend here. But I'm afraid it will not help you. I have never let a target escape. Ever.”

“It seems like there a lack of information on your part. I have nothing to do with my family. I do not do business for or even with them.”

“Well. That is a surprise. I will have to let my employer know when I bring him your head.”

“Y-You're still going to fight us?” Aster asked, gritting her teeth and slightly adjusting her stance.

“Of course. And I will win.” The man said, cocking his head. “Perhaps this will be very interesting. Most people attack me when I stand here and just talk like this. Ah well.” The man draw his sword, and rushed at them.

Aster froze for a second, but Haverson sprung into action. As the man ran towards her, Haverson ran towards him, but at an angle which forced him to confront the older man or be flanked.

The man tracked Haverson methodically as he ran out of the corner of his eyes and at the last second before the two came into contact, he stopped abruptly, springing backwards and threw one of his knives with his off hand.

Haverson dodged out of the way even as he was running and his sword flashed out.

The two made contact and a sinking feeling instantly developed in Haverson's stomach.

With that one contact he could tell several things about their adversary. The first was that he was stronger than Haverson. Not by a massive amount, but perhaps the same strength gap between he and Aster. The second was that he was out of practice: a condition that was definitely not shared by his opponent.

The blades slid apart and the two men circled each other.

Haverson scanned the other man again, for any points of interest. The mask certainly was strange, but it didn't seem to hinder the other man's fighting, and seemed to almost be part of the other man's face since it wasn't held on by any straps Haverson could see. The sword he had was ordinary, perhaps a little heavier and a bit shorter than Haverson's own.

Haverson's eyes widened. “Aster, he's coming for you!” he yelled, breaking Aster from her shock. He sprinted after the other man.

The masked man lunged at Aster, crossing the twenty feet or so between them at astonishing speed.

She brought up her own sword, deflecting the attack, and whiped her lighter sword around fast, but found the assailant's weapon already ready to stop her.

She sprung backward as the man attacked her again. Haverson felt a bit of relief. Although it had been two years, it seemed Aster retained a measure of her old training.

Haverson reached the man and purposely attacked him frantically, forcing the masked man to turn to defend himself. Haverson could tell that although he was distracting the man, his stamina would not outlast his opponent. The masked man's movements and counters were not flawless, but he moved with an effortlessness that made it hard to predict his movement. If they won this fight it would be because they could attack from both sides, as Haverson had tried to set up twice now.

Aster stabbed at the man while he was occupied with Haverson, but the masked man somehow anticipated the attack, leaning back just enough to have the sword pass in front of him, leaving Aster exposed.

The man's arm moved. Aster's surprise was just appearing as her attack missed. Haverson could see the attack coming. Damn it!

Haverson forced his body forward, striking as fast as he could at the man's torso.

Haverson's attack connected, but the armor the other man had seemed to have some kind of metal in it, since the sword just barely cut it, revealing only the smallest of wounds. Blood seeped too slowly from it.

But as Haverson congratulated himself, assured that the man wasn't under the aegis of some powerful magic, he let out a choke of surprise. His eyes followed what his body was only just recognizing. Reaching out and impaling his offhand arm, was the masked man's own arm holding a knife.

Aster cried out and took a swipe at the man's head. “Damn you! You piece of shit!”

The man ducked, but Aster saw this coming, and swept her foot straight into his crotch with her left leg.

The duck turned into a fall and the man collapsed to the pavement.

Haverson stared at the knife jutting out from his arm. He inhaled and exhaled quickly and tore the weapon from his body. Pain lanced through his arm, and some part of his mind was sure that the knife had gone into bone. He tried to not look at the blood.

Aster approached the huddled man.

“I hope that hurt, you pathetic filth!” She said, going to stab the man as he lay on the ground.

Haverson looked up from his task just in time to see what was going on. The man's feet were still crouched, rather than planted flat. “Aster! He's faking!” he cried out, realizing that the man and subtly turned his collapse into an opportunity.

She dodge to the side as his sword swept out from his side, catching her in the side.

“Fuck you!” Haverson yelled, not waiting to see if the blow connected, springing forward. But the man was already ready for him, turning and straightening at almost superhuman speeds. The two traded blows several times.

Meanwhile, Aster checked her side quickly, wincing when she saw the blood pooling through her travel clothing. She gritted her teeth and attacked as well.

Whoever the man in the mask was, he was good. He had achieved his apparent goal of injuring both of them, slowing them just enough to make it possible for him to actually fight them two on one. He spun, and dodged just as fast as both of them, deflecting or forcing back all their attacks. Even more, he constantly moved backward, forcing them to follow him to maintain their flank.

This state of affairs lasted several minutes, neither side able to land any major attacks. Aster and Haverson may have been out of practice, but in a life or death situation, their old skills flowed quickly to their fingers and feet.

Finally, it was clear the man was getting frustrated. He delivered a much stronger than usual counter blow to Haverson's attack, and then put his weight behind it. Haverson, not expecting this found himself with the wrong stance, and he felt himself falling.

While Haverson fell, Aster attacked the man with increased fervor, nicking his side and face, but never managing to land a proper blow.

But the man no longer had to deal with Haverson as the older man rolled backwards and to his feet and attacked Aster with an even more fearsome set of attacks, making advantage of his greater strength. Aster was push back onto the defensive, and was hard pressed just to block his attacks.

As Haverson rushed forward to take the focus off of her, the man spun around and threw something from his jacket. “Stop interfering!”

Haverson spun to the side, but it wasn't a knife that the man threw, and the object wasn't even a knife.

A blinding light seared into Haverson's eyes, and the sudden whiteness blinded him. For just a moment, he was horrifyingly reminded of the incident. Fortunately, the moment was a brief one, and Haverson expected an attack. Because of this, the masked man's thrust hit him on the right side rather than the left.

Haverson screamed as the blade passed through his armor and into his body. Red hot fire burned inside of him and he struggled for a breath that refused to come. He choaked blood and looked up as his eye sight returned.

“Enton!” Aster yelled, seeing him stricken. But the assailant had counted on her distraction as well. His blade shot forward. Aster went to doge but realized that the masked man had purposefully stood on her foot while lunging, catching her off balance.

She threw her sword up and he caught it skillfully, sliding along the edge and, with a flick of his hand, wrenched the weapon from her hand. Aster let out a cry as he attacked again. She had no weapons left and could barely react in time. She threw up her hands to catch the blade, even if she only wore leather gloves. He simply pressed his attack stronger and sent the blade straight through her outstretched hands and into her head.

Haverson stood still, not wanting to understand what he was seeing.

The man kicked Aster's feet from under her, but the way she moved it was clear that she was already…

The masked man knelt and wrenched the blade from her skull, at the same time, checking to make sure she was... Straightening, he confronted a horrified Haverson.

“I do apologize, but I always get my target. I told you you weren't part of this. You're free to go.” he said, turning to walk away.

“No...” Haverson said, the word leaking from his trembling lips. “No, it can't be...”

“There was so much more! It should have been me!” he screamed, his whole body now trembling. Somewhere within him, the void lurked, sending up its enticing emptiness, but he was much too far gone for that to have any effect on him now.

The masked man continued to walk away.

The blood welled from her forehead, spilling out onto her tangled blond hair, staining it red.

“It should have been me!” Haverson screamed at the man. “How dare you!” His feet found themselves, and his fingers tightened around his weapon. His wounds were forgotten for a moment.

He launched himself at the other man. Haverson thought very little as he slid from attack to attack, fighting like a man possessed. The man in the mask calmly defended himself.

“I t-told you. I don't have any business with you.”

“Well I have fucking business with you!” Haverson screamed, his eyes bulging.

He continued attacking, sometimes getting in a few glancing hits to the man's armor, but few connected. The man simply countered, making no effort to attack Haverson. How could he be so calm!

Haverson let out a blood curdling yell and put all of his force into his next attack, aimed straight at the man's masked face.

More pain lanced through his body. The masked man had hit before him. Haverson's attack quivered and his arms slumped. Haverson had been stabbed through the stomach. He coughed and tried to catch a breath.

The man slid his sword out of Haverson's stomach causing Haverson to cry out again in pain, but this time, only blood spurted from his open mouth, and the older man fell to the ground.

“I'm sorry about all this. This was an interesting time. You two were much better than I anticipated or expected. I will have to tell my employer about this. You injured me. No one's managed to hurt me this badly in a long time.” The masked man said looking down at the assortment of small wounds he had across his body as he straightened.

Was this the end? Haverson's vision started to fade around the corners. The void grew as it never had before, spreading slowly, unbidden, from his stomach, and extending outward first into his legs and then his arms.

He suddenly felt very cold. This was the end? He was bleeding out badly. The pain was thankfully so overwhelming as to be distant. He couldn't feel anything now that the void was coming for him, one last time whether he wished it to or not.

He turned and looked at Aster, who still lay on the ground, now in a large pool of her own blood. His finger tightened around his sword. No. He couldn't. Not now. He slammed the blade into the stones, and hauled himself forward with it. The void started to retreat just a tiny bit.

There was only one way now. Only one way forward. He coughed up blood, again and again until his throat finally cleared. His muscles bulged as he held himself upwards with his arm. He was looking at Aster. Aster was dead. The masked man had killed Aster. He had killed Aster. Haverson's face contorted into a hideous grimace.

“Kerack!” he yelled as loudly as he could to the sky.

“Kerack, you old black bastard! You offered me something once! I want it. I accept. Everything. All of it. Whatever the price!”

It was quiet on the street. The masked man continued to walk away from Haverson at a slow and leisurely pace towards the winch.

“You said I could still accept! Germain said I could still accept! Kerack you piece of shit, I'm dying! This is your last fucking chance…” he coughed up blood, his strength failing.

There was still silence.

Haverson started laughed quietly. “You fucking waste of a god.” Then more quietly, “Aster, I'm so sorry.”

But just as he was starting to fade, he was blinded again. This time by a massive pillar of white flame, which descended and engulfed him. It was so powerful and so quick that later he wasn't sure whether he had actually seen it.

He was slammed into the ground, he could feel the inexorable pressure of the flames pushing him into the stone beneath him. He could smell his leather burning and then his skin and hair burning as well. He was surrounded by the light, the fire around him, engulfing him, searing onto him, into him...

I AGREE

Then it was all over.

The masked figure had stopped.

Haverson felt a tingling sensation. He looked down, his armor and flesh scorched. The pain suddenly emerging from all over his body, and his previous wounds multiplying their pain by tenfold. His mouth opened to scream but instead it turned into a bestial cry.

His feet planted themselves and his body followed almost unbidden as he rose. His stomach wounds were sealing before his eyes, blood flowing freely and the muscles ripping and reforming, squiggling like worms before his eyes. The pink flesh quivered and aligned, his skin sloughing off the burned layers, his hair bursting through his scalp.

He put one foot out and found that he could walk. The walk turned to a run as his bone in his injured hand scraped against itself, fragments forcing themselves out through his muscles and skin before falling to the ground as he ran, the remains growing to replace the gap.

His feet moved faster, the distance disappearing between him and his foe at a sickening pace.

“Stop!” he yelled at the masked man, who was almost a hundred feet away from him at this point, almost gone through the gate they had originally entered through.

Amazingly, and perhaps coincidentally, he actually did, perhaps sensing something. The man looked behind him.

“I'm not fucking done with you!” Haverson said, running past Aster's body.

The man turned in surprise, his sword drawing. Haverson slammed into him, lifting him clear off of his feet and tossing him to the ground. The man turned the slide into a roll and came up on his feet. They were now fighting past Aster and closer to the gate.

“I'm going to kill you!” he bellowed, closing quickly, much more quickly than he had thought possible, with the masked man.

Clearly the other man was surprised as well, since he just barely managed to get his sword free when Haverson's first blow connected with him. Haverson had left his sword where he had originally fallen, so it was his fist which connected with the other man's stomach. Haverson heard a satisfying exhale as the wind was driven from the man.

One after another he rained the blows into the man, each one causing the man to visibly shutter. The knuckles of his hands broke with the tenth impact, but he continued his onslaught with the wreaked remains, and was pleased to find, through the pain, that they had rehealed by the time he had raised his hands again for the next attack. The mask showed an expression of surprise for the first time.

Finally though, the other man managed to raise his sword, while moving backwards through the now open gate.

Haverson followed his quickly through the gate before he could run and lashed his fist out. The man stabbed him through the chest again.

What! The pain came again, stronger this time. How?

But after a second Haverson realized what was going on. He stared down at the wound which was already starting to heal even as the man took his sword out of the wound.

Haverson started to laugh.

Haverson advanced on the man, laying blow after blow into him, purposefully advancing constantly to a range where the other man's sword wasn't as effective.

Haverson punched him in the shoulder, rocking the other man's whole body.

The masked man lashed out, cutting Haverson's ear straight off. Haverson laughed as the mangled fold of flesh started to regrow before the shocked man's masked eyes.

Haverson punched, the man caught the blow on his sword. Haverson howled as the blade bit into his fist, then into the bone of his fingers. But he understood how things worked now. He remembered some of the more desperate fights with Germain, and he neither gave into the pain nor allowed the masked man any hint of pleasure.

He grabbed the sword with his other hand, clenching it firmly even as it tore into the flesh of his palm. With one swift motion he ripped it from from the masked man's grasp, blood splattering in an arcing trail with the weapon. A chunk of flesh separated from Haverson's hand, but the site here it came from was already squirming, the bone sealing, the muscles burrowing back into place, the skin stretching over the place the wound had been.

Haverson smashed the other man in the stomach again and again. He tried to land a blow on the man's face, but he dodged out of the way. Even without his sword he was not completely helpless. He produced to knives, and started slashing at Haverson.

The cuts were perhaps the most painful thing Haverson had ever felt in his life, getting stabbed through the stomach included. But the knowledge that he was safe and the revenge that flamed inside him kept him on his feet.

The wounds festered and bubbled as a thin clear liquid was expelled forcibly from his body, the blood stopping as the wounds healed.

“H-How?” The masked man asked. “They're poisoned!” he said, looking down at his weapons in shock. They had clearly never deserted him until now.

Haverson delivered a kick straight to the spot he had punched him earlier and smiled as he felt the man's bones break on impact.

The man let out a confused burbling cough as blood forced its way out of his mouth.

Then Haverson started covering him in punches.

The other man futilely lifted his arms to block the attack, but Haverson kept punching again and again, until he felt something break in the other man's forearm.

The man tried attacking then, but Haverson caught the hand with his own. He locked eyes with the mask, and slowly wrenched the arm to the side, the other man resisting him all the way. But Haverson wasn't done with him. Not just yet.

Haverson continued the hold he had on the man's arm, forcing the man backwards, and downwards until he forced him to the ground. Before the man could rise, Haverson slammed his foot down on the man's ankle, shattering it after a few blows. As the man was writhing, Haverson landed blows on the man's face, one after one another, turning the visage into a bloody mimicry of what it once was.

But it wasn't good enough. He continued, blow after blow until long after the man stopped struggling, until the mask was completely gone, and until he felt the skull split open in his hands.

Haverson lifted the corpse into the air with one hand and dragged it to the edge of the plateau.

A terrible smile ran across Haverson's face as he hurled the body towards a particularly sharp looking pile of boulders several hundred feet below him.

It hit and outlined in blood on impact. It did not move.

Satisfied, Haverson staggered over to Aster's body and collapsed.

Ansalom had served the La Rouche family for decades. His service extended back to his childhood, but when he had followed his uncle around the old corridors of the La Rouche manor, learning how to keep the house properly. Except for a brief stint as a low ranking official in the millitary, it was nearly thirty years of unbroken service. He was a consummate butler and a decent chef. He single handedly commanded a small army of housekeepers, and under his control they kept the house presentable for the La Rouches and especially the Patriarch, Mathis.

However, late at night, after the others had gone off to sleep and the he saw to it that the guards on duty that night had their orders, he sometimes slipped off to the gravel yard, where he would frequent a dimly lit dive called the Underdrink

The other denizens of that gloomy business were not ones to talk, but after about a year, some of the regulars opened up about their pasts.

Because of his position, Ansalom had gotten them to swear they would never reveal where he went at night, but few of them cared. They found a caustic humor that one so well off should come into a place such as the Underdrink.

In such company, after a few drinks, and when pressed, he would admit that he had wanted more in life. When further pressed, he could not explain what more he wanted.

They always joked he needed a wife, but had rejected that suggestion so many times it had become trite.

Truthfully, Ansalom knew that even working under one of the most powerful merchant families of the North, and despite the benefits that his position afforded him, he perhaps would have been more satisfied as his own man, working day and night for himself, and himself only.

Yet, years after Ansalom recognized this truth, it was still him on that day, after all the other staff had gone to sleep, who opened the door that night.

The storm had passed, but the weather was still foul. Because of this, the knocking had come as a surprise.

Ansalom whiped the tiredness from his eyes and put down the stack of accounts he had been preparing for Mr. La Rouche. He stopped for a moment, leaning back in his chair, the wood creaking as he did so. The light of the two candles illuminating the small office flickered from some unseen gust of air and made the shadows of himself and his chair dance upon the walls.

He stared out the door to the office and past the foot of the stairs to the front door. Had he just imagined it?

The knock came again, this time more insistent. No, he had not. It must be important for the guards to have let whoever it was in at such a late hour.

The knock came again.

Ansalom's eyes narrowed, and he rose suddenly and quickly, striding down the hallway. It must be an emergency. His feet swished across the luxurious red carpet, the portraits of his uncle and his uncle's father hung on the cream colored walls of the hall, their frozen eyes staring straight forwards as he rapidly walked past them.

Ansalom came to the foot of the stairs as the knock came again, but weaker this time. His had stretched out to reach towards the doorknob. But something made him stop.

He looked up the dark stairs to where Mr. La Rouche and his wife most likely slept, if the patriarch was not still in his own office. Ansalom's eyes narrowed again, and he slipped the knife that he kept by the door into his palm and held it behind him. It never hurt to be careful. It never hurt to be prepared. There had been previous troubles like this, and guards, even old friends, were not always reliable.

Mentally readying himself, he reached out and opened the door.

The cold night air rushed into the warmth of the house, and the curtains on either side of him billowed. His face took the full force of the gust, a cold and wet force.

Before him was a unknown man with an arm wrapped around his own chest, a dark liquid stained his clothing, and from the smell Ansalom knew instantly what it was. His hand tightened around the knife and he began to move forward.

“Please...” The man said, pleading.

Ansalom stopped in mid motion, the knife still concealed. This man was much older than he at first expected. He was definitely not one of the guards. His hair had just started to go white, and his clothing, a great cloak, and ripped at the edges. Assassins were not usually old men. Assassins did not plead with their targets. Assassins did not appear drenched in blood.

Then Ansalom saw that the man wasn't alone. Slumped on the stoop next to the man, wrapped in a further cloak was immastakably another person, but from its position, it was clear that it was unconscious. But on closer inspection, that cloak was dark as well with blood. A body.

“Who are you? What is the meaning of this?” Ansalom commanded, his voice like steel.

The man shook his head. It was only now that Ansalom noticed that the man seemed to be weeping. For some reason, and for the first moment in a very long time, fear shot through Ansalom.

“Please…” The man said again, then looking up at Ansalom, “Its Aster… Gods, its Aster.”

“Ansalom! This isn't like you at all. I can't remember the last time you've come into my study this late at night, let alone like this.”

“Sir. You must come at once.” Ansalom said, having just burst into the office unannounced.

“Fine, fine, but what could possibly be...” Mathis La Rouche looked up and suddenly locked eyes with the old confidant. Ansalom's wiry frame filled the doorway, illuminated from behind by the sconce in the hallway. His face was cast into shadow, but from that shadow, his eyes blazed. A chill descended upon the patriarch.

“Sir. You must come at once.” He repeated, his voice firm. The tone wasn't a suggestion. It was a command.

Mathis's eyes widened and he grabbed the letter opener on his desk as he rose. There had only been two times Ansalom had ever spoken to him like that. Both had been attempts on his life.

“Where are they? We need to wake Ethalia! She is in the second bedroom.” He said, leaping to his feet.

“This is not an attack on your life.” Ansalom said. “Yet you must come at once. It would not be proper of me to describe this. You should see it yourself.”

Ansalom lead Mathis towards the front door at a quick pace. The mansion passed around them like a blur, and as Mathis's mind raced, Ansalom clarified, “And it is not Ethalia either. She is well, but I do not think you should wake her just yet.”

Ansalom took a quick series of turns, bringing them through the servants corridors and through the seldom used dark ballroom. The hard wood echoed as their strides resounded on the floor, echoing through the empty house. Their shadows cast long against the sliver of light from behind them, running along the expensive wallpaper, countless paintings and reflecting in the inky pools of dark mirrors.

“I have already sent for Mr. Marteband.” Ansalom said, the two exiting the ballroom. “Although honestly I believe there is little he can do at this stage.”

“Mr. Marteband? Is someone injured?” Mathis asked. But Ansalom was silent, and merely threw open the door to the kitchen.

Mathis entered the room, one of the many that he did not frequent often, and looked straight ahead of him as Ansalom held the door. A body lay on the large preparation table in the center of the room. Several sconses had been lit, but the kitchen had not been designed to be used at night. The room was still dark and he could not make out the features of the body.

He heard a sound from the side of the room and saw a man, his head buried deep in his knees, his hands folded in submission beneath his forehead.

“Ansalom. What is this? Who is this?” He demanded, spinning to look at the butler.

The old man's face was creased deeply, a horrible frown printed on his countenance. Ansalom shook his head and winced. “I'm so sorry old friend. Its Aster.”

The room spun. The shadows ran a deep blue across the ground, across the body, the dark shapes of kitchen equipment resting on the counters. The individual cobblestones became apparent to Mathis, each one pressfitted snugly against the rest. Atop these, the same shadows lay, before burning bright across that divide into the imprint that the sconces left. Flickering orange and blue.

He remembered walking slowly across the room. The table lay before him, and even though the task was insurmountable, his feet bore him there. He remembered every footstep. His hand reached forward by its own volition and when it exteneded infront of his vision, Mathis could see that it shook. The body lay before him, already starting to stain the wood of the table underneath.

His fingers wrapped around wet and cold, blood soaked cloak. He felt the coarse material between his fingers. The top side was slick and cold to the touch, the bottom only slightly less so. He gritted his teeth, and his hand slid to the side, peeling away the covering from the body's face.

An inhuman cry issued from his mouth and echoed down the hall and through the dark and empty house.

Tears streamed down from his face unstoppably. His hand holding the blood stained cloak shook more violently. He found himself breathing large breaths of air, yet somehow all of them refused to fill his lungs, forcing him to take one after another.

Before him, Aster lay. And it could only be her. The long blond hair that had always tangled so horribly, the mark on the left cheek from when she had burned herself on something from the stovetop… But the face… Gods… It was a broken shattered thing, still spilling blood, wet with rain and other fluids. Beneath the fleshy mess of the wound, he could stare straight into… and there were fragments of bone peaking out from the gash, little pieces of white shards, like the first fallen flakes of snow among red fall leaves… One eye still lay in its socket, the pupil a small pool of green brown staring lifelessly up at the ceiling.

“Aster...” he choked, his hands letting the fabric fall from his fingers. He forced himself to look straight at the ruined face, to remember the little girl who had left him so long ago. His fingers traced the iintact parts of her forehead before running into the mess of sandy hair. There they caught and refused to go further. When he looked, he saw the strands had caked together with dried blood.

Bile rose swiftly in his stomach and Ansalom appeared out of nowhere with a large pot. The butler looked away.

Mathis wiped his mouth and looked again at Aster. He had not seen her for almost ten years, and in that time had welly and truly changed from a rebellious child into a young woman. He figured she would have rivaled him in height. He could not look away.

She wore leather armor, dark bands held the collection together. He did not ignore the many scores along that armor, nor the fact that by her side there was an empty scabbard. She wore simple tan trousers, the kind of outdoor gear they issued the members of the military. There were dark leather boots on her feet, still dripping mud. Across her arms, which lay bare, were several scars, some inches long.

He choked again. He could not deny what he was seeing, yet his mind could not allow him to understand it either. Wasn't it just yesterday that he had been running after her through the gardens? Or scolding her when she sneaked into his office? Had it been so long when he used to hear of her misadventures with her two younger brothers or the constant fights with Ethalia or her tutor over her lessons?

It had. It had been a long time. Winters had come and gone. Summers had changed into Autumn and the hope that he had held of seeing her again had faded, when his men had found nothing and no one, and it became clear that she was gone for good.

Perhaps that had been the worst part of it. There had been no ransom note, there had been so sign of a struggle. No body, no sightings. She had simply disappeared on a cold winter day when the frost had gathered on the windows. And that had been the end of it.

And after almost half a year of searching, and thousands of gold spent, when Ethalia refused to talk to him about it any more and even his business partners tried to convince him to move on, only then had he the audacity to understand that she was gone.

But now she was back. But in what state? Gods… There was nothing Mr. Martebrand could do for her. That much was clear. That had been clear from the beginning, from the first second he had revealed the damage. Whoever had done this had been brutal.

He stopped and looked up at the unknown man in the chair off to the side. Ansalom gave him something to wipe his mouth with other than his hand, and he did so.

“And w-who are you?” he managed, voice still cracking with residual emotion. The last word tinged with a bit of venom. Who was this man who had brought his daughter to him, dead and mutilated so?

“D-Did you do this?” He asked, fists tightening. His eyes focused on the bent over figure.

The man in the chair let out some sort of exhausted choke, and looked up. The man's eyes were bloodshot and his clothing stained deep with blood. Interestingly, despite the man still favoring his side, and the tearing of the clothing at that location, Mathis could see no fresh blood.

The man shook his head and stared at Mathis, his eyes filling with despair as they slid past the patriarch and back to Aster's body.

“No.” The man said, finally. “But I killed the one who did.”

“And what villain did this?” Mathis asked, staring down at the wretched man.

The man sighed but met Mathis's stare. There was something raw about the other man's eyes, something that in one look Mathis's gut told him that the other man had nothing to do with Aster's death.

“I do not know much of the man. He was some assassin of some kind. He boasted to the two of us that he had never failed to get his mark. He was an ungodly swordsman; I have never seen the like.”

“Is that true?” Ansalom said suddenly off from the side.

Mathis turned his head slightly to look at Ansalom's expression. It was stern as usual, and skeptical.

The man sitting on the chair looked to the source of the interjection as well. His eyes narrowed as if trying to remember something.

“Do I know you?” The man asked.

But Ansalom shook his head. “No. I should think not. But I think I know you, although I never thought we would meet in a situation such as this.”

“Who is this, Ansalom?”

Ansalom leveled a gloved finger at the man.

“I think I recognize you. You're voidwalker aren't you? You're the terror of mages. Two assassins? One to kill and the other to deliver the message? An odd strategy.”

“Voidwalker!” Mathis said, breath catching. He took an involuntary step back.

The man on the chair got up and held out his hands to show that he had no weapons. “Yes. I suppose I am, or was that man. But I gave it up. I gave it all up. I'm just an adventurer, a nobody.”

“So you deny that you were the one to do… this?!” Mathis said, gesturing with a face full of hatred at the body on the table.

The man took a step forward, and ripped a part of his shirt open, where the wound was. A ugly festering, half healed stab wound revealed itself. Next to it, another.

“These were made by the same sword as the one that did that to Aster. But this is just the recent proof. Aster and I knew one another. Or at least we did. We adventured together for six years. I do not go by voidwalker, that was never my name. I am Enton Haverson.”

Mathis exhaled and Ansalom backed up until he was again behind Mathis.

“Excuse me. I just thought...” Ansalom said.

Mathis stared at Haverson so a long time, until the man grew restless. Just as Haverson thought he would be forced to talk more, a man in a long grey coat accompanied by a young messenger boy arrived in the kitchen. The messenger boy took one look at the room and satisfied his task was done, fearfully fled the room.

The man in the grey coat bowed to Mathis and produced a bag.

“I am sorry. I came as soon as I heard.” The man said.

“May I?” he asked, gesturing towards the body.

Mathis grimaced. “You may try what you wish Mr. Martebrand, but I do not think your skills can be of use here. It is… too late.” He said, the words hanging in the air as if he was slowly understanding the truth of his own words.

The priest approached the body and breathed out slowly as he revealed the damage.

“Oh…” He said, his hands dropping the cloak that hid Aster from the mortal world.

“From your expression, I suppose there is nothing to be done? Is that the case?” Mathis said, turning suddenly towards the well intentioned priest with fire in his eyes.

“My daughter is dead Vulris. She is with your god now.” He said, still angry. “After all this time… Can there be nothing that can save her? I-I… money is no object Vulris. Diamonds, gold, anything you require for your rituals, anything!” Mathis said, clenching his hands and pleading towards the acolyte.

Martebrand looked wearily towards Aster on the table. “I am so sorry Mathis my old friend. Even with my power, there is nothing I can do. It is not within Geremon's domain to restore life to the dead. He is the infinite repose. He calms those who are ill, but does not cure them, he begrudgingly allows us to heal with his power, but none can return the dead.”

But Mathis's eyes were wild and large. He threw his handkerchief to the ground and pointed at Aster. “Vulris. I know that such things are not possible to you. I know that is impossible, but perhaps the head of your order? I know such things are theoretically possible. There are stories...”

“Legends!” Vulris said, suddenly angry as well. “I know you want such a thing, but even if it were in my chapterlord's power, he would not do it. He… could not. His power is Geremon's and Geremon does not bend nor waver. And his voice has been weak as of late…” He added, trailing off.

Mathis clenched and unclenched his hands, pacing furiously back and forth.

The other men in the room looked at him, on edge.

“You!” he said, shouting at Haverson. Haverson looked up.

“How did you escape death by this assassin? You said you killed him. How was it that he killed my daughter but you escaped? Those wounds look foul and fatal! How is it that you are here?”

Martebrand looked at Haverson, and directed his attention to the aforementioned wounds.

“I-I didn't know. The man was on us so quickly. I never thought...”

Mathis took one threatening step towards Haverson. “Answer me! I was told voidwalker was dead. I was told the man who that used to be had given up the power, and died long ago.”

“Yes. I gave up the power.” Haverson admitted. “But perhaps if I had known ahead what the man was capable of, I might have been tempted to use it again, even if it had destroyed me. But no. Aster and I came up the lift and were attacked.”

“She was the target. We fought him but the blow was struck. I attacked him and was stabbed through. I lay bleeding out. In that moment of death, I-I knew rage. I hated myself for not embracing that void, there would have been a chance if I had. If I only had…”

“...But the deed was done and there was only the seething hatred left. Kerack, he… knows of me, despite my best efforts. I had rescued an old friend of mine, who happened to be the headpriest of rage. Kerack gave me the power to destroy the assassin. But not to bring Aster back. When I awoke it was all gone.”

Martebrand looked at Haverson with equal parts hesitation and revulsion. “Kerack is mad. His power is an unstable hatred. Even if you had tried, I do not think the result would have been pleasant.” Martebrand said, with not a small amount of detain.

But Mathis interjected. “I do not care for these ecclesiastic differences. I mean to have my daughter back.” he stated forcefully, attracting the attention of everyone in the room.

“But that simply isn't possible.” Martebrand said gruffly, throwing up his hands.

“Vulris. You have been my friend for years and helped my family many time. But I must say, you are being quite unhelpful!” Mathis said, loudly. “So. The god of madness and He of the infinite repose will not help me. Is it the case that only the gods can provide this service? Surely the Shadowmaster will be no more helpful. He is more likely to have help her killer! Is there no power among men to turn back the vale of death?”

The room was silent.

“D-Do you speak of… necromancy?” Martebrand said fearfully.

“No!” Mathis said. “I will have my daughter back whole and sound, not as a corpse! There are those with great power. I know this! Those at the university perhaps?” Mathis ventured.

“They look only to their books. They squabble among themselves. Even Rathar Cuebonh, their head scrivenor lacks anywhere close to the art needed.” Martebrand said.

Mathis growled. “So who shall I turn to? The Shani then, and their dread lord? Their mad king? Shall I acquiesce to the southerners and their battlemages?”

Martebrand shook his head. “I do not know Mathis. The battlemages would probably not be capable of such a feat, even if you weren't a Northerner. The Shani and their strange rituals? I can only guess Mathis! You could run to the far north for all I know and commune with the spirits! I don't know!”

“You're a priest Vulris! You are supposed to know of such things!”

“I know of know of no human or Shani that for certain is capable of raising the dead. As a priest of Geremon, my goal is acceptance! It is not only useless but counterproductive to deny reality. True understanding come when you are at peace with the world, when you accept fate.”

“Well, I'm not going to accept fate!” Mathis almost screamed, slamming his hand down hard against the table.

“Am I right in thinking that Aster… fought to the end?” He said, turning to Haverson.

Haverson nodded.

“Then I will not falter? How could I stop and 'accept'? How could I simply 'accept' such a fate?! How could I not fight until the end?”

Martebrand clearly disagreed vehemently with this line of emotional reasoning, but said nothing. Haverson saw that Ansalom also was silent.

“If only Pluor and his fetid opulence still granted power for wealth. Were this my grandfather or great grandfather, I could simply buy this favor.”

“The price was severe if I recall from my readings. Pourr was no kind soul.” Martebrand said.

“Does it look like I care?!” Mathis raged. He stopped, realizing he was scaring the priest. “I am sorry my old friend. But truthfully I would give it all away, the house, the name, the mines, the trade, all of it. I would give it all away for Aster. There was a time when others said to stop, and to let her go, to 'accept', when my heart wanted nothing more than to find her. I listened to them and now Aster has gone to a place where I cannot find her. Where all this is meaningless.” He said, seething, hands again clenching and unclenching as he paced.

“I will listen to my heart this time.” he said.

Martebrand scratched his beard, and took a seat next to where Haverson eventually ended up sitting.

Mathis thought and spoke to himself, odd words and plans slipping into actual speech from time to time as he paced.

“I'm sorry stranger. I don't know how you are involved in all of this, but I did notice you have a set of nasty wounds. I can only assume you were involved in whatever happened to Aster.”

Haverson nodded and let Martebrand look at the wounds. After consulting a tome from his bag, Martebrand's hands began to glow as he healed Haverson's side.

He was just finishing when Haverson sprung up. Martebrand lurched backwards, with surprise.

“The elves.” Haverson said. “I heard stories once from a traveler who had been all across this world. He had been himself to the deserts. He said that there is a fragment of their mother goddess Ishira whom they call the Suture Queen. He said she can cure any illness, any disease.”

“And did this traveler say anything about returning people from the dead?” Mathis asked, quietly.

“He… he did not, not explicitly. But he spoke of her power, that only the desperate seek her, and that she has never rebuffed any supplicant regardless of the malady. And she always fulfilled any request for the betterment of the body. It is her gift.”

“Hmm. The elves you say… This suture queen...” Mathis said, running his fingers through his hair.

“Oh...” Martebrand said, making a disquieting noise. “I… would not necessarily go to her. It is not as easy as this traveler spoke of. It might have been a century ago, but Ishira's power is almost gone. The elves are nothing these days. Their king, Aumnum-Ra might also be able to do something. His power is great, perhaps greater than any other human on this earth, but he does not act, he only grieves.”

“And do you blame him?” Mathis said, still quietly. “What they did… No. What we did, us humans, was truly monstrous. I have been to Ankhsomar once. I stared from that grief into that desert, and I could not understand the desolation.” Mathis said, staring at the ceiling.

“Do you know where this Suture Queen is? I have heard of her, I once had dealing with the elves, but I have distanced myself from them in the recent years.”

“Ethalia.” Martebrand mumbled under his breath.

“She is at the Fell. I recall no more than that.”

“The fell...” Martebrand repeated, “that is a foul place.”

“Foul or not, it seems the Suture Queen is the only being that has a chance of saving Aster.” Mathis said, grimly.

“Mathis. She can not be saved. There is nothing to save.” he said softly.

“Vulris. I understand that this entire errand runs counter to your ideology. I do not expect you to help for this reason. However, in order to even attempt the journey, I must not have the body decay. That is what they say in the legends no? You must keep the body preserved.”

“I suppose…” Martebrand said hesitantly.

“Then I will ask for your help. I have need of your infinite repose. Grant your master's gift to Aster if not to me. Do your ritual. If I understand, the body is preserved following that?”

“Yes. It can be if I should wish it.”

“Then, friend, can you do that for me? No. For Aster?” Mathis pleaded.

Martebrand gritted his teeth and looked at Aster.

“This whole proposed quest is an affront. You should accept rather than reject this truth. I understand this is horrible, and unforeseen but...”

“But will you do it?” Mathis said, a bit more forcefully, staring straight at the priest of Gerremon.

Martebrand sighed.

“I will. But Mathis, it will be the last favor I preform for this family. This whole thing is too close to breaking my vows, the intent if not the word.”

“So be it.” Mathis said. “I must attend to something. I will return shortly. Thank you for your help Vulris. Ansalom, with me. I will need your help.”

Martebrand sighed again and started chanting, running his hand slowly along the table where Aster lay. Haverson watched him.

It had been a thankfully long time since he had seen this particular rite. Geremon's followers were a constant sight in war time. The motions stirred up strong memories.

The rain had fallen, just as it had today. He stood with someone, looking out from a hill. Was Germain with him? He could not remember. The sweet scent of pine had come from the land below, the crisp scent of wet needles mixed with undertones of earth. This area should have been used for farming, but instead today people were going to die over it.

A cry went out from somewhere off to his side. The had stumbled onto a number of Southern forces. There were people around him now. The northern style of fighting cared little about formations and order, and more on the individual battle prowess of individuals. The more difficult the terrain, the more heavy the melee the more effective that tactic proved. Today however, they had been ambushed.

He saw them now, it was a unit of heavily armed men with spears. Elite troops. In the hills? He remembered swinging his sword. This was before the incident. He was only somewhat effective. But he had survived.

Some others had not been so lucky.

Now he was sitting on a rock, looking at a man, no, a body, on the ground. Someone he should be listening to was talking to him. But he couldn't tell whether they were trying to boost his spirits or admonish him.

The preist that traveled with him. What was his name? Unlike this Vulris person, he had been a strange one. He dressed in all black robes with silver trim and refused to wear armor. Haverson had never recalled him actually fighting. But he was a constant presence after the fight.

That ritual, a circle formed, two flows revolving in opposite patterns, circling each other again and again; Haverson could just imagine the lines of power coalescing in the priests hands. It was a gentle ritual. It was like a farewell. It was solemn.

Again and again.

Haverson started as Martebrand laid a hand on his shoulder.

“You seem familiar with the Final and the Forever.” Martebrand said, looking down at him with dull brown eyes set among white wispy hair. He was older than Haverson by at least a decade.

“Yes.” Haverson said simply, his eyes darting to Aster's body, where Martebrand had replaced the cloak. Haverson motioned to the chair next to him, if only to get the man's damn hand off his shoulder.

“You were in the war then?” Martebrand asked, lowering slowly into the chair.

“I was.” Haverson replied. “I got to know your friends well, usually saying rites over more of my friends.”

“Geremon simply seeks to find peace in the emptiness. Find a contentness in the truth of death. It is inevitable no? Why destroy yourself fleeing from the implacable hand?”

Haverson turned towards the old man. “Such platitudes grind against my mind.” Haverson said, frowning.

Martebrand put up his hands. “I did not mean to offend. I take it you knew Aster? Were you two...”

“We adventured together if that is what you mean.” Haverson said, eye narrowing slightly.

“I see.” Martebrand said. “Then what do you think of Master La Rouche's impossible idea?”

Haverson looked down at his hands. “I understand his motivation.”

“And do you not agree that physically, actually, nothing can be done? We are literally talking about gods here! Asking favors from gods! The elves are a strange and muted voice. I see no way that whoever this Queen is will help Mathis, regardless of his resolve. And furthermore, I regret the anguish that my friend will feel when he truly realizes that his hope is gone. It is better to recognize the truth than to fight it: to understand your place within the world.”

“Do you think so?” Haverson said, looking up at the man, skeptically. A breeze filtered through the room, rustling the cloak on the body. Faintly, they could hear two people arguing from somewhere deeper in the house.

“There was a time when I thought I understood my place in this world, when I thought I understood what it was I woke up every day for.” Haverson said, staring at Martebrand.

“I truly was at peace with myself. Even now, I do not regret my decisions that I made during that time. Only that I did not realize my true position until so long after.”

“And what did you do?” Martebrand asked.

Haverson locked eyes with the old man. “I killed men.”

“Perhaps hundreds. I was the calm of the storm. Swords and shields washed over me, fire broke against my skin thousands of times and through all of it I emerged unscathed. I had found, no, been taught a power that came from the lack of emotion, a state which my teacher had called the void.”

Martebrand's eyes widened. “What power is this!” He moved ever so little away from Haverson. “That sounds unnatural.”

Haverson laughed. “Quite the opposite. It was the most natural thing. Once you learn, it is like breathing. It comes to you on a whim. But there is a problem with calm. It is intoxicating in its… safeness.” Haverson said, gesturing.

“I am not sure I follow.” Martebrand said.

“Imagine you could observe any act, and not feel remorse or sadness, or doubt: a state in which you always felt assured of your actions, because they were made from a state of pure emotionless.”

“What you are describing is not too dissimilar to Geremon's teaching, but in a way drastically more detached.”

Haverson nodded. “Now, isn't it possible that you might begin to commit acts that previously would have horrified you? Is it possible that with no restraint of emotion, others might begin to regard you as some sort of monster?”

“Now hold on. I said there are similarities between the two teachings. Geremon does not encourage intervention. And the goal is not to rid yourself of emotion. You think I do not feel sadness? I do! This death is a horrible nasty thing. I simply understand the world and my role in it.”

“I only meant to draw parallels. I understand the psychological differences.” Haverson said, waving his hands. “My point is, after a time, I found how wrong I was. To be passive, even while being empathetic, is directly against the truth of humanity as I understand it. We are cast here with little direction, even from the gods, and we struggle against the world around us and the world we make for ourselves.”

“We are meant to rage, and howl, and throw ourselves against our barriers, together, as a human wave, futilely or not. It is that struggle which defines us, which separates us from the elves or the shani. To not act on your emotions is to be as a corpse, a brainless fleshy golem, as true as your god. And to throw your emotions to the void… it is to be nothing at all, not even a human, not even a dead one.”

Martebrand straightened and thought for a long while, but by the expression on his face, Haverson could tell that the man did not agree with him, even if Haverson had been able to explain his ideology to the man properly.

“That is why I understand Mathis, as you call him, his reaction. After all, I too would give up most of the things in my life to have Aster back.” The words came from Haverson's mouth, but he found that he was the one who had to think about them.

That was true, wasn't it? Aster was not his child; she was not his daughter. Yet they had been together, and faced so many life threatening situations that it would have been a lie to say that Haverson didn't feel some sort of paternal bond towards the young woman.

That was perhaps why it had hurt him so deep when she…

Mathis strode through the doorway.

“Dear gods, what is that?” Martebrand said, surprise clear in his voice.

Haverson turned towards the door Mathis had just entered.

The other man lumbered through the entrance of the kitchen fully armored. But it wasn't just the prescense of armor that astonished the two, but its make. The suit was completely made of some gold alloy, the glint off it was unmistakeable.

Plate armor was rather rare in the north, the military preferred chain mail and more lightly armored soldiers. So for the patriarch to have such a set of armor… there was no way! The thing had to be custom made!

The old man's white hair and head popped out from a solid collar which flowed seemlessly into a breast plate made of two pieces, held together by some internal mechanism. The shoulders were two more seperate pieces, two more further pieces, one join and a vambrace finished the arms. There were two embossed circles guarding the underarms which completed the upper half of the body.

However, the set did not end there. Continuing downward was a fanned waist underwhich were the thigh guards, knee guards straight down to the ankles. Even the boots themselves had a small piece of metal covering the top.

Haverson and Martebrand stood in awe.

As the man strode into the room, Haverson caught a glimse of a sword fastened to Mathis's side, almost as an afterthought. A stark departure from the impossibly and eye rendingly ostentatious set of armor, the sword was a pure silver, and even in the dim light, Haverson could tell it was simply made. Or was it?

As he looked closer, Mathis now aproaching the table, he realized that its material was not steel as he had previously thought. The metal was at once both more dull and finer than he had initially seen. It had only a straight taper, almost running completely straight. Its cross guard was a simple piece of metal, and its length had no embellishments save for a single word etched into the sword down its length. Haverson could not tell what it said.

“Gods, Mathis. You're serious about this!” Martebrand said.

“Of course I am!” Mathis rumbled, swiveling around in the set to face the preist.

“But are you really going out in that? What do you hope to accomplish? Where are you going to go?” The old man asked, shaking his head.

“Were you not listening? Haverson and I are going to travel west and then dead south, deep into the deserted wastes of the fell, to its heart, where the forgotten core of the elven kingdom lies. There we will convince the Suture Queen to restore my daughter to life.”

If the two of them could be even more astonished, they became so. Just hearing the rediculousness of the plan, its impossibility, was mind blowing.

Then, a detail of what Mathis had said connected in Haverson's head.

“Hold on a moment. Did you say I was going as well?” he said, flabbergasted.

“Of course. I don't think I would get very far by myself, with the skills I have. I am no fighter; I am no adventurer. Gods above, I am approaching my sixtieth year. But I cannot trust another to do this in my place, and we must leave at once!”

“Haverson, you have the skills of an adventurer. You know how to fight, what to expect of living outside of the city: I must have your help.”

“I-I, I didn't think about this!” Haverson babbled.

“Don't you want to see Aster alive? If I understand correctly, you traveled with her for a long time. Surely from all that time you wish to see her again?”

“Y-Yes, undoubtably.” Haverson said.

“Well, get ready. This is the only way to do that. We are leaving tonight.”

“Hold on. Hold on.” Haverson said. “The lift is broken! How are we going to carry… carry her body?”

The impossibility of the venture slammed into Haverson again. “I don't know anything about the desert! I just know stories! I'm not much younger than you! And how are you even moving in that? Its going to be a huge target to theives, even in the northern lands. Its a god damns suit of gold! How does such a thing even exist?” He protested.

“Details.” Mathis dismissed the barrage with a wave of one gold encrusted hand.

Ansalom entered the room, his hands full of equipment which he set on another counter and hastily stuffed into a traveling bag.

Haverson's mind reeled.

“Ah, Ansalom, thank you.” Mathis said, grabbing a long cloak from the man. With some effort he threw it over the gold armor, mostly hiding it. He grabbed a further set of oversized gloves from the butler, covering his hands.

Only on closer inspection could you now tell the details of what lay underneath, although instantly someone would be able to tell Mathis was wearing some kind of encumbering armor. There was no hiding that.

When Ansalom finshed packing the bag, Mathis grabbed it with one mailed hand and closed it, tosing it suddenly towards Haverson.

In shock, Haverson stood from the chair and caught the oversized back.

“And what is all this?” he said, the situation still struggling to process.

“Provisions, a map, bedrolls, a tent, a touch, firestarting equipment and some rope. Ansalom and I guessed that we didn't have the space for foul weather equipment with all that, so we will just have to hope that it does not rain again before we get to the desert. Right, and you're carrying all of that.”

“This is crazy!” Martebrand repeated.

Mathis turned on him, but as he did so, Haverson's face had changed. The astonished and wide eyed expression had compressed, withered away, to a grim and steely face of creases. Haverson shouldered the pack.

“Ok.” Haverson said. “But we will surely die of thirst in the desert.”

“Right. Ansalom?” The butler had been fiddling with something nearby, and upon hearin his name, swiftly appeared holding two waterskins, presumably filled with water. Mathis tossed one to Haverson.

“If we can get close, I might be of some help. I had dealings with the elves once.” he said, now looking at Aster. “My child...” He said softly, leaning over the covered body.

“Ansalom, do you have it?” Mathis asked.

“Not quite yet sir. It will take a moment to get it up from the cellar sir.” he said, before disappearing out through another entrance way.

Haverson shouldered the back pack. “You have yet to tell me how you can move in that thing.”

“Fine, we have time before Ansalom comes back. It was almost thirty, no fourty years ago. I had my first several investments and I had secured the rights to a mine shaft. As mining progressed, it became clear it was more plentiful than the engineer's I had hired had supposed. I was awash with offers for transportation, deals for smelting, distribution to Swan, even offers of equipment through and intermediate to the military.”

“But I was a brash and stupid young man, and I spent my money foolishly. This was my pièce de résistance, a status item more ridiculous than that of my peers by far, a shining beacon of my wealth, and more importantly, lack of common sense. In short, it is, as you have no doubt guessed, not true gold, which would dent much to easily, but instead, the formula of an alchemist smith I contacted. He and a team of three spent almost half a year making this for me. Then I had it enchanted.”

“You cannot imagine how expensive it was. But of course, that was the point. But I retain a bit of my sanity during that show of profligate spending; I know I wasn't a fighter or a soldier, no matter what I played at. I had the suit ensorcelled such that it allows its wearer tremendous strength, although at my age and body, that means I can move around comfortably and lift perhaps tree times what I normally could.”

“Such an artifact!” Haverson said.

“What a spectacular waste. Im sure the armorer was not amused, regardless of how he appeared.” Martebrand said with scorn.

“It does not matter. I soon learned of my foolishness in the best and worst way possible. My spending came to an end, and the lesson was learned…Perhaps one does not learn until one has suffered...”

Mathis said. “This will prove to be such a time, I believe. It is in such hardships, not death, Vulris, that the truth of men is revealed.”

Ansalom entered the room carrying a simple pine coffin.

“I shall not ask why you have that.” Martebrand said, scowling again.

The rest of the assembled people stepped back as Martis saw to Aster.

He shut the coffin and secured the latches.

“Your art will last Vulris?” Mathis asked, looking at the old man.

“It will, for a time. You might be able to make it, provided you do not get lost. I have no idea of the distance. It will not last forever though. And you best keep that coffin closed. That will help. Now, I think I'd best be off. I don't think...”

Ansalom stiffened and Haverson followed his gaze to one of the doorways.

Shortly after, a woman, perhaps a handful of years younger than Haverson, entered the room.

“My lady.” Haverson said, giving a small bow. Such a curtisy was not common in the North, and Haverson did it simply to be respectful, especially to someone who had just suffered a loss.

However, the woman simply glared at Haverson, then seemed to dismiss him.

Her voice was clearly unhappy.

“So you're actually doing this Mathis?” She said, emphasizing the man's name.

“Yes. I should not have thought that you would doubt me, Ethalia.” Mathis said. “I have always been a man of my word.” He added.

Haverson somehow understood that the line meant something additional to the two people, but could not tell what it was.

The woman, apparently Ethalia, shook her head and laughed slightly. It was not a pleasant laugh though.

“No. I suppose I should not have doubted you.” She said, pausing and looking at the coffin on the table.

“This is for her?” She asked, locking eyes with Mathis.

“It is.” He said firmly. “I will not apologize for anything Ethalia.” Mathis looked around the room quickly and clenched his fists. Then, he suddenly strode forward and grabbed the coffin with both hands and lifted it in to the air, with audible effort. It sat rather uncomfortably on his shoulder, but he seemed to be able to bear the weight, at least for now.

“I am leaving at once.” he announced. “You are all my formal witnesses for this procedure, Ansalom, you may record this in writing later; Ethalia Childebert, you are now the acting Patriarch of the La Rouche family. Felix and then Alain are to follow. All of its resources and servants are at your disposal, save Ansalom. Try to keep them off our back while I am gone. They will no doubt come like wolves when they hear of my departure.”

Ethalia laughed again. Haverson realized that the sound was a strained thing, like something pulled taught over an opening, threatening to snap.

“I will do what I wish. Do not worry. I will take care of your… empire, my dear; even as you abandon the civilized world on your mad errand. I will pass on good news to your sons.”

Mathis motioned Haverson to follow him with his free hand, and Haverson wordlessly came, not wanting to get caught in whatever was happening.

“But Mathis… I agree that I will take care of your empire. Perhaps I will take care of it too well. Don't expect me to turn it back over to so easily.” She warned.

Now it was Mathis's turn to laugh. “Lovely. Now I remember why I married you.” He said, with a weak, passive aggressive chuckle.

He, perhaps purposefully, turned his back to the woman and started to walk out of the kitchen, apparently towards some sort of back door.

“Hold on, noble knight. One last thing.” Ethalia said. “I'm curious, what is Ansalom's role while you are gone? Is he to follow my orders?” She looked at the Butler, who stood impassively.

“Certainly not.” Mathis said with a smile. He turned half back around so Ethalia could see his face. “Ansalom's role? Follow your orders? Certainly not. He will be following my orders, namely, to keep an eye on you!”

Ethalia's smile vanished and she glared murderously at the butler, who made no combative reply. However, there was a hint of aloofness to his lack of response somehow, as if concept of a rivalry between the two were inconceivable.

Satisfied, Mathis motioned again to Haverson, and the two left the room.

Haverson looked behind him with not an insignificant amount of concern. They had left the road and were planning on cutting south through the old road beneath the Alagoth Basin. There was only one problem. They had to get through nearly a mile of untamed forest, and then cross the bog that lay at the out put of the massive lake.

It was daybreak now, but only just, and the sliver of sun that would eventually peak above the mountains was only casting indirect light, further filtered by the branches above them. Luckily it was light enough to see, illuminating an obnoxious set of thickets stretching far in front of them. Haverson sighed and continued his hacking.

“I'm not doubting your tenacity Mr. La Rouche, you displayed that to me clearly as we were leaving and continuously as you carry that thing. The point I'm trying to make is that perhaps we should stop and think for a moment.”

“Stop and think about what? We have our goal right? We have to get to the desert and as quickly as possible.”

“Right. But the way the priest made it out, that spell should last as long as we need. We should figure out what route we're taking and plan.”

“I thought you were the outdoors man. Surely you know the route I'm thinking of? We simply have to go west.”

“Fine, but when do we turn off the road? The path to the desert is not exactly one taken by many people.”

“I have been there before.” Mathis said defensively, pushing aside a small branch and navigating not only his massive cloth covered armor, but also the pine box he held on his shoulder.

“Alright, so we're playing it by ear, that’s doable. One last question then, how are we going to get across the river?” Haverson asked, turning around to look at Mathis.

“The bridge I would assume.” Mathis replied with a puzzled frown.

Haverson started laughing.

“Hey, what are you laughing for? This is the old road right?” Mathis said, gesturing to the path of relatively clearer underground that they were following. Beneath their feet was the remains of a packed dirt trail.

“Yes, but its called the old road for a reason. No one takes it anymore, they haven't for years.”

“Why not? The lift breaks down. I know that, it messes up logistics for us to no end.”

“Because the bridge washed out years ago.”

Mathis groaned but continued walking.

The two emerged from the thick underbrush, thoroughly dishevled and covered with detritis and broken branches. Their boots were covered with burs. Mathis shouldered the box through one last choking vine, tearing the piece of vegitation from the box with impunity.

“So what now?” he asked.

Haverson said nothing but the two looked down a small rise with a palpable feeling of disgust.

Before them was a depression, through which the river flowed.

Well, flowed was a bit of an overstatement. The Alagoth basin wasn't fished or plied, but even if it was, the western and only outlet would have made the proposition dubious by itself. Before them, the water flowed glacially through a wide bed of muck, tangled semi aquatic plants and peat.

Haverson could feel the dampness in the air even as they approached.

“So where did the bridge used to be? Maybe we can ford it?”

But Mathis didn't even seemed convinced by his own proposal. He looked out, down the gully and across the wide semi submerged islands, looking for something, anything man-made. Even knowing that there had been a bridge here at one point was not helpful.

“Is that it?” Mathis asked, finally spying the stanchions rippling in the water.

The bridge was completely gone, the only thing that was left was its wooden supports, steadily rotting year after year. There were five of them that Mathis could see, big trunk like things almost three men wide. Each one was in various stages of neglect. The ones closest to the shore had fared better, and the one that had lain in the center of the river couldn't be seen at all.

The path that they were theoretically following extended in a line, matching up with the stanchions. At the far end there was just the vaguest hint of a continuing path.

“Thats it.” Haverson confirmed. “Its been a while since I was here.” he said, starting to clamber down the berm towards the water. He stopped at the nearest support and laid a hand on it, feeling the damp wood.

“There used to be a section of bridge left on this side, but I guess even that’s long gone. I suppose we'll have to cross.”

Mathis nodded and started to descend, his feet sinking into the soft and pliable mud.

“Aghhh!” He growled, freeing his boot with an audible sucking sound and stepping backward. “Its deep!”

Haverson nodded.

“We might want to rethink this.” Haverson said, massaging his forehead. “I had forgotten that it had rained yesterday. Of course this is all sodden. Although to be honest its not much drier usually.”

“Cna we go around? How much longer will it take?” Mathis asked, looking downstream.

“I know of only one other actual road through these parts, and its much further south, almost triple the distance we've gone already from Dor's crag. And its all dense underbrush like what we came through.”

Mathis nodded, and scowled at the mire in front of them.

“How long is it though?” he asked,

“A good day or two.” Haverson replied, looking off southward.

“Then we'll have to cross.” Mathis said, sinking his feet into the mud.

“Ugh, I supppose so.”

The going was difficult. Even by the shore, the muck rose above the height of their boots. Haverson grimmiced when he felt the cold water seep into his shoes. The swamp may have felt like it belonged somewhere warmer, but he knew that regardless of season, the waters of the alagoth were fed by icemelt year round.

They dutifully trudged through the mud, even as it rose up to their waist. As they got closer to the channel, Mathis turned around.

“You can swim right?” He asked, still doing his best to keep the box above the waters.

“Yes. I wouldn't say I was amazing at it, but I'll be fine. How about you though? That armor must weigh a ton!”

“I'll try to muscle through it.”

“What does that even mean? The channel is shallow compared to the river later, but there's no way you can keep your head above the water.”

Mathis made a disgusted sound and with palpable discontent had to lower the box to the water.

“Then I'll have to float across on this.” He said. “Forgive me Aster.”

Trying not to think about it too much, and hoping that the priest’s spell protected from water as well, Mathis clung to the edge of the coffin, and slowly made his way to the edge of the channel.

Here the current moved stronger, and as Haverson swum out to meet him, Mathis felt a bit of fear. He could feel the cold of the water and it froze at his muscles. He could feel the strength of the water. Even with his suit, he realized he could not attempt to fight it.

He gritted his teeth and kicked off into the channel, the two of them clinging to the box.

There was a solid minute of fear as the bottom dropped away below them, and as detritus flowed around them, pushing them implacably away from the path.

The two kicked furiously, hands never leaving the box.

Haverson felt something move beneath him, and instinctually kicked at it.

“Oh shit!” he yelled, “There's something here!”

“What?!” Mathis cried, looking over at Haverson with panic in his eyes.

Whatever it was slammed into Haverson, before slipping off into the current. He could tlel by the strength of the hit that the thing was large, perhaps even the same size as him.

“Kick! We got to get to the shore now!” Haverson yelled, sending spray in all directions as he churned the water with his feet.

Mathis joined him. After a moment, even though they were not yet at the shore, and the threat of whatever Haverson had stirred up still sent cold sweat through both of them, Mathis reached up to grab a branch of a tree which extended over the water.

Yanking the bough hard, he slowly lead them towards the shore, using the branch to keep them from being swept down the river.

They both breathed sighs of relief when they felt the muck under the feet again. Exhausted, it was all Haverson could do to haul the box to the edge of the stream.

Mathis stopped as Haverson dragged himself from the water, and turned back towards the dark peat clogged water. The current swirled and heaved but Haverson couldn't tell whether that was because of whatever had hit him, or because there was just an underwater object that they hadn't seen earlier.

Mathis looked at the coffin in the water and threw his arms around it. Crying out, feet sinking into the sludge, the lifted the whole thing into the air, his arms shaking from the effort. The box came free from the water with a sucking sound.

However, he did not let it drop. Even as it was clear he was at the limit of his strength he lowered the box, slowly and gently to the ground. He let out a sigh, and collapsed next to it.

“Gods.” He said, slowly sinking into the mud.

“Its not easy, roughing it. I assume this is the first you've done something like that?” Haverson said, sitting next to him, catching his breath, one eye still tracking the surface currents on the water.

Mathis coughed and spat into the water. “I used to be quite adventurous when I was young. But mostly within the cities. I'm a city man, I admit. I have gotten used to the stones and the wood. And Ansalom.”

He sighed again and groaned, putting his hands on his knees as he rose.

Even under his travel cloak, it was clear that the golden armor was soiled. Bits of leaves were still trapped in between the joints from when they were moving through the underbrush, now sodden with water. On the knees and boots, you almost couldn't make out the gold with all the mud. It almost pained Haverson to see such an expensive set of armor in such a state. But perhaps it was a good thing if they ever wanted to pay unmolested with such a rare item.

Haverson rose with Mathis.

“Ready to do that again?”

Mathis froze, turning slowing to the adventurer.

“What?” He said, gruffly, straightening. His white hair was slicked back with water, making him look almost regal.

“Well, we're not on the other side. There's a bit of an island here and then we have to cross the other channel.”

Mathis grumbled something under his breath, but with some effort lifted the coffin again to his shoulder.

The island was low and swampy, and the path was almost indicernable. Fortunately, the island also wasn't very big, harboring many trees but nothing much of import.

The tramped through the damp earth, brushing past cattails and other shore plants, even as they were swallowed up under the overhead branches of gnarly twisted swamp trees.

The walked for several minutes in silence until Haverson could no longer see the channel behind them. He relaxed somewhat, and looked around. The ground was saturated, and bug flitted from stagnant puddle to puddle. It was clear that the island flooded often, and it wasn't a surprise that there wasn't much left of the path.

They followed what they could make out, secure in the knowledge that all they really needed to do was go straight.

“Hey, whats that?” Mathis asked, pointing at something off to the side of the path.

Haverson directed his attention to where the other man was pointing.

There, amid the twisted trunks of trees and peaking through the choking growth of innumerable vines, was a dilapidated.

The roof had long since lost its integrity, and the whole second floor had seemed to have melted into the first, the wood no doubt rotting in the damp environment and frequent flooding.

But what was more striking was the manner of the wood. If it was at first painted, that effect was now years gone, and the puffy wet rotten wood, heaved black rot along every surface. That, combined with vacant lower windows and doors lent the whole building a kind of sad and forboding look.

“Ah, I'd forgotten this was here. Some fool a while back, maybe as long ago as when I was a child, decided to make a house here. I suppose he wanted to bring back the old road, maybe collect some tolls for his trouble. Problem is that this area floods often as you can see.”

“Hmm. Doesn't look like its inhabited now.” Mathis said, peering closer.

“That because he abandoned it of course. You can't fight nature, especially not here.”

Mathis stared into the blackened empty house, and he felt a stale breeze move by him. It could have been his imagination, but he could have sworn there was someone's voice on the breeze, just one long steady exhale, like a sigh.

Mathis shivered, and shouldered the coffin.

“Lets keep on moving.” He said, glancing one last time at the house.

Haverson nodded and they left the decrepit wreak to continue its steady decline into nothingness.

The rest of the island was unintersting and within a few minutes they had traversed its length, cutting through the overgrown path.

They emerged on the other side to see the second channel Haverson had talked about.

The second channel was slightly smaller than the first, but not by much. If anything though the water seemed to flow more swiftly through its passage.

Mathis looked at it with clear unhappiness.

“Oh. Actually, we may not have to get wet at all.” Haverson said, pointing to an object off to the side.

“A boat?” Mathis asked, turning slowly with the large box still on his shoulder.

“Not a chance, but it seems the storm last night did us some help. Look.” Haverson said.

A massive tree lay halfway across the channel, lodged in the ground. They wouldn't be able to avoid getting wet, but they wouldn't have to swim. Or at least that’s what it looked like, and if they could stay on the trunk.

“I'll go first. Come to think about it, it may have come down in the storm, or it may have sat here a while. The whole thing could be rotten. With your armor, you might break right through. At least with me, I'll have a chance of swimming if the thing breaks.”

Mathis nodded, and Haverson approached the edge of the second channel.

“Here goes nothing.” he said, and began slogging through the mud again.

He knew Mathis was watching him, and for some reason that made him a bit nervous, as if he had to prove himself, or show his skills as an adventurer to the old merchant.

But such thoughts were useless. There was something Haverson was more concerned about. There was something that had attacked them in the water, and he had no desire to be attacked again. Although they wouldn't be swimming, with any luck, from experience, he knew things that lived in the water and freely attacked people were always nasty.

So he watched every ripple he could, every pattern across the water as it went up to his knees. The trunk was close, and it seemed the thing, whatever it was, would not make another appearance.

He made it to the trunk and tested it, breathing a sigh of relief. It seemed like it had been a fresh fall. It was not rotten after all. Scrambling up onto it was a bit of a dubious act, and he had found his hands struggling to find purchase as they slipped off the wet bark.

“Careful, the surface is slippery. Its hard to get up!” He yelled back to Mathis. “But it looks good. We should probably be good. Let me get to the end and then you should go.”

Haverson finally succeeded in pulling himself up, throwing the full top half of his body over the log and then shimmying slowly the rest of it on.

He advanced on the log, careful to keep his balance. Against his better instincts, he checked the upstream channel as he crossed.

Was that a shape there moving in the water, or just something disturbing th current like another branch? He couldn't tell. They way the water moved and coursed around everything made it hard to tell the truth. Was it moving closer or was it just his imagination.

He shook the idea from his mind and continued along the tree.

About halfway his foot landed impropperly on the trunk, resting too long on an area where the sodden bark sloughed off beneath his step and he suddenly slipped. Luckily there was also an offshoot from the trunk and he instinctively grabbed it.

He found himself in an uncomfortable situation, straddling the tree and only still on it because on a vice like grip on the branch.

When a second had passed, he was able to regain his composure and stood back up.

He didn't look back this time to see if Mathis had seen him fall. It would have been pointless. With that out of the way he was able to get to the other side, massaging his bruised leg.

“Ok, its seems safe enough, come across.” Haverson yelled.

Mathis nodded, and strode out, keeping a grip on the coffin on his shoulder. Unlike Haverson, there was no hesitation. Haverson admired the man's drive, but wondered how much of it was resolve and how much of it was simply because the poor man didn't know what he was up against. Well, if they were doomed to fail, he was not going to be the one to tell him. Let him find out for himself.

Water scattered before Mathis's purposeful steps and with one swift action, leaped out of the water, coffin still in hand and landed on the trunk.

Haverson couldn't believe his eyes. Either the man was much stronger than he let on, or the magic of the suit was understated.

There was a worrying deep groaning noise as Mathis landed on the trunk, and even the merchant, driven as he was, paused for a moment, listening and feeling for further instability.

Haverson also scanned the water for movement.

Once Mathis was assured that the tree would not break under him, he continued a slow but assured pace, step by step towards the end.

When he reached the side where Haverson was waiting for him, Haverson breathed a sigh of relief.

“It seems my worries were unwarrented. Still, this explains why no one comes down here often. And why no one fishes in the lake.”

“Do you know what that was that attacked you?” Mathis asked, slowly setting down the coffin.

“Unfortunately not. I'm not sure anyone does. No one has the death wish to figure out. I'm sure the military could figure something out given enough time, but they have bigger things on their plates.”

“Hmm.” Mathis responded. “Do you mind looking away one second?” he asked, looking back at Haverson. “I need to check to see if water got into the coffin.”

“Umm, right, sure.” Haverson said awkwardly, staring off into the foliage, and planning their next move. He also checked his backpack and was surprised to see that its contents were only partly sodden. Oh well, they had had to swim, even if it meant his bed roll would be damp tonight. It would have been more of a problem if either of their weapons had detached in the water.

The path ahead was slightly less overgrown, if only because the original road here had been larger. Furthermore, Haverson could tell by the sides of the channel that the southern flank did not seem to flood as often.

Mathis finished attending … the box, and righted himself.

“Its easy going from here no?” He asked, lifting the container.

“Well, relatively easy. As easy as traveling goes. We won't need to cut through any wilderness for a day or two, though for sure. I'm just guessing though. I don't know where the turn off is for Ankhsomar.” Haverson admitted.

“And I don't remember. Plus we are not necessarily going to Ankhsomar. We have to go to the fell itself.”

“Are they not near one another?” Haverson asked, looking back at the merchant.

“I-I do not remember. Size and perspective is a strange thing in that desert. Its very hard to think there. Every breath and every movement is difficult, not even because of the oppressive heat, but because of the feeling the land gives off. Its hard to explain. It has been a long time since I was there, and many thing have happen since then which cloud my memories. I suppose we will feel it soon.”

“In any case, making for Ankhsomar is a start. Surely we will be able to find out way to the fell from there. I will try to remember the turn. Especially because I would be surprised if there are many people who remember it now a days.”

Haverson nodded. “Then for now we just need to get to Mellont. I believe that is the closest major city to Ankhsomar. Or perhaps Harsos? It used to be elven after all. I am not sure, I do not have a map.”

“Harsos may have been elven but its also west of Mellont. We will need supplies for the desert, which we may be able to get in Mellont if we are lucky.”

“Then it is decided. To Mellont.” Haverson said.

Mathis nodded.

In less than an hour they had made their way through the rest of the old path, cutting and slashing their way. Above them, the trees towered, blocking the mid day sun. Through their leaves, rays of light filtered down into the dusty undergrowth.

Haverson, sword out, did his best to slash at the worst of the growth that had moved in after the path was abandoned. It was the same kind that they had encountered earlier on the edges of the channel, a kind of choking useless vine which tangled every which way, even on top of other plants.

Their steps crackled underneath them, as their boots tread on the dried leaves of years past. A musty aroma could be smelled, and somewhere off to the north they could faintly hear the sounds of the lake.

“Well now. This isn't so bad.” Mathis said, following Haverson. “If only they fixed that bridge, this would still make a lot of sense to take this passage. Not everyone from the eastern towns has business in Dor's Crag. Although I suppose as a merchant myself, I would be against that...” Mathis said, reflecting.

“The toll on that elevator is something I've grown to hate.” Haverson admitted.

“But you can see all the trouble you'd have to go through to open this back up. Maybe you can pay for it when you return.” Haverson joked, but it looked like Mathis was seriously thinking about it for a moment.

They continued for a few more minutes, making light conversation, mostly about the trees and the nature around them. Although Haverson spent a great deal of time outdoors, especially compared to the merchant, he was no naturewalker. He barely knew the names of even the common plants, much less what they could be used for. But he did his best to answer the merchant's questions.

Finally, they broke through one last patch of overgrowth and emerged onto an actual road.

The packed earth beneath them seemed almost foreign after the hours on the old road.

“Here we are.” Haverson said as they stepped on to the road, “the road to the East.”

Mathis looked in both directions. “Seems vacant. Where is everyone?”

“Oh.” Haverson said, looking at the road which curved southward. “We're technically not on the main road yet. This is a spur which plunges south. They call it the elven road, although this is the best kept part of it. We go in the opposite direction.” He said, pointing northwards.

Mathis nodded.

The smell of wet bark from yesterday's rain filled their noses as they set forward on the road. There were surrounded now by taller evergreen trees, the geography having changed imperceptibly while the moved away from the basin.

After more than an hour they came upon a fork in the road as it curved from north to eastwards.

“To our east, the land rises into large halls, covered with evergreens. One branch of the road, to Harsos, the old elven town, goes that way. To our north though, the road skirts briefly back past the basin, then goes east. That is our path.”

So they turned north and walked along the road. Suddenly, and without warning, the trees to the west of them fell away into low marsh grasses, revealing the basin again. High above them, and to the north lay Dor's Crag. In the middle of the basin, the singular island in the lake proper. Off to their left, and mostly obscured with vegetation was the swamp island with the house they had just passed.

Haverson and Mathis grew quiet as they approached the city from the south.

She would have come this way, looking at the city as she did so. How many times had they taken the elven road, simply to avoid that place? It seemed silly. Horrible really, now that Haverson got to know Mathis, and he displayed his emotions for Aster. They could have visited at any time.

Gods, what had he been thinking? He had always let Aster do what she wanted. After all, he had treated her just as another adventurer. He knew of no other way to treat anyone, except for perhaps as an enemy. And so it was with all groups of wanderers, that the unspoken rule was king: never ask about a person's past. It was a person's preogative to reveal as little or as much about themselves as they felt.

But now Haverson felt like he had done wrong. All this time had Aster herself wanted to reconsile with her family? Surely she had time to do so, but what if she had been like he was, stuck and unable to come to terms with how she had changed? Wasn't it Haverson's fault that Mathis and his daughter had been separated?

Gods…

These thoughts swirled around Haverson's head, casting him into a dour mood. As if to complement his feelings, the sun soon vanished as they walked along the shore of the lake. Gray skies ruled. A roiling mass of turning chaos. No storm but simply gray. A thick suffocating blanket.

The moments passed swiftly as they walked, and the day passed.

“Which way now?” Mathis asked, gesturing to the road ahead of them.

“Oh, sorry, I got lost in thought.” Haverson admitted.

He looked up and surveyed where his feet had taken him.

The land lay open. Off to his left lay, strewn like rocks along a beach, several larger than person sized boulders amid short grass which lay on the bank of the Arnon. The road actually came to a proper crossing here. Off to their side was a small inn, around which several people milled. In the surrounding fields, they could make out the bent shape of further people. Most ignored them, but a few raised eyebrows at the pair, both old and one with such a large wooden box.

“I have seen this area many times on maps, as I do most of my travel, when I have to, to the west. I suppose we go East?”

“You're correct. The roads run fairly straight, even with the hills to the east. As you must know, this road here,” he said throwing a hand northwards past golden fields and hills, disappearing in the haze of the mountain to the north, “goes north until Coldstone Pass.”

“A crucial link with the Fartherners. Have you ever been to the far north?” Mathis asked, starting towards the east road.

“No, although I've shared stories with many who have. I hear that they dislike people visiting them. Plus the weather is even worse than here if you can believe it.”

“Its true. I have not been myself, but I do business with a handful of the clans by correspondence and agent. They are honest but superstitious people. But you're right, they don't really like visitors. I think its simply because there is not enough food to go around some years, although interestingly enough, my last deal was actually importing grain from them.”

“Is that so?” Haverson asked, the two of them walking past stone walled fields. Every once and a while there appeared a large farmstead servicing the area around it, sometimes these would collect is a small collection, but never anything anyone would call a town. The largest might have a spare room, but they didn't intend to stay here. They had a long way to go.

“The balance of trade is shifting. Perhaps you have felt it in your travels. It used to be that the grain came from here. And as you can see, it still does. But Dor's crag, and the capital and all the western cities, they are so large, and the land around them is mostly poor. Every year it gets harder and harder to provide grain. Thats why trade has shifted. We trade more now with the southerners than we ever have in the past.”

“Is that true? The southerners?” Haverson asked, shocked. “And their king is fine with this? And our military is fine with this?”

“Well, true, sometimes deals are done under the table, but the vast majority are perfectly legal. The southerners have huge tracks of untapped land, but not the tools or the know-how to make use of its resources. Their stifling system of hereditary land ownership forces people further and further away from the cities, unlike here, or keeps them in poverty, almost like slaves. But it is from these down trodden people that we get our food; them and the lowlands.” Mathis laughed sadly.

“But I'm sure such things are boring to you.” Mathis looked at the sky. The sun was almost setting now. Through the heavy clouds, reds and oranges peaked through holes. The field workers were beginning to retreat to their houses.

“I suppose we ought to make preparation for the night.” Mathis said.

“Right.” Haverson said, jerking back out of a second malaise.

“I don't know of any real inns on this stretch, but I'm sure some of the farmers will put us up, especially if we pay.”

Mathis let Haverson lead the way.

The two approached a collection of buildings as the sun started dissapearing for good.

Haverson knocked at what looked like the main building and explained their request to the person who appeared at the doorway.

He looked like he was in his late thirties and looked them over for a moment, puzzled why two older men would be traveling so hard and alone. His curiosity certainly much have increased at the sight of Mathis, who appeared as a giant in his armor, and would have peaked when he saw that Mathis held a strange and clearly heavy wooden box.

“I must say, we don't get many traveleres that look like you. Where are you headed?” He asked, without agreeing yet for them to stay the night. Behind him, Haverson thought he heard the voice of a woman and a younger child.

Mathis looked at Haverson.

“Mellont” Haverson said. “Our customer requisitioned some very expensive items, and we had to come personally instead of sending Ansalom”.

Mathis luckily knew much better than to react at the lie.

“Hmm. Dare I ask what you have in that box?” The man said, looking Mathis over.

“We will pay extra so you don't have to.” Mathis added.

The man snorted and threw up his hands. “Hells, I don't care that much. Just don't light the place on fire, or I'll come after you with the law. Just because we're farmers doesn't mean you city folk can take advantage of us, hear?” he said, somewhat gruffly.

“How much were you thinking?” The man asked, cleverly not setting a price himself.

Mathis suggested a number. Haverson had restrain himself not to gasp. It was about five times as much as he would have suggested.

“Oh. Wow. Must be real important huh? Well. You can stay in the spare room over in that building.” The man said, pointing to a small guest house.

“There's no lock on it usually, so you can just walk on in, but you should be able to deadbolt it when you get in. I-I would invite you to eat with us, but we just finished actually. I apologize.” The man's gruff tone had softened somewhat at the allure of so much money.

“That is not a problem.” Mathis said. “We will be off very early in the morning, so let me pay you now.”

The man looked almost suspicious. “Uhh, ok. Thank you.” he managed, looking at the rediculous amount of coinage Mathis had pressed into his hands.

“Thank you sirs. Good luck on your travels.”

“Thank you as well.” Haverson said, shooting a glance at Mathis.

When the door had closed and they were walking over to the guest house Haverson couldn't help but point out to Mathis that he had vastly overpaid the farmer.

“I know you don't travel much, but there were times I had to beg to stay for free at places like this.”

“Well, you don't have to do that any more.” Mathis said, quickly.

Something seemed off about the man's response, as if he was upset about something, so Haverson didn't press him.

They entered the plain guest house and were pleased to see two bedrooms, which decided the eventuality that they had apparently both fear where one of them would have to sleep on the floor. With that out of the way, Mathis closed the door quickly behind Haverson and collapsed to the floor, the weight of the armor shaking the entire house.

“Gods man, are you ok?” Haverson asked, half moving his hand to place it on the other man's shoulder, but stopping half way.

“Yes.” Mathis said, folding over slowly, laying out the box on the floor near the entrance. Haverson decided he would leave the man by himself for a moment, and proceeded to make sure the wet items in his pack had dried.

As he did so though, he peaked through the door to the bedroom he had taken and observed Mathis, drenched with sweat, slowly taking off the armor piece by piece, each golden segment hitting the floor with an audible thud. With each piece, Mathis let out a sharp sigh.

There was something peircing about the scene, and this sentiment didn't pass Haverson unnoticed. Were they both still in shock? They had to be. Of course he was. Haverson closed his door without interrupting, but even as he didn't he was unsure of his action.

He looked around the room.

It was small and humble; the most noteworthy item, the bed, was just barely large enough for him, and a simple sheet covered it. The walls were wood panels with no decoration. Through the only window, and its shutters, the sun was silently lowering itself below the horizon, leaving the world and Haverson with only darkness.

He went to pick out his usual firestarting kit but was surprised when he opened the bag. It was only after a moment of rummaging through the unfamiliar and still somewhat damp contents that he remembered that this was the pack Mathis had given him to carry for the both of them. His old pack… all his old equipment, where was it?

He tried to remember, but it was the graphic elements of the fight that came to his mind instead, and the smell of blood came unbidden from his memories.

He shook his head. The pack must be still sitting on the stones were he had left it back in Dor's Crag.

He found himself sighing as well as he decided not to light a lantern. He could feel sleep crouching silently, waiting for him.

He looked himself over, wincing as he did so. Kerack's power was indisputable, but his personality was wroth manifest. He cared little about his subjects or in fact the lives of any mortals, as Germain had warned him.

So now as Haverson stripped his shirt off, he was able to see what marks the assassin had left, even through Kerack's power and the priest’s healing.

An ugly scar ran its way along his stomach where the blade had hit him not once but twice. All on his body, small pockmarks remained, from when Kerack's power had expelled the poison. Haverson found himself running a hand along the marks.

What is...is. Even if it is not how you would wish it.

He sat down on the bed but was immediately prodded by an uncomfortable object: his sword. Running a hand through his hair, he stood again, noting how his muscles ached as he did so.

He loosened the belt holding the sword and let it fall to the floor. It was nothing special. He had never fought with a special sword as some adventurers did. He had never named his sword. He had learned that from his master, or in response to his master's teachings. What was important was not the sword, as the ancient man had reminded him many times, even though Haverson had never seen the man hold a blade himself, what was important was the person holding the sword.

Especially if that person was Aster.

What a stupid thing to think.

The weapon hit the ground with a thud, and with a sudden fit of anger, Haverson kicked it away from him. The blade flipped upwards and spun along the ground before hitting the wall with a dull thunk.

Haverson scowled and lay in the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

The roof was as simple as the rest of the room, the wooden beams hanging from their posts, the wood tile roof above that.

Haverson stared at the ceiling until sleep overcame him.

Despite his weariness, Haverson awoke with the sun. Its red golden beams worked their way through the shutters on the windows and managed to sneak right into his eyes, arresting any further slumber. Or perhaps the intrusion was more violent. The solar force was undeniable, shaking him bodily from the great unconsciousness that had taken hold of him.

He awoke but resisted its force, staying in the straw bed staring at the ceiling.

For a moment the exigencies of his trip and even his immeadite surrounding were forgotten. He existed at a simplier level, simply staring at the ceiling, his body as if in suspended animation.

A thought entered this half dreamlike state.

Aster was dead.

His consciousness revolted against the idea, recoiling with horror and disbelief. A sick feeling rose in his stomach reinforced by the lack of proper meals the previous day.

Could such a thing be possible? The ceiling glared back at him, its timber beams revealing their cracks and splinters before his gaze. He covered his eyes with his hands, but still the light somehow shone through.

It couldn't be true. He was on his way to meet her. He would be able to explain everything; continue off where they had left one another. Perhaps she could even forgive him for his previous actions, he just had to explain, he just had to understand himself why he had been driven to acting the way he had when she had left.

But just as the sun could not be fought, so to could the truth not be hidden from his mind. A cold icy confirmation stabbed him agonizingly as he recalled her dying.

There would be no reconciliation, no forgiveness. It was… too late.

How could such a thing be fair? He gritted his teeth and whiped away the beginings of tears as his sadness and disbelief slowly turned themselves into anger.

He was suddenly on his feet. His hand shot out and grabbed his armor, discarded in a chair beside the bed. He donned it with hurried actions and swung the heavy pack from the floor to his shoulder.

He looked down at the floor at the last piece of equipment. His sword lay innocently on the ground. Even in its sheath he could tell he had somehow forgotten to clean it, and it still held blood from the encounter. His hands trembled, and found themselves in fists.

“Damn!” He yelled, breaking the silence of the morning, and punctuated his cry with a strong kick to the weapon, replaying his actions from the previous night without realizing it, its mere presence reminding him of Aster and his failure to protect her.

The weapon flew through the air and struck the doorframe with a dull clatter.

He stood for a moment suffused with pure anger, unable to do anything but seethe in his own impotence.

The was a stirring sound from the room next door.

Shaken out of his rage, and now somewhat ashamed of himself, Haverson retrieved the weapon and quickly attached it to his belt. His embarassment made him conscious of the fact that he had done such a thing last night, and something about that filled him with unease. The gods made their thread through such coincidences and such metaphors. With that in mind, he made for the door before Mathis could ask him what was wrong.

He need not have bothered, for Mathis himself was just rising. On the ground in the entrance way was the set of armor, lying on the ground, haphazardly discarded. It shone and reflected rays in a thousand different directions as Haverson emerged. There was something strange and surreal to seeing a priceless set of armor lying on the ground like it was.

As Haverson stared, Mathis could be heard opening the door. As he did so, Haverson could see through into the other room.

It was similar to his own, with a simple bed and tan linens. However, Haverson could also make out one item that was disimilar. The corner of the coffin was just barely visible. Was the top slightly off?

Remembering that Aster was dead was one thing, but for some reason seeing the evidense of the fact in front of him sent fresh horror through Haverson. But he was careful not to react visibly as the other man exited.

The older man was visibly exhausted. There were lines under his eyes and his whole face had taken on a gaunt appearance.

Apparently Haverson's stare caught Mathis's own, since the merchant ran his had to his forehead and traced his brow.

“That bad huh? Well it has been quite some time since I have left the city. Its to be expected that I have some catching up to do, especially to an adventurer.”

The remark was meant to be friendly banter, but for some reason Haverson stiffened at his description as an adventurer. There was something about the way the man said the word, that made Haverson sure that the man had a different notion of what it was he did.

But it would do no good to get cross so early in the trip, plus it was probably just his imagination.

“Well, here we are. I estimate that it will take a week to get to Mellont, more if we get foul weather.” Haverson said purposefully. A sudden thought hit him as the man nodded.

“Uh, I apologize, I must admit I was not in my normal state when we arrived last night. How do you want to divide the rent for this room. Ah… we have not even written up an adventurer's agreement.” Haverson reflected. Surely the merchant objected to such informal and haphazard legal situations such as the one they were in?

Mathis stopped collecting his armor from the floor and turned to Harverson and looked him straight in the eyes.

“Haverson. I know we have just met, but I will be completely sincere with you; if Aster trusted you, so do I, to the same degree.”

Haverson didn't quite know how to respond

Mathis continued. “This is my fools errand. This is my mistake, regardless of what you think about your own involvement. This is my show. I would not have you spend a copper on me.” He said sternly. Having said that he relaxed. “Besides, I have more than enough coin...The one thin I do have...” He said, mostly to himself, as he started collecting his armor again.

Haverson let the man collect himself and waited outside for the merchant.

It was a clear crisp spring day, and the chill of the winter was well gone by now. It would not be long until the sweltering heat of the summer reigned in these plains. Haverson stared out at the land.

The farm was a small affair, clearly a family with perhaps only a handful of members and probably no hired help. On such a farm even the women and children worked. It was how Haverson had grown up himself. It was a living, but not one he envied.

The main house, unpainted but in moderate condition and a full two stories, sat at the end of the small turn they had taken to get her the previous night. He was outside the guest house, situated nearer to the road. In between he and the house was a small dirt area probably designed for loading wagons. Off to one side was a large barn and to his other there was another smaller smaller barn.

To his north, past the main house was the northern plains, the grain of the farm extending as far as he could see until a rise obliterated his view. Well off, far to the north, to the left and right and lit by the sun coming from behind him were the mountains. Even in the late spring they were still heavily capped with snow, and it would take until the summer for the melt to truly begin.

They sat off in the distance like something unobtainable. Haverson knew that despite their perceived closeness, it was almost two weeks of hard travel to the ones on the right. Somewhere to the left, Dor's crag lay, although its exact location was obscured my a copse of trees on a hill.

He turned towards their location, briefly scanning the Old Elven to their south. Its dark and tangled forests were no more inviting than they had ever been.

However towards Mellont, the path was clear and he had taken it many times before. Rolling hills, most farmed at least until below the pass, where another north road ventured off. Then there was wilderness for a time, and the hills grew more steep and the land more dangerous, especially during the winter. However after that you arrived to the environs around Mellont, a typically peaceful area, consisting of mostly farms with the exception of the city on the hill itself.

“Are you ready?” Mathis said.

Haverson looked up, shaking himself from his reflection. Mathis had somehow managed to fasten on his armor himself, although several of the pieces looked a little askew, especially compared to the job Ansalom had done for the merchant the day before. On his shoulder gripped tightly was the box.

“I am.” Haverson replied. “We should be off.” He said simply, checking his pack once more.

Then the two slipped from the farmstead and met the road. From there they simply started walking into the morning sun, each engrossed in their own thoughts.

The country side went quickly and peacefully. There was a slight breeze from the west, and it brought with it the scent of earth, of tilling and planting. All around them was farm as far as the eye could see. Gently sloping hills covered with wheat and other crops blanketed the land, once every mile or so, crisscrossed by the occasional fence.

There were people out in the fields, hundreds upon hundreds, and houses dotted the landscape as well, sometimes bunching together into tiny homesteads where generations of farmers had built houses together. The largest of these might even have an inn or some general purpose store, but by in large it was a isolated existance.

Haverson knew this existance well, he reflected as he walked along the packed earth road. It was his original life. Something about that resonated with him, especially as they passed farming families where children ran among wheat rows, screaming and laughing as the grownups tried to get them to help.

He sighed and looked at Mathis. If the scene spoke to the other man, he hid it well.

“I grew up on a farm not unlike this one.” Haverson said, breaking the silence that had enveloped them since the morning.

“Oh?” Mathis said, swinging his head towards the younger man. He was wearing his ragged clothing atop his armor again, and Haverson noticed at this point that he couldn't even hear the joints.

Haverson tried to ignore the coffin on the other man's shoulder.

“Yes, a long time ago, back when I was still a child, my family and I lived in the shadow of the mountains far to the north between Dor's crag and the capital.”

The place came to him with some difficulty, even though he had just been there last year, as if his mind actively was trying to stifle the memories for some reason.

“We would wake each morning, my brother and I and have to do our chores. Gods if we behaved like these kids we would have gotten paddled quick!” Haverson said laughing, as the passed the family working.

Some of the members looked up with sweat drenched brows, even in the cool mid day air, but upon seeing strangers, they said nothing. Farmers kept together.

“Our mother had passed away when my brother was born, so it was just my father and us.” Haverson added.

“No extended family?” Mathis asked.

“No. I suspect that my father was actually a Lowlander, if not a complete southerner. He didn't like to talk about his past much.”

“I see.”

“How about you?” Haverson asked, then, not wanting the other man to think of his loss, redirected the question, “where were you raised?”

Mathis squinted out at the sun, about a third of the way into the sky.

“I suppose you wouldn't know much about my family. The La Rouches are an old family; we would like to think one of the first, and several of our members have tried to trace our lineage back to Dor himself.” Mathis chuckled.

“Fools were good at making money but precious little else. My father and mother were bothvery stern parents. I just barely recall interminable lessons with my tutor.”

“Tutor huh?”

Mathis nodded. “They knew what I wanted to be before I was allowed to figure it out. My grandfather was a merchant, my father was a merchant and I would be as well.”

“Hmm.” Haverson said, thinking of the similarities. He had wanted little to do with farming as possible, but it seemed like his father had always just assumed Haverson would have followed him in his footsteps. He had been to shy or too timid to tell him otherwise while he was still alive.

“And you know what? I was a good merchant!” Mathis laughed dryly. “I spent money like I drank wine, like I gathered young women. I proved I was more skilled than all of my siblings, taking their attempts at business one by one. I knew what I was doing and I loved it.”

Haverson started. “That doesn't seem like you at all!” he exclaimed, shocked.

“You seem much more… measured than that.” he admitted.

“Well. It took a long while. And… and very important event.”

“But information loves a trade: If you grew up a farmlad, how did you come to swinging a sword?”

Haverson dropped his gaze to the sword by his side and then stared at the farmland.

“I never much liked farming. Nothing exciting or unique about it. That wasn't to mean I was bad at it though, I worked hard with my brother and when my father passed, the farm legally went to me. I was only able to put up with it for a year before I passed it along to my brother.”

“Why did you do it then?” Mathis asked, shifting the coffin to the other shoulder as they walked.

“Obligation. My father worked hard for the land we had. It was a rough sort, out in the north with heavy snows and many boulders. I didn't want to disappoint him. But one day I just looked out at what we had made, with both of our lives, and my brothers as well… and, honestly I was dissapointed.”

Haverson stopped talking for a moment and shook his head.

“Its kind of horrible to say that such effort and time was a waste, but at that moment I truly felt like that. Think of it this way: There was a corner of the land that we owned where the land rose into a hill. On the top of this hill, my father and I had spent a day or two when we had time to spare, and removed some of the trees so that it was possible to look out across all the land we had.”

“And so I did that. And there it all was. Right before my eyes. Everything our family had worked on and sweated for. What my father had lived and likely died for. Right there I could see it all…” Haverson laughed and shook his head again. “It was all just right there. And I couldn't help but think: How pathetic. That’s horrible right? But I felt it anyway. And that conflict, between the shame of my feelings and the truth, that is what drove me to leave.”

Haverson looked over at the old merchant, but the man seemed to be legitimately thinking about what Haverson had just told him.

The merchant saw Haverson looking at him and nodded. “And what did you do then? When farming was not enough for you, what was?”

“Well, adventuring I guess. Odd jobs and living from contract to contract. Basically the opposite of stable life I had lived. At least until Gerrant got his god damn pants in a twist and decided to murder several thousand people.” Haverson trailed off, but Mathis just hummed, still thinking.

As if mirroring Haverson's story, they were now past the limits of what could be considered Dor's Crag's environs. Past the farmland and into the plains that lay under the coldstone pass. They were truly in the country now.

This was a less forgiving land. The frigid wind came quick down from the mountains and winters were cold and wintswept with less trees to block its onslaught. However, such was the demand for crops from the cities of the north, that many intrepid and hardy people had made their home amid the plains.

Although the road was much of the same, the homesteads were much more isolated, gathering themselves into groups several families large for protection from both the elements and perhaps the loneliness. The plots of crops had areas of untilled land between them. Either because the land lay too far from the farm house or because the soil was too poor or lacked reliable water.

“I suppose this is more of your land then.” Mathis said, looking out far around at the somewhat bleak landscape.

“Yes and no. I would rather be in such a place rather than a city, but contracts in a place like this are few and far between. When they do come it is usually because someone is desperate.”

“Desperate?” Mathis asked.

“Indeed. The people who live in places like this, perhaps a bit like an adventurer, pride themselves on being self reliant. If they have to ask for the services of an adventurer, it is because they are forced to do so. Keep in mind, we are no longer in the city. These people are poor farmers. Typically they have little gold to give.”

“No gold...” Mathis said to himself. “I imagine that makes things harder. Do you… simply do things for free?” He asked, a bit confused.

Haverson grinned. “Not everything is about gold. The further you get from the large cities, the more little things start to matter. Do you have enough food? Are your shoes still good? Have you fallen ill or gotten injured? All of these things become both the quest and payment for an adventurer out here. Sometimes it is like symbiotic relation. I would need food. They had trouble with wolves… you see?”

“Wolves? Really?” Mathis asked, clearly surprised.

“Surely. Although the military used to do its best to patrol the road, during the winter it gets much harder. And with the southerners, the whole situation the way it is, more and more men are being brought away from the hinterlands. I've covered myself in wolf blood more times that I care to remember.”

Mathis thought for a moment. And then swung his body around quickly, looking back the way they had come and off further down the road towards their future. “You bring up a interesting point. Where are all the patrols? Do you think something has gone wrong? Surely they have to protect the grain shipments?”

Haverson looked around. “Its still in the early spring. Even early harvest won't be for another month.” He peered off into the distance. “But there on the hill off in the distance I think you can see a garrison. Although again, at this time of the year, I'd be surprised if there's more than a skeleton crew there.”

Mathis hummed again, thinking. “I must say, this is quite different from where I usually do business. The Shani are fickle people and just as likely to steal from your cargo as they are to trade with you. But if you think we are safe...”

“We are not necessarily safe Mathis.” Haverson said, completely serious. “You are never safe while adventuring. What younger men learn quickly is that its not the heroic parts that kill you, its the logistics, the lack of water or food; the weather. Tha being said. For now, we're just going to Mellont. We should be fine. Now when we get to the desert, that is another story completely.”

Mathis nodded and the continued into the plains.

It was the dying of the day when Haverson let out a sigh and looked around.

“Well, we might as well put up for the night.” he said.

Mathis looked around and scowled. “And not an Inn in sight.”

Haverson managed a chuckle. “Out here? Not a chance. There might be one for the turn off for the pass, but honestly, we'd be walking in the dark, and I think we've made good progress. I can't say for certain, but we're sure to make it within the week at this rate.

Mathis nodded, but was clearly out of his comfort zone.

As the red sun set to their south Haverson started looking around for a place to set up for the night.

The land had once again changed subtly. Rolling hills had emerged from under them, the they grew more numerous and more steep as they progressed, with rock faces sometimes appearing from beneath the earth. Boulders too lay strewn around the land, some reaching surprising porportions.

It was at one of these boulders that Haverson suggested that they stop for the night.

He motioned to Mathis to follow him, explaining as he went.

“If we stay in the shadow of this boulder we'll be sheltered from the wind. Also we should be less visible from the road, just in case. Although...” Haverson looked to the sky and tested the wind, while Mathis waited.

“I don't think it will rain, but its certainly damper than it was this morning. I think we'll awake to cloud cover. It will probably get chilly during the night as well. We should make a fire.”

“I thouht we wanted to hide from the road.”

“The boulders should hide some of the light. Plus, sleeping without a fire on a night like this would be very uncomfortable. If I were alone I might do it, but I gather you're tired from the day?”

Mathis reluctantly agreed. “I ache all over. I don't think I have ever pushed myself like this.”

“Right. If you sleep without a fire, you'll find that in the morning all your muscles will have set in horrible knots. While I set up the tents, do you think you can find fire wood?” Haverson asked.

Mathis, nodded, and gently lowered the coffin to the ground, and taking a last unsure glance at where it lay, went off to collect wood.

“Don't go too far. We're loosing the light. It'll be dark before you know it. Half an hour at best, minutes at worst.” Haverson warned.

“Don't worry, I'll be back.”

Haverson set about setting up the tents and the fire, and by the time Mathis returned with an armful of brances, Haverson had a small kindling started.

“Great. Just throw those over there.” Haverson said, pointing to the ground some space away from the fire.

“Well, this is an experience. Thank you for setting up the tent. I will have to learn how to do it myself.” Mathis said with a bit of embarresment.

A sudden wave or shock and horror flashed over him.

“Where is...”

“Dont' worry.” Haverson said quickly. “I put it in your tent. You have quite the large one and I'm sure there is more than enough room.”

“Ah.. I see.” Mathis said. He nodded. “I won't lie Haverson, I am tired. Today's travel has taken a lot from me. I will retire at once… Unless we need to set a guard?” he asked.

Haverson looked up at Mathis then around at the countryside. “No we should be fine. I'm a light sleeper.” He explained. “Part of the job I suppose.”

“I see. Well. Good night then.” Mathis said, half bowing, half nodding at Haverson.

Haverson saw to the fire as the other man retired. He made sure it would have enough fuel for at least most of the night and that it wouldn't spread by accident. He then went to his own one man tent and fell fast asleep, exhausted by the day's travels.

Haverson awoke covered in sweat. He quickly held still and listened to the night.

After a moment where he didn't even breathe, he determined that there was most likely nothing outside, or at least nothing he could hear.

It was still very dark, probably past midnight. What would make him wake in the middle of the night like this? And why did he feel so damn nervous?

He slipped his head out of the tent and looked around. The fire had gone out, but the clouds had lifted for the moment and he could see that there was a close full moon drifting over their heads.

Actually… Haverson looked at the other larger tent with some concern. Could he have heard something breifly? Was there something wrong with Mathis?

Gripping his sword with one hand, Haverson slid across the ground, careful not to make a sound.

The moonlight put everything into an odd contrast, stark blacks and whites, illuminated in strange ways which cast long distorted shadows.

He frowned and knocked on the tent.

“Mathis!” He hissed. “You ok?”

He waited for an answer but only silence responded.

A sudden chill ran through him and froze like ice in his veins. Where was the other man? Was he simply asleep?

Haverson opened the fastens on the tent.

He left the open, the flaps catching in the chilly midnight air.

Inside the bedroll was empty, and perhaps even more troubling, the coffin was still present. Would Mathis have left the coffin alone? Perhaps if there was no other option, but Haverson doubted that he would do it for very long. But his armor was also there on the ground of the tent...

He went into the tent and laid his hand on the bedroll. It was still somewhat warm, but still colder than it would have been if Mathis had just left. The man had been gone for some minutes.

What would have possessed the man to leave like this in the middle of the night? Surely he knew the dangers with going out at such a time? Shouldn't he have been exhausted!

These thoughts in mind, Haverson looked out of the tent and scanned the immediate area of the campsite.

Nothing made sense. If there had been some sort of danger, why hadn't Mathis called out? If there was no danger, why was he gone? Haverson supposed that the other man's actions were his own, but the fact that the man was unacquainted with the wilderness meant that Haverson was at least somewhat responsible.

Plus there was no way that Haverson could carry that coffin…

They had chosen an alcove of sorts behind a boulder. The road was just barely visible past the rock. On their other side, there was a small copse of trees which rose into a small hill.

Haverson narrowed his eyes and walked quietly to the road.

There was something menacing and unfamiliar about the empty road. Although they had been traveling along it for two days, if Haverson's sense of direction had been any worse, he surely would have gotten turned around… Now which way was was back towards Dor's Crag? That way. He checked for footprints but there were obviously too many to make out either his or Mathis's. If Mathis had taken the road for whatever reason, there would be no following him.

Haverson came back to the camp and looked around a bit more carefully.

There were subtle footfalls around the boulder, but most were Haversons's.

Then, staring around at the trees, the feeling of uneasiness returned. Then it all clicked. The trees, the moonlight… There was almost certainly something unnatural going on. He had encountered such things a small handful of times, deep empty ruins full of sadness and the lingering magic of peoples long gone. Was it the same feeling? Mostly. There was more uneasiness in the air where there should have just been sorrow…

Haverson examined the ground near the trees.

Sure enough, after several minutes he saw one or two broken branches and the start of a trail. He didn't remember seeing the trail earlier when the sun was up, but that was how such things usually worked, and it is likely it was well hidden...or not even there.

He stepped onto the trail, beneath his boots, he heard the crisp noise of breaking frost. When he looked down he saw his steps emblazoned as discolored patches of trampled grass. But besides his own steps there were the heavy boots of another person who could only be Mathis.

Frowning, he followed the trail up the hill making sure once and a while that Mathis's footprints were still there.

The trees around him extended their leaves inward, and he had to brush them aside more and more frequently as he felt himself getting to the top of the hill.

When he crested the hill there was a brief pause in the vegetation where he, using the moonlight, could look out a limited distance down the ravine on the other side.

Cold mist hugged low to the ground and as the hills spread before him they became increasingly sharp and hillock like. Every so often the earth would tear through the thin layer of grass and scrubs that lay on top of it and expose itself as small formations of rock. These appeared black against the moonlight shrouded mist.

Something about the appearance of this valley disturbed Haverson ever more than before. If Mathis was down there, and it seemed like he was, the poor man had no idea what he was dealing with.

Haverson gingerly started down into the mist. One hand stayed constantly on his sword, even though he wasn't quite sure what to expect or even that any potential adversaries would be vulnerable to his blade.

Haverson was not a superstitious man, but he had seen things and signs of things that indicated that life and death may not be just a simple binary condition. He had no desire to reinforce those experiences though.

So he watched his step carefully, not quite sure of what to expect. He certainly wanted to avoid any graves, exposed or hidden. He knew from before that basically any man made stone object was suspect. And was to be avoided. There was no running water nearby, which might have helped…

The mist swirled around him as he descended into the valley proper. He tried to listen for sounds, footsteps, anything, but it was deadly silent. There were no sounds of insects, or any other moment besides his own. His heartbeat was painfully loud in his head.

“Mathis?” He called out softly. He cursed himself for breaking the silence, and his voice, even weak and hesitant as it was, seemed to echo out throughout the valley. He had a sinking suspicion that his was the only voice that had reached this place in a very long time.

He crouched to examine the ground. There was some sort of path he must have been subconsciously following which ran through the lowest point of the valley. Increasingly large around it loomed the mist shrouded hills and outcroppings.

After scanning the path for a short while, he came upon a muddy patch which revealed a second set of bootprints. He had come to recognize these as Mathis's.

Haverson shook his head and shivered. He tried to peer into the fog to see if he could make out the other man, but the visibility was limited to maybe only ten feet in front of him.

He had to go deeper into the valley. Of course he had to go deeper into the valley.

He gritted his teeth and drew his sword. The sound of his weapon exiting his sheath was like a thunderclap and he could have sworn it even echoed around him.

He continued forwards.

As he passed through the first set of hills, he was horrified to see the nature of the valley was becoming clearer. The mist gave way just a tiny bit and through the gloom he could make out the hewn shapes of entrances into the hills.

Gods. Its a burial ground.

Almost shaking now, he bent down to check for another set of tracks. As he confirmed their existence though, a sudden sound, real or imagined caused him to jerk his head upwards.

Was that a person? He could have sworn someone had passed right in front of him!

He spun around but the area was completely empty.

“Mathis?” he tried again, though even the sound of his own voice put him on edge.

Again there was no response.

He kept on walking, slower this time though and with more trepidation.

He came close to the first set of passages into the rock.

He tried to keep his eyes straight ahead, but a morbid curiosity grabbed his vision and he looked to his left through one of the dark openings into the hill.

In front of the hill, the path split, and made as if it should run to the hill, but about halfway died in the middle of overgrown weeds which choked the approach. The hill itself was covered with pale sickly grass and was at least fourty feet tall, rising sharply from the path, chunks of dark rock splitting from its surface.

But it was the entrance which held Haverson's gaze. The opening was hewn into the side of the cliff with either haste, or no thought to aesthetics, for the rockwork was crude. Could elves really have made something so horrible? However, all along the opening, in clear silver lettering, which here and there cought the mooonlight, Haverson could make out the scrawling fluid script the elves used.

The entrance was just a opening into the rock, and Haverson could see that it constricted on both sides. Someone would have to squeeze through in order to get in, and might not be able to do it with armor. The thought of passing through that cleft terrified Haverson and he did his best to tear his gaze from the horrible doorway.

A cold wet breeze stirred from further in the valley and on it Haverson suddenly caught the smell of… flowers?

He almost stopped in place in shock as he looked around. There was barely any grass here let alone flowers…

A memory, unbidden and unwanted floated to his mind. They were funeral flowers. They were elven funeral flowers.

He gritted his teeth, and continued forwards, following Mathis's footsteps. The subtle sweet fragrance got stronger as he ventured into the valley. For some reason, the existence of such a pleasant smell in so horrible a place filled him with more dread than if it had been the stench of death.

Suddenly, and without warning a figure appeared from the mist. It stood strangely contorted, a silluette against the moonlight illuminated mist.

“Mathis?” Haverson asked, for the third time, but got no answer from the figure.

Haverson looked down at the ground to see if the foot steps ran to here and was dismayed to see two sets of footsteps. One of them was not Mathis or Haverson! He looked backwards in shock to see where they had started, but could not make it out. Unlike their's the additional set of footprints was almost certainly a woman from the size, but… he shook his head in disbelief… it was barefoot!

“Mathis. We have to get out of here. This is not a good place.” Haverson said, approaching the man and laying a hand on his shoulder.

The other man's shoulder was strangely cold, and for one terrifying second, Haverson thought it might have been some sort of walking corpse. But as Haverson rounded the figure, he saw that it was indeed Mathis.

But not Mathis as he had known him. For one, the golden armor that he had been wearing the entire trip had been left in the tent. Without it, the other man was surprisingly thin and gaunt, even compared to Haverson's own wiry frame.

Additionally, it could have been the lighting but the merchant seemed very pale, his skin and face the color of moonlight pulled tight against his bones. The merchant listed, leaning to one side, and was muttering something under his breath.

As Haverson watched in confusion, the merchant took one faltering step forwards. Haverson looked at where he was going and fear gripped him again; he was headed right for the opening of one of the barrows.

“Mathis!” Haverson yelled, shaking the other man. “What the hell is wrong with you? We have to get out of here!”

But although the man's eyes darted to Haverson and seemed to understand his presence, he made no motion except to take another lurching step forwards.

“Its...” He said weakly.

Haverson inhaled quickly. This was obviously some sort of stupor or spell. Could someone have cast it during the night while they were sleeping? Or… He gazed into the rune etched yawning darkness of the grave entrance… could it have just been the effect of this place? Had he not been lead astray in the Old Elven before? But never like this…

The air swirled around Haverson and the hairs on his hands and neck rose. He felt the presence of another person, but when he whipped around, it was clear that no one but them two were there.

“Its her…” Mathis said, a twisted smile running across his face.

Haverson jerked back to the merchant. “Her who?” A sudden fearful thought came to him, “I-Is it Aster?” He asked falteringly, his sword lowering as he stared into the mist trying to discern any possible shape. The world was a frightening lonely place. He had known things he could not explain, things that could only be described as spirits…

But Mathis's smile grew sad at the mention of his daughter.

“Oh, no… Not Aster. Her...” he said, frowning. His voice was slow and wavering with emotion.

Haverson shook his head. “Mathis. If its not Aster, it probably won't help us.” He glanced around again worryingly at the barrows. Was it his imagination or were there pale shadows coming from them? It was almost like someone had lit a flame inside…

“If its not Aster, we need to leave!” he said, tugging on the man's hands. They came away limp and clammy. The merchant made no attempt to free himself, merely taking another step forwards.

The merchant shook his head. “I didn't think of it before, Haverson.” The merchant said, eyes wide as he suddenly turned staring straight at the other man.

Haverson stumbled backwards at the wild and vacant, yet somehow devastatingly sad and lonely eyes.

“There's another way after all…” Mathis said slowly, rocking his head slowly back and forth. “I didn't think of it before, but She reminded me. Oh its been… ” Mathis choked, “… so long...”.

Haverson watched as tears ran down the merchant's face. The light in the barrow was certainly real now, a pale haunted thing, which flickered and shimmered before his eyes, not unlike the moonlight from above.

“I just have to walk in. And we can all be together again.” Mathis said, taking another step closer.

Some animalistic part of Haverson's body screamed in terror at the ghostly entrance, and putting one and one together, Haverson began to have some idea of what would happen if anyone entered that barrow entrance.

“No!” he cried, grabbing Mathis's hand tightly arresting him from taking another step.

“You can't!” Haverson said. “We still have so much further to go! I-I can't do it alone...”

The air stirred around him, the scent of burial flowers sweet in his nose. From somewhere far away he could hear a single indistinguishable voice on the wind.

Or could he? The armor was in the tent no? With it he could carry the coffin by himself, he realized.

He looked to Mathis. A moment of recognition dawned within Haverson. He suddenly commiserated with the other man more than he ever had before. Haverson knew the emotion that Mathis currently held, that crushing grief, feeling like everything was falling through one after another…

The whispering came again, this time louder. He could still not make out words, but the tone was soft and soothing.

Would it not be a mercy to let the man slip into the next world?

He stared at Mathis, who still was pale with grief. The man was old, even compared to Haverson, how much longer did he have? Wouldn't it be better to go in the manner of his own choosing rather than in some grave sickness?

Wouldn't it be better to just… do nothing? What right did he have to tell Mathis no? What right did he have at all to accompany the bereaved father? Wasn't it Haverson's own actions that caused her death in the first place?

The voice was now speaking directly to him, its smooth beautiful words still unrecognizable, yet stirred deep emotions within him.

He felt his eyesight grow fuzzy around the edges and his head grow heavier. Yes… That was it, he would just sleep… sleep for a short while…

And he almost did. He feel inwards, his body slowly tilting as consciousness left him. Mathis was walking away from him, growing closer and closer to the opening. His eyes closed as the world drifted away from him…

And into the void…

It rushed unbidden from what ever dark recess it normally sat, hollowing out his body, and suddenly, all sadness and grief, and loneliness was gone. Just a shadow of it true power, just a thin finger reaching up into which his consciousness fell.

Haverson stopped his fall instantly, and shook the sleep from his eyes with one quick gesture. The void had enveloped him because he had been under the power of whatever mysterious thing had brought him here. It had responded to his true subconscious intentions.

Several thoughts streamed through Haverson's mind as the alien force around them began to realize its effect was no longer working.

He could not let the merchant die. Despite his earlier thoughts, he probably could not make it through the desert alone, even with the armor. It was worth saving Aster if it was possible because she was a valuable asset and showed potential as well for harnessing the void.

Finally, it was possible that this force despite its actions so far, did in fact wish harm against both of them, rather than just luring Mathis. Who would have known what would have happened had Haverson fallen asleep?

He sheathed his sword. It would be no use unless he truly utilized the void, and there was enough of him left to make sure that that didn't happen.

He grabbed Mathis's hand and forcibly dragged him from the entrance.

Mathis appeared shocked and disoriented, but did not fight him.

However, the wind increased twenty fold, and became bitterly cold, now flowing swiftly into the barrow as if trying to drag the two of them backwards.

The voice whispered to him again, its beguiling elven tongue foreign to his mind.

“Begone spirit!” He ordered, his voice booming into the darkness. “Your magics are of no use!” He said, even though it probably was a lie. He continued to drag the merchant stumbling away from the barrow.

The whispering stopped for a moment and the void retreated back into whatever corner it had come from, leaving his terrified, but with a clear course of action.

He took the respite to start half running, moving as fast as he could with still leading Mathis.

A hissing bubbling noise came from all around him, and the moonlight suddenly vanished behind a cloud, casting the valley into darkness. The putrid smell of burning hair came on a foul slow and warm breeze.

Stumbling forward, he saw that instead of the pale light, the barrows now reflected flames, licking their insides. Mournful laments came from inside the barrows, collecting together into a cacophony of cries, and in the flickering light, he could just make out what could have been cloaked figures.

He did not waste any time to confirm his visions.

The figures writhed in flame projected from every entrance, scattering at angles not normally possible. They cried out and twitched in the flames, reaching towards him with their shadowy hands.

He jumped away and through the outstretched arms, doing his best to keep Mathis out of their grasp as well.

He could see the copse of trees appear on the hill in front of them; they were close to escaping the valley.

A sudden force arrested their movement.

From behind them, an arm extended from the swirling red flame tinged mists. As he looked down, he saw a dark black shadow outstretched from the darkness. The ground on which it ran sizzled and burned, the few tufts of pale grass in the path erupted into flame. From the force suddenly holding them back, it seemed to somehow be holding Mathis by the arm.

“No!” Haverson said fiercely, gripping tightly to the other man.

Mathis said something weakly to the darkness.

Haverson, planted his feet and pulled with all his strength. After a terrifying moment where he thought his strength would give, the force suddenly let go.

He wasted no time leading the slightly less disoriented Mathis back to their camp where he made sure to light a large fire. He then sat by the fire, making sure nothing came out of the woods after them, although we was not especially sure what he would do if something did.

Mathis seemed to collect himself a bit as they sat. Now, rather than appearing in a trance, he simply looked tired which was fair given that they were still supposed to be sleeping right now.

“Do you mind telling me what the hell that was all about?” Haverson asked, a bit more pointedly than he intended. Well, the other man had almost gotten them obliterated by spirits…

Mathis looked up with a large frown. “No.” He said, finally. “Perhaps later. We shall see. I am tired.”

“Is that really all you're going to say? You were about to walk through that door. I'm pretty sure it would have killed you!”

Mathis waved the accusation away and stood up. “I don't want to talk about it.” He said harshly, quickly walking to his tent and closing the opening.

Haverson fumed for while about it, tending the fire, and eventually fell asleep next to it.

Haverson woke up with the sun. He immediately frowned. The sun was too bright. The ground was lumpy beneath his back and something had worked its way into his back as he slept… for the brief time he had slept.

He got up with an irritable snap. The full brunt of the sun burned its way into his eyes. Squinting and holding his arm to stop the light, he saw Mathis sitting near his tent with the coffin.

“We should go.” he said quickly, frowning as he did so.

Mathis looked up and for a moment Haverson thought he might have protested, but something changed his mind, and he started trying to disassemble the tent behind him.

He was doing a terrible job. Haverson watched briefly before becoming frustrated.

“Move over,” he said sharply, in retrospect perhaps a bit too sharply, but at the time he didn't care. The man was hopeless. Plus he was about to rip the damn thing.

Mathis looked a bit shocked, but he did move out of the way to allow Haverson to have a go.

“Pack your bag. I still think we can make it to Mellont within the week if we start moving.”

Mathis again looked like he was about to protest, but before he did, his eyes happened to land on the coffin and he grew silent again.

“Fine.” He said.

The two got ready quickly and left the hilltop. Haverson made a mental note to never stay there again.

The fabulous sunrise did nothing for Haverson's temperament, and try as he did, he didn't seem to be able to wipe the sleep from his eyes.

The road traveled for a bit through rougher terrain and the morning chill came upon them even as the sun came down, making an uncomfortable situation where they sweated even though it was quite cold. They could both see their breath in the crisp air as they entered a cut through a particularly steep hill.

He had been here a few times, but now he was a bit on edge despite his temperament. He glanced behind them suspiciously, looking for fog or any unnatural signs. Seeing none, we reminded himself that there were also more mundane threats: this was a perfect location for some sort of ambush.

Mathis looked around as well, but it was clear the merchant was just looking at the cut itself. It was an impressive engineering achievement. Well, they hadn't held out against the south for centuries just on gold. Mathis traced the cuts which, after a point, went through the rock itself.

“Hmm.” Haverson said, eying the ridge line, looking for a possible enemy to silhouette itself against the sky. He almost wanted it to happen. It would at least give him something to take his anger out on.

They walked along the road, and for a brief moment, it turned to actual cobblestone, like one might expect in a city. Probably just using the stone they got from the cut. Still, he was in a suspicious mood, and wanted to make it wasn't some further enchantment. The fact that they hadn't encountered anyone this morning was also suspicious.

“Hold on one moment. I'm going to climb up and make sure we're going the right way.” Haverson said. He started up the side before Mathis could protest.

There were creepers running along the side of the rock, and Haverson selected the largest of these to help him. The cut was also not close to being vertical. Gravity tugged at him, and he defied it with exhilaration. With one final effort, he pulled himself to the top of the cut.

He was instantly hit with a sharp breeze, which threatened to push him back down the cut. Cursing, he stabilized himself and looked out ahead of them. The hill he was on gave him a good enough view that he was not only able to see the path ahead of them as it sliced its way through the hill, but also the crossroads perhaps a half a day's travel to their east.

As he took in the scene, he felt some of his anger seep away from himself. Why had he been angry in the first place? They had to sleep in the wilderness, strange obstacles were going to present themselves, that’s just what happened. That being said, the whole affair was still disquieting. There was some connection between Mathis and whatever force had accosted them.

He tried to remember what Mathis had said as he had tried to pull the other man away. Something about a woman? He didn't recall seeing a woman… but the footprints were definitely female. Very strange. He would have to…

“What does it look like?” Mathis ventured, looking up at Haverson from down in the cut.

Haverson looked down and had a fleeting desire to drop some large rock on the man. He dismissed it, but he found himself headed back to his earlier temperment.

“Nothing. Just hills like you would expect.” he said curtly.

The scrambled down the cut and joined Mathis without talking to him.

“I could make out the crossroads to the east.” he added.

“Did you see anyone?” Mathis asked.

Haverson stopped a moment. Had he seen anyone? He hadn't really been looking. Had there been someone with a wagon in the shadow of one of the other hills further up?

“No. Or at least I don't remember” Haverson said with a sigh. There was no reason to be mad at the other man he realized. He had done something stupid, but so had Haverson when he was just starting out. And so had Aster. Lots of stupid things actually, and it seems traveling with him had been one of them…

Haverson looked over at the other man as they started walking again. The merchant was grim, and it seemed like the armor moved more stiffly than it had the previous days beneath the ruined cloak. Perhaps he had been too hard on the man. They were really just starting their journey, if they were actually going to make it all the way through the desert, and this was the good part.

He stopped in his tracks. Mathis raised an eyebrow, clearly expecting another outburst.

“Hey, Mathis...I wanted to, err apologize for my behavior this morning.”

A small smile appeared on the other man's face.

“Think nothing of it.” he said, waving the whole thing away with one hand.

Haverson reciprocated the slight smile.

“I suppose I just slept poorly.” He admitted.

Mathis let out a sigh as they resumed walking.

“You as well? My feet ache something horrible and my mind still feels fuzzy from last night.”

“Ah, right. Erm, did you want to talk about that?”

“It seems like you do.” Mathis said, flipping the question.

“Fair enough. I am interested. It seems like the.. force we encountered last night knew you.” he said, staring off to the side trying to get any additional information out of the other man's reaction, by reading his face.

Mathis's eyes grew tired, like he was growing nostalgic. “Its possible. I suppose it possible. I don't really know what to make of that place. Do you know anything about it?”

“No.” Haverson admitted, noting that the other man had evaded the question again. “I have been in such places only twice before. Neither were pleasant experiences, and both times, I had men around me die. I suppose we got out lucky whatever it was.”

Mathis looked at Haverson with some surprise. “You truly have had a different life than I” he said with a sigh.

“Aster was with me the second time.” he said, without thinking.

Mathis's eyes opened wide as Haverson realized that mentioning her might have been a bad idea. Haverson honestly wasn't too sure how Mathis was taking Aster's death, especially since the goal of their quest was ostensibly to restore her to life.

As he thought of this, he realized something with shock. He turned to Mathis, this time with more subtlety. The man was old. They had left so quickly, Haverson hadn't really been able to comprehend what had been going on. Could the old man have gone insane? Leaving his family all at once like that, running off into the wilderness? That was probably what his enemies would say upon hearing of the events.

But no. On second inspection, he saw that there was still purpose behind the merchant's eyes. It was not like the empty stares of his former squadmates.

Fine then. But another thought came to his mind. Were they really journeying to revive the young woman? Or was this a journey of acceptance. When they came upon that vast wasteland, devoid of life, would the merchant truly understand that it simply couldn't be done?

“I don't really know what to say to that.” Mathis said. “I'm horrified she went into something like that. Horrified that she had to.”

Haverson shook his head. “I'm not sure what you're thinking, but she never 'had' to do anything. She went everywhere under her own volition, except of course the times we were captured I suppose. Point is, she was in it for real. She was as much of an adventurer as I. She showed herself capable time and time again. Perhaps she was a better adventurer come to think of it!” Haverson said with a laugh. “She found a way out of the profession after all. I simply spent months in taverns.”

Mathis looked at Haverson darkly, surprising him. “Perhaps I did not hear you correctly. What did you mean she found a way out?”

Haverson started. “Oh. Oh gods, I didn't mean it that way. I… I. Aster got a job, a real job. A good one. And a...” he looked at the merchant. “And a… fiance I suppose.” Haverson kicked the ground as he walked. He had really talked himself into a corner hadn't he?

“A fiance?” Mathis said, shocked.

“I believe so. She didn't tell me, but it wouldn't surprise me if the two of them planned it.” he admitted.

“Who? Why wasn't this man with her?” Mathis said angrily.

“Ah, its hard to explain. He and I were at odds. It seems so stupid now. She was meeting me after some work in Harsos. She probably asked him to stay back in Naissus.” he said. “If I hadn't been such a god damn idiot… If he had been with her as you suggest, perhaps things would be different.”

Thankfully rather than asking more questions, Mathis grew silent, reflecting on his own throughts.

Haverson caught some words from the man as he mumbled.

“...So many things I didn't know… Gods...What have I done? What have I been doing?” The man said, glancing back at the coffin.

He shook his head.

They walked for a few minutes in silence again.

They emerged through the cut and before them they could make out the crossroads, still a bit off. Along the road they could make out the wagons of farmers, sparsley leading east.

Mathis sighed. “It seems we have emerged form the hills hm?”

Haverson nodded, then looked up a slight smile in his eyes. “Was that a reference?” He asked the merchant.

“It was. So you're well read?”

“Not at all. I just happen to know that play.” Haverson admitted.

“Its Aster who knew the great works….Ah, but what am I saying, of course she would have learned it from you!” He said with a smile.

Mathis sadly shook his head. “Its possible I suppose, but I wasn't always there for her. Probably a tutor or two.”

Haverson grimaced. How was every damn conversation between the two such a minefield?

But the merchant was probably thinking the same thing, since he laid a hand on Haverson's shoulder.

“Look. We obviously have a great deal of history with Aster. We're not going to be able to tiptoe around this in conversation. For gods sake, I'm literally carrying her with us in a coffin” The merchant said with a biting laugh.

“Let us two talk. Perhaps we can convince each other this mad task is possible. I know its a delicate topic but I would like to hear about…” The merchant coughed and cleared his throat. “… about Aster while she was gone.” He sighed and quickly dried his eye, turning on Haverson quickly.

“For instance, how did you two meet?” he asked.

Haverson looked up, feeling a bit better with the merchant's honesty and forthcoming attitude.

“Well...” he started. “It was raining in Merin's Ford, and while I went through a particularly disreputable part of town I noticed that my coin purse was missing...”

Haverson continued, telling the story of them meeting, Mathis nodding, sometimes horrified, sometimes proud, but always eager to hear more, as they walked to the crossroads.

They continued like this for the next handful of day, passing farmers and the occasional military patrol. The walking was hard, but the road was clear and some nights they even happened on farmers who agreed to put them up for the night.

More than their physical progress, it seemed like the rift caused by the events of the previous night was somewhat healed over, although despite their sharing of information questions remained on both sides.

And so it was, as the wind shifted directions, to flow down from the north that they came to the outer environs of Mellont, the largest city East of cold stone pass and indeed in all of this side of the known world.

To call it isolated was a bit of a understatement. Haverson was not a man of history, but he knew some about its legacy. Once a fabulous city of splendor, and in fact the rival of Dor's Crag and even the capitol itself, stories related the horrible destruction visited upon the city as part of the Elven counter attack.

It is said that the elven clerics summoned their power in a peak of rage at seeing the destruction the early humans had wrought on Harsos and the other now forgotten cities in the Old Elven. The earth­ had churned beneath the foundation of the city and was swallowed up as into the ground itself. It is said that thousands perished.

It was hard to reconcile this murderous supposed past with what Haverson saw now.

Large but rolling hills stretched as far as the eye could see. They were perched at the top of one as clouds above moved swiftly in the wind. The air smelt of freshly tilled earth and grass. Farms once again covered the land. Mellont existed now solely as an agricultural center, and nothing more.

Haverson could just make out the city itself, sitting on top of its massive tel. Its walls had long since fallen into ruin and much of the city was old and decrepit. However, there were a fair number of people on the road leading to the gates, and the number only increased as Haverson and Mathis got closer.

The two of them paused as the got closer. The collection of people had turned into an actual line.

“Hrm. Well, this is new.” Haverson remarked, craning his neck to see ho far the line went. It snaked along the road for a few feet then dashed up the hill that Mellont sat on to enter one of the gates.

“Perhaps something has happened. Why don't we try another entrance?” Haverson suggested.

Mathis nodded.

The area directly around Mellont was heavily farmed, with almost every inch of the small valley that surrounded the city packed with fences and crops. More so than even when they had exited Dor's Crag, people worked the fields. However, as opposed to families as it had been there, there were hundreds of people per farm here: each one an important operation.

They found a small cut that seemed to snake its way around the city, and followed it to find another entrance.

“Have you been here before?” Haverson asked, glancing around at the mill of people.

“Yes, but its was a long time ago. Like I said, most of my business lies to the west and with the Shani.” Mathis responded. “Is something amiss?”

“No. I don't think so. I just don't remember there being this much… activity the last time I was here. The place was more like a town than a city. I wonder what has changed.”

“Well, there's more people.” Mathis said simply.

Haverson raised an eyebrow and saw the older man grinning.

“Come on. If there was something wrong we would hear the warning bells, or there would be soldiers.” Mathis pointed out. “There's another gate.” Mathis said pointing.

The massive mound upon which Mellont sat was nearly four stories and rose rather sharply from the basin surrounding it. On top of this already natural defense, the Potentate and civil guard of Mellont had raised walls, but this had been many decades ago, and ill-repair had reduced most of the stone fortifications. Thus, the emerging holes had been filled with rubble, or cobble, or in some places where the neglect had lead to major collapses, wood beams.

“Sure seen better days...” Mathis noted, but Haverson quieted him as they got closer to the smaller gate. “We don't know what the mood is in the city. Lets be nice shall we?”

When they summited the rise, after several quick minutes of panting, they were apalled to find another line, snaking around in the shadow of the gate. It looked like their change of gate had some advantage though, everyone in this entrance was on foot, the gate being too small for most carts.

“Have your packs out for inspection!” One of the guards shouted. “A toll of one copper coin for entering the city, one silver coin for trade and one gold coin for wagons. Don't try to hide your trade goods, we know all the tricks!” He said.

“Hmm. Seems the potentate has come up with some ideas on how to revitalize the city. I'm sure no one is too happy about it though. Most people live outside the city here!” Haverson noted.

“Outside the city? Really?” Mathis said, surprised.

“There is no real concern about attack from the southerners like there is in the other Northern cities, and we've been at peace with the Fartherners for generations. There's no need for the walls of this city.”

“Its just strange to me. I grew up in the city and spent most of my life in them.”

“Have you ever been to the South?” Haverson asked.

“Once or twice for business. They don't really like my kind though. They're quick to hastle you for gold when they learn you're a Northern merchant.”

“Then you saw their cities? Disgusting right?”

“Yes. Now that you bring it up, I was quite apalled. Even Merrin's Ford is clean by comparison. There is something to be said for our guard system.”

The man at the gate shouted out some more orders.

“That being said...”

After several minutes of waiting, it was finally their turn.

The guard eyed them up and down.

“What are you two in town for? Aren't you a little old to be traveling by yourselves?” The gaurdsman said rudely.

“Aren't you a little young to be standing guard? I would have figured you would be off playing make believe or suckling at your mother's tit.” Mathis responded acidly.

Damn! Did the merchant have to be so dismissive? He had just warned him to watch his mouth!

“Careful old man. We have the right to turn away anyone we want from the city for whatever reason. Whats in that box?”

Mathis and Haverson looked at one another. How did they answer that?

After a second of suspicious shrugging, they couldn't think of an acceptable white lie so Mathis took the initiative.

“Actually,” he said, his voice lowering, “if you must know, this is in some ways a funeral procession. I'm taking my daughter to my family's ancestral home to be buried.”

Haverson was careful not to react in any way. He could tell that the guard was scrutinizing them carefully.

“Hmm. I'm not sure I'm inclined to believe that. You two look out of sorts. I wouldn't be surprised if you two were just some old fogies those merchants hired to get through the gate without paying the toll. Open the box!”

Mathis looked alarmed. And took a step back, still clutching the coffin.

Shit. This was turning sour fast.

“Sir. I'm sorry for my companion's behavior, but what he says is true. My nephew died in a horrible accident. I wouldn't open the box if I were you.”

By this point, the people behind them were starting to get impatient.

“Just open the damn box or pay the toll already!” One of them yelled. “I've got places to be!”

“Even if its possible you're telling the truth, I'm inclined to agree with the people in line.” The guard said with a sneer. “Just pay the toll and I'll let you go.”

Haverson scowled. “But its true!” He protested.

Mathis shook his head. “Its no use,” he said, sighing. “I suppose we'll just have to pay the toll.”

He very carefully set the coffin down and rooted through his coin purse to find coins small enough to use for the toll. Haverson was careful to cover the line of sight as Mathis did so. He had noticed that the merchant had a certain dismissiveness when money was concnered. No doubt it came from his well endowed fortune, but Haverson knew that such things caught eyes easily. It was better if no one knew.

Mathis finally pulled the correct change from the bag and handed it to the guard indignantly.

The guard, took the coins and gave the door a good kick until it stayed open behind him.

“Welcome to Mellont. Enjoy your stay.” He said with the grin. Neither of the two men returned the gesture.

They stepped into Mellont and Mathis was immediately struck by its difference from other cities he had been to. He glanced around at the three story tall buildings, many of which had boarded up windows. Since they entered through a smaller gate it obviously had put them into a smaller street, but even in the worst areas of Merrin's Ford the buildings burst with people. Here it seemed like there were none.

“Is it usually this empty?” he asked. “There certainly were people trying to get in. Where did everyone go?”

Haverson shrugged, but kept an eye out for people.

“It shouldn't be too hard to find the market.” Haverson said, stroking his chin, where several days of beard had started to grow. “I suppose we just follow the road until we get to a larger one.”

That seemed like as good a plan as any, so they started walking.

The buildings loomed around them, but it was an empty presence, as if you could almost tell they were unoccupied. At one time the city would have been quite cheery. As opposed to Illithar's stately avenues, and Dor's Crag's purposeful stone buildings, the roads in Mellont turned and jutted back and forth sporatically. But unlike Merrin's Ford, where just constructions were usually the work and indication of illegal activity, here it looked like the streets had always been like that.

The buildings were certainly not impressive, but at one time they would have held a certain character. They mostly had a lose stone base and extended up into wood constructions that went usually three stories. Unlike Swan though, no two buildings looked the same. There was no attempt to mirror the neighboring buildings, and curious angles and flourishes spouted from the most unlikely places.

Haverson had to stop for a moment as he came to one stretch of the road, perhaps in a formerly better part of town where one of the houses had a wooden tower built into its side. Rising up four stories, it was crowned at the top with a tiny conical roof, as if imitating the fortifications of the Southern cities or some battlemage's lab.

Mathis and Haverson traded expressions, but kept on moving. From far away, much further into the center of the city they could make out a loud collection of people, which they presumed was the market, although they had no real proof.

The neighborhood changed again. They were now larger and at least tried to maintain a straight road between them. Grass ran rampant in the stones, but it had a kind of mantained look as if someone might actually look after it once and a while. Off to the sides, the door stoops were now consistant of large well crafted but weathered stone blocks, and the houses themselves, grew a bit larger.

“Look at that. These buildings are painted!” Mathis said, pointing to the buildings as they passed.

And so they were. Pale yellows and reds, some brown and purple. If they had been in their prime this place would have been hard to look upon, but time had wrought its effect on the colors and they had faded drastically. They also encountered more people, most decently dressed, if poor.

“This would have been pretty garish in its time.” Mathis pointed out. “Some of the merchant paint their houses the color of their crests, but this is taking it a bit too far I think. How can they afford all that paint?” he wondered.

“Well, its been awhile since any of them buildings were painted. Its its current state, I suppose its a bit sad really. A constant reminder of a better time.” Haverson said morosely.

“Hmm. I think its comforting for some reason. Better than the damn green fascade I have to look at next to me back in Dor's Crag.”

“What green is that?” Haverson asked as a group of children went running, laughing past them.

“Patriarch Childebert's lovely custom built monstrosity.” Mathis complained. “You would think that the late man would have had some sense. He was such a rigid cold man, but I suppose he wanted the people to be impressed. He tried to build a place similar to my estate, but couldn't hire the right architects and ended up with something hideous. Or at least in my opinion.” Mathis added.

“Hmm.” Haverson said, thinking of how far removed such worries were from an adventurer.

“One moment. Wasn't your entire house dark red?” Haverson asked as they walked past a bakery. The shopkeep looked up tiredly and half heartedly tried to encourage them to buy something.

Realizing that they hadn't eaten since breakfast, the two actually decided to come in.

The shopkeep was just as surprised as they were.

“Ah, w-wonderful… misters.” he looked confused at the two, trying to figure out what kind of customers they were, scrutinizing their age and came back perplexed by Mathis. The man had some sort of noble look to him, but his clothing was completely at odds with that. And there was the matter of the massive box he held.

“Err. There should be something coming out of the oven just now actually.” The shopkeep stammered as they stepped inside. The heat of the oven in the back of the building reached out into the open are at the front of the store. Behind the counter, which looked seldom used, a large industrial area lined with some sort of concrete and the half dozen or so people who also looked up, surprised indicated that this was probably a community oven.

“We're not looking for anything complicated. Whats coming out?” Haverson asked, suddenly thinking back to his childhood, when his brother used to get in trouble stealing loaves. A sad smile graced his lips.

“Its a local variety.” The shopkeep said, still trying to place them. Finally giving up, he shrugged. “I don't know what you're used to, but you might find the grain a bit coarse. But the grain was probalby only milled the week before, and I assure you, we make some of the best bread in town!” The shop keep managed, picking up some steam, before apologizing to slip behind the counter and check on the status of the bread.

Mathis took the smells of the bakery in. As he did so, his stomach grumbled. He looked sheepishly at Haverson. “I suppose I'm used to a rather rich diet.” He admitted.

The shop keep came back with a steaming large circular bun.

“How much for it?” Mathis asked.

“Oh you want the whole thing?” The shop keep said, before seeming to realize that he might have just talked potential buyers out of a sale. It was clear he didn't negotiate very often.

“Well, we've been traveling all morning” Mathis added, “… if it wouldn't be too much trouble.”

“Of course!” The shop keep managed. He and Mathis then conferred on a price.

Apparently their arrival had excited the shop keep since he threw in a small basket to hold the bread in while it cooled.

Mathis, apparently amused by the parochial and simple act of buying bread, said nothing but stifled a bewildered grin as he took the basket in hand and promised to tell others about the bakery.

“I take it you don't get out much in the Crag?” Haverson asked.

“No. You guessed right.” Mathis said, quickly slipping off his gloves, revealing well manicured hands, and slipped his gloves into a pocket.

He descended quickly on the loaf as they walked.

“Ansalom did most of the shopping for the house. I deal with transactions of much large quantity usually.” He said, holding the loaf with one hand and tearing off large pieces of the steaming flaky bread with his teeth.

“Damn, I try to eat trail rations even when I'm in the city, but by the gods that looks good. Any chance you could save some for me?”

Mathis looked at his companion and blushed. “Ha. One or two days out of the refinements of my normal life and I've turned feral!” he laughed and offered Haverson the loaf.

“Oh, what do you want me to pay for it?” Haverson asked, also ripping off chunks.

“I told you already,” Mathis said, “this is my expedition. I pay for things.”

Haverson didn't have any problem with that.

“So what now?” Mathis said, shifting the coffin from shoulder to shoulder before giving up and sitting down on a stoop. Haverson followed him.

“Well, we need supplies for the desert. I haven't gone on an expedition like this since I went up far north, and that was a good amount of people. Having just us two is almost suicide.”

Mathis's face darkened as he looked out from the street they were sitting on the side of.

“Well we've made it all the way here so far. What would we have to do from here on?” He asked, suppressing a scowl.

“Ha. We're still in good lands Mathis. The desert is going to be unreal. If this were for any other reason I would say we needed at least five other people, and that would only be if two of them knew the area and with a map.”

“Hmm. So what are we going to do?” Mathis asked. “Couldn't we just… you know, travel, like we've been doing?”

Haverson raised an eyebrow.

“Traveling along a road is way different from going off into the unknown.”

“The desert is not unknown. Elves have lived there for… well… since there was a desert, and before that!” Mathis protested.

Haverson threw up his hands. “Thats a good point. I would feel much better if we could find an elven guide.”

They looked around. There was no one in the street, human or elf. “Do you recall seeing any when we came in?” mathis asked.

“No. They're a rare bunch to be sure. Although if they were in any human town it would be here or the fort.”

Mathis nodded. “Why don't we check out the market? We need other supplies, right?”

“Yes. We're going to need a wagon and animals of some sort… hmm. Actually I'm not sure...” haverson thought to himself. “I don't know a huge amount about desert travel. I know we might need as much as 5 gallons for each of us, but with your armor and the weight added by carrying that water everything changes...” Haverson now started scowling himself.

Mathis looked at him expectantly. “We've got to keep moving right? You said yourself, we have no idea how long the spell lasts, and after it...”

Haverson thought for a moment, gesturing in the air and sometimes trying to mark things on the ground. Finally though he gave up in frustruation.

“I'm sorry.” he said. “I just don't know Mathis. I realize that we need to keep moving, but there's just too many variables.”

“Hold on a moment. You know the adventuring side of things but we need someone who knows the area. I would guess that person would be at the market as well maybe? This is a logistics problem. This is my area of expertise.”

“Its possible.” Haverson admitted. “At the very least its a start.”

Mathis got to his feet.

“Hold on a moment.” Haverson said, looking at the coffin.

“We're going to have some trouble with that. The shop keep at the bakery and the guard were all weirded out by it, and whether they identify it as a coffin or not, it raises some undesirable questions. Perhaps we should rent a room for the night.”

“But...” Mathis looked at the coffin with… fear? Mathis stared at the coffin as if he could see through it, his face becoming grave. “I don't want anything to happen to… it. ” He said, perhaps more softly than he imagined.

“I-I understand.” Haverson said awkwardly. “We can get a nicer place somewhere. Someplace with a sturdy door and no windows. And a lock. No one will touch it. You're paying right?” he said with a grin.

Mathis did return the grin, but Haverson felt like it was lacking a bit. Well it was worth an attempt.

So they walked around for a bit, walking up and down the streets, sometimes asking the other people milling around the city for recommendations.

Finally they decided on a place who reputation they liked and got direction to it as well. It was for out of city merchants, but it wasn't the extravagant over the top type place that Mathis might have stayed had he come to the city on business.

After a few minutes and some wrong turns, they found the place and rented a room, making sure the door locked and that everything looked above grade.

Haverson unlike his companion, was satisfied when he turned away from the door and waited for Mathis to remove his armor. The man made it clear that it was only to be used to carry the coffin, and Haverson wasn't going to argue the point. Who knows what rumors would spread if someone found that a merchant patriarch was walking around the city in gold armor? They would never be able to do anything again, or they'd get killed. Or both.

Mathis came out of the room and locked the door behind him. He came out wearing completely different clothing. The ragged over garments that the merchant had been using to hide his ridiculous set or armor had been replaced with a loose fitting brown shirt, a simple pair of cloth pants and tall boots. He wore a jacket over the whole thing, but it was of a type of leather that made it look somewhat unfinished.

“Huh, so you know better than to go out there with flashy clothes.” Haverson noted, agreeing with the nondescript choices.

“I knew we wouldn't want to attract attention. Also, these aren't mine… I don't actually own any clothes like this. Ethalia was causing some trouble so Ansalom just packed one of his outfits.” He said suddenly not making eye contact with Haverson as if he were embarrassed by his wealth.

Whatever Haverson had thought about the wealthy merchant families, this was not it. Perhaps it was the situation they were in, but Haverson certainly had not expected someone this self aware, or this humble.

“I shouldn't have to remind you to keep track of your things, especially the key and whatever coin you brought. Mellont isn't known for thieves, but anythings possible in a crowd, and this city has changed a fair bit since I was here.”

They exited into the street and headed towards the market.

“Ah, I had forgotten about this.” Haverson said as they approached the entrance into the massive open space at the center of the city. Where normally a civil building, or a keep or some other building of importance would have normally stood, instead there was simply a huge open area, cobbled and with several non working fountains of middling artistic quality.

“Oh. I actually remember this.” Mathis said. “A long, long time ago when I came here once on my way to the desert. But it wasn't like this. It was… larger, right?” he scratched his beard and kicked at some of the grass growing in between the cobblestones.

“I remember… laughter… there was some sort of traveling group and all the children were watching them.” he said, gesturing to a sunken depression on one side of which there was a stage. The pillars that delineated the space form the rest of the square had fallen year ago and were just starting to get covered with ivy which had crawled over the wall from someone's yard.

“Oh, its all changed.” Mathis said.

And it had. Besides the features that they had already seen, the market was larger but somehow more impersonal than the last time Haverson had been here.

The last time, they had been on their way back from the fort, and they had the elf with them. Everyone had been sad at the turn of events and the market had gone a long way in cheering them all up, even Aster.

If only he knew where that strange elf had gone afterward. He might have been able to help them. If Haverson recalled correctly, he had a marvelous magic bag that would have made crossing the desert much easier.

The tents of the market was all festive with their different colors, but the merchants all shouted with loud voices to get people's attention, and there was none of the feeling that the place had the last time. There had been something quiet, and cheerful about the way the vendors had smiled when you walked by, politely asking if you would like to see more. Now a myriad of hands grasped out from ragged tents all trying to greedly entice the people to see more. This was especially strange because the main focus of the market seemed to have changed to be almost purely agricultural.

“It looks like we may have some trouble after all. All of this is farm goods. Who is buying all of this?” Mathis asked, before letting out a small exclaim and ducking behind Haverson.

“What on earth?” Haverson asked, not quite believing such childish behavior from the old man.

“Hold still. That man in the green. He's one of Childebert's men. He does procurement but he knows my face. We don't want him to see me.”

Haverson mumbled back some reply and excited a shop keeper by pretending to browse some vegetables while the man went by. There was a small group of shop keeps following him, all talking at once. Haverson got the impression that the green clad man was about to get a very good deal on whatever he was buying, but he didn't like the mischievous grin on the man's face.

Thankfully he passed quickly, allowing them to make their away from the upset vegetable peddler and onward towards what they were really looking for.

At the end of the day, the met back up and compared what they had been able to scavenge. They had successfully been able to acquire large waterskins, a better compass than the one they had brought, scarves, and shawls for the sand and when it got cold during the night. Pack animals had been a tougher proposition. It seemed that they were in massively high demand to both work on and transport the goods of the many farms in the areas. They simply couldn't find any sellers in the time they spent.

They had also gotten some tips about possible guides and one mapmaker. Unfortunately, when it had come time to actually find these guides, it seemed like they were all either long gone, either dead or had left the city at one point or another. The only good lead on a guide was one whose estranged wife said that he had absconded with his lover to Fort Erengar.

“Well we got some of what we needed. But the lack of a guide and pack animals is distressing. Both of those things are, in my mind, crucial to our ability to even start into the desert. At least we can find that Mapmaker. The sun is still up. We might catch him while he is still in.” Haverson said as the two walked in the direction that had been suggested.

Mathis nodded. “As much as my heart tells me to simply just keep walking, I know it would be a death sentence. And that wouldn't help any one. But I have been thinking about our supplies and how much water we will need off of your numbers. I think I have half an idea of some of the numbers. I will need estimates of the time it will take to go from the closest point of 'civilized' land to our destination.”

“Hmm, and I certainly can't give you that. I believe Searcher said that the cleric was located on the fell itself. That makes it easy enough to find, but do we stop at Ankhsomar? Would the elves help us, or stop us?”

“As I have said, I have been there before. But if my memories and knowledge are worth anything we will get no help from the elves past perhaps supplies. They care about nothing now, not even themselves.” Mathis said with a bit of sadness.

“I see.” Haverson said. “By the way, why exactly were you in Ankhsomar? You said yourself that its basically a dead place.”

Mathis shook his head. “It is. But it was not always. The decay or whatever you want to call it, of the elves took some years, and a long time ago, decades, it was still possible to find some who wanted contact with the outside world, who still wanted to live. I was there for… business.” Mathis said, glancing quickly back at Haverson.

They followed the winding, and at times, even unpaved roads, steadily growing more and more confused.

“Didn't we just come from here?” Mathis asked, looking around at the intersections. “I swear some of the buildings look familiar.”

“Its hard to tell. I've only been here a couple of times and each time I didn't stay long enough to remember the layout. If this were Illithar or Merrin's Ford or even Swan, I could tell you with certainty, but here I just as knowledgeable as you.”

“Wait.” Mathis said, pointing at a building in the distance. “I definitely remember that one. The one with the tower? We saw that one on the way in.”

“I suppose you're right, unless there are two buildings with such strange constructions. But that would mean that we've turned around...” Haverson looked around more closely. “We must be approaching it from the opposite direction.”

They winded through the network of houses and alleys until they once again found themselves staring at the strange house.

A small sign outside the building said: “Quentin's Maps, Antiques and Oddities” Under that, it had a picture of a rolled up map and a musical instrument.

Mathis and Haverson looked at each other and frowned.

“How could we have missed this? We even stopped to look at this building when we came in. I don't remember seeing that sign out there. I thought this was just some odd house.”

Haverson shrugged. “Maybe he was out, and the sign wasn't there when we passed.”

Mathis shrugged as well and walked up to the door and gave it a knock.

The sound echoed on the inside as I the interior was one large open area.

The two of them waited a few moments. Mathis tried again.

It was only on the third time that they heard footsteps approaching the door.

An old man about Mathis's age opened the door a crack.

“Sorry, who is this?” The man asked, not opening the door any farther.

“You don't know us.” Haverson said, “But we heard you were a mapmaker?” He added.

“Yes, yes. Is there anyone else in the street?” The man asked.

Haverson looked up and down. “Uh, yeah, some children down at the end… but why...”

“That fine.” The man said, opening the door. “Please come in.” He said, walking further into the building.

Mathis and Haverson were a bit put off by the strange request but followed the other man into the house.

As they thought, the house was almost one large room, books and shelves were piled as far as the eye could see. Interspersed among the stacks were faded armchairs and a few desks, always covered with parchment or items. Every so often instead of books, curiosities poked out from the piles, mostly instruments, but one or two weapons and on one of the walls was a very exotic set of ancient armor.

Making the area even stranger, there were two depressions built into the floor, so that one had to watch their step moving around the collection. At the center of the first there was a fireplace, with a massive incomplete map. The other simply had a rock collection.

Off in the back Haverson could make out what could have been a kitchen. There was no sign of a bed or any sleeping arrangements, or a bathroom. However, there was a stair case that went both up and down that most likely led to the second floor and perhaps eventually the tower.

“This is quite the collection!” Mathis said, impressed. “It positively dwarfs my collection...” Haverson elbowed him in the side. An adventurer wouldn't have a collection of books unless he were a traveling peddler, and ones that sold books were very rare and usually only frequented the capitols.

“What was that?” The other man asked, finally sitting down in an area that was the most cleared of items. There was a chouch and a chair next to one another and the man motioned them towards the couch.

But Mathis was too impressed to keep silent for long.

“Is that a map of the whole world?” he asked, bypassing the couch, and approaching the unfinished masterpiece.

“It is. It was the efforts of nearly half my life.” The man added. “Although I'm sure that by now the military has many of such maps.”

“You made this?” Mathis asked, incredously. The map was made out fo many tiles, such that it look like it was completed in sections. On first glance it would have seemed that one person or group had made each section. But a more interesting feature of the map was its minute detail.

Mathis took a step closer. Every inlet every hill seemed to be represented. The style was not what you would consider luxurious or even clean: blotches of spilled ink, weather damage and other blemishes covered areas, but by in large, Mathis could not remember ever having seen such detail.

“So you are familiar with maps?” The man asked. “You might want to be careful with that one. Its one of a kind and I would hate for anything to happen to it. Why don't you come over here so we can talk about what I can help you with? That old thing is no use to any one. Thella says she gets sick looking at it sometimes. Its grotesque isn't it?”

Mathis was going to protest, but Haverson wave him over.

“Yes, um, Quentin is it?” The other man nodded.

“Quite frankly, we are conducting an expedition into the desert and we have need of a guide of the area. Although a map would be second best.” haverson explained as Mathis joined him on the couch.

“The desert!” Quentin said, surprised. “What could compel two individuals, especially those of your age to consider such a mad task? You should hire someone to do it for you. Even I gave in and have an apprentice now. If its artifacts you're after, I can assure you, there are easier ways to get them. I have a few myself around here somewhere...” He said, his eyes searching piles.

“No.” Haverson said simply. “This is a task we have to do ourselves. And we do have to go into the desert. Do you have any maps of that region.”

The man placed his hands together and thought.

“It has been such a long time since someone came in here for maps of such an interesting place. Sometimes I still get prospectors or settlers looking for far off areas, but mostly its people looking for instruments these days, or looking to 'borrow' books.” Quentin said with a laugh. But then his eyes, narrowed.

“I will be honest with you, especially since you are going to such an exotic place. I have no idea of your intentions. Forgive me, but these maps of mine have been used for the most horrendous things. I really do need to know why would are going into such a place. Surely it can't be to speak with the elves. They have fallen silent years ago.”

Mathis looked at Haverson.

Would the man commiserate or laugh at their quest. Would he think them mad men? Would he think them necromancers? It was known that every so often a mage would try to bring the dead back to life. Some even succeeded, but the results were always horrible abominations.

Mathis looked like he was thinking, scratching his now not so trimmed beard.

“Well, err, we have to get deep into the desert. He have a task that has some time limit to it. Its not just research or pilfering! There is life or death associated with our task.”

But if anything, this caused Quentin to narrow his eyes even further.

“Life or death you say? Where have I heard that before?” He looked at Haverson. “You know. There's something familiar about you that I can't place… Something that doesn't stick well with me.” He leaned forward.

Mathis took a chance.

Haverson suddenly heard Mathis cry something in a beautiful language, that clearly was not common. The words slipped past themselves, and there was a refinement to it that made it sound more like poetry than words. Perhaps it was poetry.

Quentin stopped in his tracks and asked a question in the language. Haverson had to assume that they were speaking Elvish, but he couldn't say he had ever heard it spoken, there just weren't any languages that sounded like that.

The two argued for a bit, Haverson growing concerned, when they both started raising their voices.

Finally though, Mathis backed down and said something that almost sounded like a confession.

Whatever it was, it completely silenced the other man.

“Well, you could have just said that.” Quentin said softly. “Of course I will help you.”

“Excuse me, but what did you just talk about?” Haverson asked

Quentin went to answer, but Mathis intruppted him. “I had to tell him what the true nature of our journey was. I believe he is now much more receptive to helping us?” Mathis said, frowning at the other man.

Quentin held up his hands. “I apologize, I apologize. I didn't know. Its just… when you do work for the millitary for so long, you start to hate what you've worked on...” he said, sliding off into silence as his eyes met Haverson.

Haverson didn't get this response very often, but when he did, he had to assume it was because they somehow knew him from his previous life, when he dashed from shadow to shadow, leaving nothing but silence and the bodies of his enemies.

“But I think I can help you. Unlike you, I have no desire to die in the desert, for I do believe your goal is unobtainable, so I can not be your guide, but that doesn't mean I won't help you.”

He got up without looking at Haverson and walked over to a pile of large pieces of parchment and rooted through it.

“Thella?!” He shouted in the direction of the stairs. “Do you know where I left the maps of the desert?”

There was a moment of silence, but then a woman's voice came down the stairs. “They're on the second desk, right where they've always been. Do you need me to find them? I'm working on something.”

“No, no” He responded, shaking his head with a slight grin. He looked at Mathis. “She's a good assistant and quite precocious for her age. Its a good thing too. A couple more years and it'd be all gone up here.” He said, touching his head. “I didn't think about what would happen to all this when I was gone.” He waved his hand around at the piles of junk. “But she's shown a real aptitude for...”

He paused for a moment and scrutinized the maps he was going through. “These aren't the right ones Thella! I wanted the ones of the fell. These are of the Southern desert!”

There was another pause.

“Who wants maps of the fell? No one goes there.” The voice asked.

“It's none of your business. Just tell me where the maps are.” Quentin yelled back hoarsely. He smiled at Mathis though. “She's a bit strong willed but all the better. I want my apprentice to be just as big of a pain in the ass to the community as I am… Ah here we are.”

He lifted out three sheets of parchment and carefully turned them over.

“So these two will get you to the fell and to Ankhsomar if you wanted to. They're from about ten years ago, but they should still be good. There's all the major ruins, but I notice that there's really only one source of water on the way there…” He turned to the last one. “So this one is of the land before the war.”

“Before the war?! How can there be a map that old? Surely you didn't draw it!” Haverson exclaimed.

Quentin turned to Haverson with a scowl. “No, I didn't draw it. I bought it off of one of the elven emissaries.”

Mathis looked up. “Emissaries?”

“Indeed. Until about two years, the elves used to send a group of their own across the desert from Ankhsomar. I never knew why they did it. Perhaps they just wanted information. Being one of the only people in the city who could speak elven, I usually had to translate for the potentate.”

“And what did you learn from them?” Mathis asked.

Quentin sighed. “Nothing that you probably don't know already. Their spirit is crushed, totally and completely. They worship their own sorrow and every waking moment is spent as part of increasingly bizarre and arcane rituals towards their own grief. The last emissary seem very… out of it. Perhaps he had trouble leaving the desert, or had some other injury I couldn't get out of him, because as soon as he related his information, he just walked off into the North, in the middle of a storm.”

“Oh, that’s a foul turn. But you're right. That is not altogether unexpected. At the very least, it is a shame, for it might have been possible to speak to one if he were here now.”

But Quentin shook his head. “Like I said, they haven't come in two years. However, a word of warning, the last one's behavior may have had something to do with the desert in addition to the wretched state of their people. He spoke of unnatural things and beasts that wander the desert, especially at night. He said some of the old ruins you can use as shelter, but others of them are cursed. He also related to me the location of this water source here, although he seemed vague about what it actually was.” Quentin pointed to the location on the map.

Mathis and Haverson studied the map for a long time while Quentin went upstairs to check on Thella's work.

“Well. According to your numbers, and the scale on this map, it should be possible to get to the fell with only that one water source. That assumes we go in with pack animals and don't get lost. There aren't many landmarks until we get almost halfway through the desert.” Haverson noted.

“Well, the fell itself should help some of that. Its massive right? We should be able to see it far off for days. But you're right, at the beginning we'll have to conserve our water and stay on course. Any idea on how to do that?” Mathis asked.

“Oh, of course, we can navigate by the sun during the day and the stars at night. We got a compass so I should be able to figure it out.”

Mathis nodded.

“This task is looking slightly less impossible now.” Haverson declared.

“It was never impossible to begin with.” Mathis stated seriously, drawing away from the table. “In fact it is the opposite of impossible, it is required.” He reminded Haverson.

Haverson nodded as Quentin came down with a young child. She had wavy reddish brown hair which she had elected to cut firaly short, bucking the current fashion from Illithar. Freckles covered the bridge of her nose, but her cheeks were covered with ink stains, possibly from itching with ink covered hands. She wore a simple tan cloth dress which she had for some reason, covered with a darker brown vest.

The girl must have been in her early teens, but displayed none of the cuatiousness that someone her age should have.

“Who are these people?” She asked, pointing to Mathis and Haverson. “Are these the fools who want to go into the desert.”

“Yes, although I would appreciate it if you didn't call my customers fools. I apologize Mathis.” Quentin said.

“Well, its true. Anyone who wants to go into that place is an idiot.” The child contemplated for a moment. “But perhaps there is an opportunity here as well. Can I go with them? There are many parts to that desert that not even you have mapped.” She said, waving to the unfinished map on the mantle.

Quentin shook his head. “Absolutely not. I need you to copy these maps that these men had opted to take, especially this old one, here.” then looking at them, “I hope you don't mind that I'll be giving you a copy of these. Reliable maps for this area are almost non-existant, and I still don't place much faith in your ability to get through. Hells, the elf who last came said he started out with a full group, but he was the only one who made it to Mellont.”

Mathis and Haverson looked at one another but knew nothing would dissuade them.

“Fine. We will take copies. How much do you want for them?” Mathis asked.

Quentin looked up. “It is two hundred gold each for the new maps, and six hundred for the old one.”

Haverson grabbed the chair for support. “One thousand gold in total! Gods, there is no way! One could buy oneself a decent amount of land and a house for that! You could like comfortably for the rest of your life for that amount of money! We don't have anything close to that!” Haverson gasped.

“Well, I'm sorry. I'm not going to indirectly fund your mad venture. Even if it is for a good reason.” He said. “You have to pay full price, and there are no other maps like this in existence as far as I know. To be honest I am giving you a deal. If you were associated with the military I would double the cost.” He said eyeing Haverson.

“Quentin. I respect the help you've given us, but that simply is too much. Have you ever had a single customer who has paid that much for a map in all your years as a cartographer?”

“Well, its three maps! And one of them is ancient!” Thella argued. Quentin didn't reproach her. Mathis wondered if bringing the child down was a negotiating tactic.

The mapmaker and the merchant argued back and forth about the relative value of the maps, their usefulness, equivalent pricings and such for a good half hour, all the while the conversation got more and more heated. Thella and Haverson mostly were silent.

Finally, Mathis loomed tall for a moment. “Listen.” he boomed suddenly. “We have no time for your tricks or your deceitful attempt to gut us of money. I told you our task in good faith map maker. I refuse to believe that, with that knowledge, you would require so much from us. Think of what is at stake: a life!”

At first it looked like Quentin might concede, for his grabbed his long beard and stroked it, looking at Thella who smirked at them, to the rest of his belongings.

“No.” Quentin said finally.

“Sir!” Mathis protested.

“Now listen here merchant!” Quentin said, moving to to directly oppose Mathis. “I have given my services for fifty years. I have built the largest and most complete collection of cartographic information short of the capitol itself. And I will not lie, I know my time on this earth is limited. I have built my collection, the task I must do now is make sure it finds its way to the right owner.” He looked at Thella. “And to get started you need money. You say your quest is to save a life. Mine is as well. For you now hold the future of not one, but two girls in your hands.” he said defiantly.

For once, Thella was speechless, and honestly looked quite dumbfounded. She stared at the old mapmaker as if she hadn't heard him correctly.

Mathis bared his teeth and clenched his fists. Haverson was still so dumbfounded by the amount of money requested that he didn't interject.

“Fine. I will pay your price. But I hope to never see your face again. To think I thought you an elf-friend.” Mathis said with contempt.

Haverson's eyes widened as he saw Mathis reach into his clothing and pull out a massive bag of coin.

“Mathis! He only asked for so much because he knew you had it! This is madness!” Haverson said, finally speaking.

Mathis shook his head. “If money is all I have to sacrifice to get Aster back, then so be it. You shall have your money!” He said furiously, spilling the bag onto the table. Quentin did not react, but Thella's eyes widened and she let out a shocked squeak, running to pick up the scattering gold pieces.

Mathis grabbed the maps. “And I'm taking the originals. Have your student draw you new ones. I'm sure your memory hasn't deteriorated; you should still be able to remake these. As for the ancient one? You are not worthy of it.” He said before turning suddenly and making for the doorway.

“Damn you merchant! You dare say I am no elf-friend? I know what you did!” Quentin said, shaking his fist, but didn't get any closer to them. Then, a sudden thought ran across the old man's face.

“And I hope this one here tells you a bit about himself! He's a murderer Mathis elf-friend!” Quentin spat.

Mathis and Haverson left the building, which Mathis closed with a hearty slam of the door. They went straight back to their inn room to make plans. Although negotiations had not gone well, all they needed was the animals now and they could start into the desert.

They didn't talk as the hour grew late. Haverson looked across the hallway through his open door as he fixed the blade on his sword. The merchant could be heard fuming in the other room, but after the sun truly set he could be heard weeping slightly through the door.

“Well. We have our pack animals.” Haverson said, patting the Donkey they had purchased. “Or animal if it were.” he said with a wry smile. It had proven impossible to purchase more than one pack animal. And Mathis had to fork over a massive amount of money to obtain it and the wagon it was attached to.

This and the setback yesterday had set him fuming, and he merely grumbled back.

“Insane these Mellont farmers! They would be called to court for trying to manipulate such prices in the capitol.” He said darkly.

“At least it looks healthy,” Haverson said, taking a good look at the animal for the first time. “Did you catch its name?”

Typically, Haverson knew that you had to inspect animals very closely, and that the purchase of one was a matter of monumental importance. He had learned many of the skills from his father as he had explained how to properly run a farm. However, it had been a long time since Haverson had required such skills. He typically lived out of his pack, and he could usually carry that himself. And he sometimes ventured into such places that not even the most hearty donkey would venture.

Haverson ran his hand over the animal's coat and looked for spots. Mathis continued grumbling, ignoring the question.

“I could have gotten a whole team of donkeys, and the hands to run them for this price Haverson! Look at the beast, its barely as tall as you!”

Haverson grinned at bit. “Ha. You're right. I suppose we did get gypped. But honestly, he was the one one of them who was selling, Mathis… Ah I think the donkey's name was Lubber!” The donkey responded a bit to its name.

Mathis threw up his hands. “You think that was a coincidence? Someone caught word that we were looking and they all agreed on it ahead of time. You think I don't know their tricks?”

Haverson was taken aback. Northern dealings were usually above the table. The very concept that they could have pulled such a move shocked Haverson.

“Surely they didn't do that!” He said as they walked, Mellont receeding slowly behind them.

“And why wouldn't it be possible? I had heard that Mellont was in a bit of a pinch, but this is much worse than I suspected.” Mathis spat. “The whole city aught to have been abandoned when the elves destroyed it. Whole thing is a rotten crock of shit.” He added for emphasis, spitting again.

“I feel like your viewpoint is a rather subjective one.” Haverson said, a small unexplainable grin on his face even after both of their setbacks.

“This whole half of the country is rotten.” Mathis growled, looking at the donkey in disgust. “Its usefulness is far over. If northern leadership had negotiated with the southerns we wouldn’t have had to rely on such an uncultured.. backwater! Yes. It would have been much better. We could have gotten our grain from the lands around Swan and the capitol, traded with the lowlands and the Shani.”

“I realize that you disagree with how the deals go, and gods know, I've never seen that much gold trade hands in my life, but aren't you being a bit harsh?”

Mathis shook his head. “Do you know the difference between them and us?” He said, presumably referring to the eastern citites. “Who came up with the laws? Us. Who defends them in times of war? Us. Who keeps the roads maintenance and negotiates with the Shani and the Fartherners? Us! They sit here in their fallow land, their hands idle and their stomachs full. None of them has ever spent a day in a mine I would imagine.”

This was a side of Mathis Haverson hadn't seen before, and wasn't quite sure how he should respond. His relationship with the other man seemed to have been getting better, but now he wasn't too sure.

“They provide a massive amount of grain I thought. Didn't you say that as we approached the city?” Haverson asked.

“That is true, but has more to do with their lands than the people. There was a reason Old Mellont and Adze were destroyed in the war Haverson. Most of the horror inflicted upon the elves came from these seemingly pastoral people. When you live in such a manner, you get lazy. It becomes easier to imagine taking things rather than earning them through effort.”

Haverson shrugged. Obviously the other man had some sort of long standing dislike of the people from Mellont. Haverson knew better than to say anything, and the morning went past quickly.

At about midday, as the road finished winding its way through hills and the land around them started to become rocky and forest grew up around them, they came across a man on the side of the road.

They had passed many people in the morning, but none of any consequence. This man however, wore bring red robes, impossible to miss against the green and brown of the road and the forest.

“Hello there!” The man called out the them specifically.

Haverson looked around to see if the strangely dressed man was calling to someone else. Mathis's eye narrowed as he watched the man.

“Yes you two venerable gentlemen! I have an intriguing set of ware and I believe you might be very interested in them.”

Haverson was about to respond but Mathis shook his head. “No thank you. We have to time to stop. Good day.”

His body language suggested that Haverson continue on with him.

When they were out of hearing range Haverson asked why they didn't see what the man wanted.

“Ha! You are as naive in the land of the merchant as I am in the land of the adventurer. Did you see any group of people around that man? It is clear he thinks himself some alchemist or hedge wizard with those robes, but I saw no people buying his wares. In fact quite the opposite. The people walking past him were shaking their heads. This man is likely a con-artist that is well known to the locals.”

“Hmm. You think? Good observation. I would have probably emptied my pockets. Magic and potions are hard to come by in this area.”

“Which makes his deception all the more lucrative.” Mathis said with a dry laugh. “If I didn't hate his deception I would praise his business sense. But we should keep on moving.”

As they moved, Haverson pulled out one of the maps that Mathis had purchased.

“Looks like we just follow the road until it meets the river.”

“And then we go South?” Mathis asked, peering over the paper.

“Presumably. But it will be up to us. It doesn't look like there's any major landmarks that we could use to turn off of.” Mathis pointed out.

“Its true. I will have to use the compass at that point.” Haverson said, thinking. “And the going will be tougher without the wagon.”

“Wagons weren't made for the desert anyway. We'd have to abandon it soon enough.”

“Men weren't made for the desert.” Haverson said darkly.

“Niether were elves.” Mathis said, looking at Haverson closely.

Haverson shied away from his intense eyes.

“Well. We should keep moving.”

They walked until the sun was high in the sky before they stopped again.

A man in a vibrant red robe was on the side of the road.

“Wait. Is that the same man we saw before?” Haverson asked, pointing.

“Shh. Don't let him notice. Its probably a group of them along this road. Some cult or something. Who knew what these hill people have come up with so far out here in the wilderness.”

They attempted to pass the man in red.

“Hey! You're not even going to take a look? Your friend still won't let you?” The man poked, rising from his seated position and throwing out his hands.

It was definitely the same person. He had short hair and a well kept beard, but some of his face was hidden in the shadow of his hood.

Haverson, unlike Mathis, had no inherent distrust for magic users. That particular cultural idiosyncrasy having been destroyed when he became an infamous mage killer during the war. Although he no longer held the power which had allowed him to destroy his enemies, he had kept his laze faire attitude towards mages. And so simply was amused by the man's activities.

“Hmm. Looks like the man followed us.” Haverson whispered to Mathis.

“You think so? An actual mage? Still, we don't have time for this.” Mathis said, continuing along the road. Haverson followed him, leaving the disappointed mage on the side of the road.

However, they had barely gone an hour when the man showed up again.

Haverson started and looked around to make sure he wasn't seeing things strangely. The road had also become increasingly sparse, most of the travel having presumably been between far out farms into Mellont. Now that they were in the forested hills, there were few reasons to travel the road unless one was continuing to the fort.

Now Mathis stopped. He eyed the man in his robes and shifted the box on his shoulders. He looked at Haverson and the donkey drawn cart that held additional provisions.

“Do you think we make a good target?” he whispered to Haverson.

“I'm not sure. I imagine merchants would look for men wearing more fancy clothing than us.”

“I meant towards being accosted.”

“Accosted?”

“Yes. Banditry.”

“Ha!” Haverson laughed. Sure, there were grudges and the like between merchants and sometimes those infights turned ugly, but banditry was a southern thing. The concept of a northerner stooping so low… to violate the Unified Codex so brazenly would be laughable. Death met those who would even think of trying such illegal activities.

“I'm quite serious.” Mathis said. “This isn't just my hatred of these eastern people. I have a bad feeling about this mage. Imagine we're in the south. Wouldn't we make a good mark?”

“… I suppose so. Two people our age? Where are our guards, right? Lets confront this man since he seems intent on following us.” Haverson said.

“I'm not sure that's a good idea. Look around. Everyone is gone.” Mathis said, quickly taking a look behind them.

Sure enough, the road had somehow clear of every single person. A coincidence? Haverson had a sinking feeling that was not the case.

Haverson let Lubber's rein fall and checked his sword.

The man stood before them, a smile on his face.

“Ah, interested now?” he said. He knealt and muttered to himself.

Haverson stepped back, hand resting on his sword. He knew the man was casting a true spell but he did not recall the type. It was possible that the man used magics not known or different than the ones the battlemages of the south used.

An interesting variety of items appeared with a cloud of pink smoke.

“Ah. So you are a true mage.” Mathis said, stroking his beard. “What is the point of following us like you have been doing? We are in a hurry and have neither the money nor the time to see your wares.”

The man smiled and shook his head. “I encourage you to look closer at the items my friends. Some of them are quite rare. I have potions that will heal all wounds, rings that hold ancient power, and a great number of antiques.”

“What is your name, obstinate mage?” Haverson asked.

The man stopped for a moment and hesitated as if he were uncertain about something. Haverson hand stayed surreptitiously on his sword beneath his cloak.

“Why, I am the Wizard Lothar, seller of magical and unique items. I apologize for my following you, but I had a feeling that you would be interested in my wares.”

“Well, you thought wrong mage. My friend and I must depart. I apologize for wasting your time, but we must be on our way.” Mathis turned to leave again.

The mage appeared right next to them.

“Hey!” Haverson shouted, drawing his sword. Lubber looked up nonchalantly at the wizard having teleported right next to him. Mathis, jerked towards the wizard, eyes wide.

“Listen to me. I got them to agree to try things my way. Please.” The wizard said, his eyes full of fear.

“You're a lunatic! How dare you frighten us with your magics? We told you we weren't interested in your wares!”

Haverson began to get a very bad feeling, and his hand started pulling his sword from his sheath before he truly understood the situation.

“See Lothar.” A voice said right next to Haverson. He jerked, but felt a blade held to his neck. The man behind him was slightly taller than him and had horrible breath. Haverson thought he heard a bit of an accent, but he wasn't able to catch what type. “I told you they wouldn't go for it. Now its our turn.”

“No please! You god damn brutes!” The mage said with broken spirit as several black clad men appeared out of thin air around Mathis and Haverson. The mage stood back and tried to look away.

“You two. Listen here.” Another voice said. It was a short man set a few paces back from them, near the mage.

“I understand you may be shocked, but I need you to cooperate with us. You see. We're in a bit of an interesting situation.” He turned to look at Mathis. “You're not someone we expected to run across. Imagine a patriarch running around by himself! No guard or anything! That’s something you don't get every day.”

“I see that you countrymen have finally fallen to the point of banditry. I had no idea that such scum existed north of the lowlands. Does it hurt to think that every time you steal, you destroy the hundred year heritage of Atheneus the wise?” Mathis said brashly.

The man shrugged. “I make no defenses for myself. But these men with me have families that they have to feed. So just hand over your equipment and we'll let you be on your way.”

“Go fuck yourself.” Mathis said, spitting.

Shit. Mathis is going to get us killed! “Umm, excuse me, but don't you people produce a huge amount of grain? Why do you need to worry about feeding your families?”

“Its an interesting economic trend, see...” the man started, approaching them.

“You're wasting your time Malik. These people don't want to hear about your theories. Just help me take their stuff.” The accented voice said from behind Haverson. Haverson could feel the man going through the pockets on his coat.

“Mathis. We don't have time for this. And we need our things.” Haverson said to Mathis. “I suggest running.”

In one swift action, Haverson spun around, sword extending and ducking as he did so. The man exclaimed but was clearly not expecting the elderly man to actually fight back. Haverson had to be careful to avoid his instinct to drive his sword through the man's throat and instead caught him in the side. At the same time, a dagger found its way into his hands, and departed. The man nearest Mathis looked down in horror.

“Oh gods, Malik. He got me.” The man said, collapsing out of shock.

These were certainly not the type of bandits Haverson expected.

Mathis started running as Haverson suggested, heading for the forest.

“Stop him!” Malik ordered the mage, and waved for the other men to attack Haverson. He himself drew a rapier and faced Haverson.

“Why couldn't you just make this easy?” He growled. “We didn't want anyone to get hurt!”

Out of the corner of his eyes, Haverson saw the wizard Lothar chanting but didn't have time to warn Mathis. Several of the men approached Haverson, weapons drawn.

The only way to win a fight like this was to strike first and hard. And so he did. His sword flashed out, catching the closest man unawares, and again he had to remember to not kill the man. Another dagger left his had and he rushed the man apparently called Malik.

If he could take out the head of the snake the body would follow. His sword arced and met the younger man's. He saw the surprise and fear in his eyes. He could use that.

He threw his cloak over the other man and stabbed him as he did so, but his blow encountered resistance. Still it was enough to trip the man, and he collapsed, tangled in the cloak.

There were three men left. He could do this. Even without the void he could do this.

He leaped forward but the other men were ready. They had seen what he could do and were taking no chances. They apprently had at least some training, since they stayed far back from him. So when he leaped, he didn't quite cover the distance he wanted to, leaving them time to react.

Three blows came out at once. He dodged one, and blocked the other but the third connected form behind him, ripping a tear into his leather armor.

Although it looked like Mathis escaped, the leader, this Malik person, was apparently still up, since he made out the other man throwing the cloak off of himself and barking something to the mage.

Haverson retaliated and mistimed his stroke, sinking his blade straight through the other man's arm. With surprise and horror, Haverson had no choice but to tear the blade from the wound. The man screamed as the bone shattered, and collapsed to his knees, nursing his forearm.

“This isn't worth it!” Haverson screamed. “I'll put all of you in the grave!” He warned, swinging his sword to discourage them from getting any closer.

But suddenly he was overcome by vertigo. Haverson was able to turn to look behind him as the ground rushed up to meet him. The mage had gotten off a spell at him. Damn. He collapsed.

Mathis from atop a hill a ways off could just barely see Haverson collapse. He could make out the people with some effort and hoped that they wouldn't search for him. He had his armor and sword but not… Aster lay still on the ground. How had he not grabbed her? Was this truly who he was? Would he honestly save himself before others?

Well it looks as if that is what he had done this time. He could always redeem himself. The bandits were unlikely to kill Haverson although he had hurt them badly. He was worth much more to them alive than dead.

So now what? His heart was still beating madly in his chest, and he was glad he got he got out of there with his armor. If he had taken if off for any reason everything would have been lost. He could just make out the voices of the men as they tied Haverson up.

“God damn Malik. Could that have gone any worse?” The mage said, gesturing to the men writhing on the ground.

“Shut it. They're injured Lothar… Come on. Those potions!” He ordered. The mage acquiesced, but reluctantly. Mathis could see the mage dissapear and repear with something in his hand which he gave to the men on the ground.

“All I'm saying is that this type of life style isn't good for you guys. You should turn to more honest work. I would be even willing to show you what I know. Maybe one of you has the talent.”

Malik shook his head. “I have to do something right? Don't you agree that their situation was unlivable? The merchants and the potentate buy all the grain and leave us with nothing. Its disgusting. And all of the farm owners cozy up with the potentate! What can farmhands do?”

“I don't know Malik, but certianly there's something better than this. Gods know, you're not even all that good at it.”

Mathis imagined that the other man smiled.

“I suppose you're right Lothar. Franz, why don't you bring the men who got injured back to the village. Lothar, and Ebwolf, you come back to the camp. Maybe we can get some money or info out of this guy. Its clear we underestimated him...” Malik said, dragging haverson's body.

“What do we do with the cart and the box?” Another man asked.

“Bring it with us. There may be something valuable in them. That was the whole point of this right?” Malik shot at the man. The third man with the odd accent chuckled and followed the other two into the forest.

Mathis held his head in his hands as they left. How could this happen? When it looked like things were finally coming together? When the impossible was suddenly forming in front of him. He, who had never ventured from the city suddenly going out into the wilderness…

But now he was truly in the unknown. He was alone, in a forest, seperated from the true adventurer with nothing on his person but what he carried. Aster was gone. He had let her slip away once again! How could he? How had he simply ran?

He slammed his fist into the ground, crushing it deep with the strength of his armor. His teeth clenched till they hurt, and his vision swam in front of his eyes.

What did he do now? There were too many variables to consider and he did not have enough information to accurately determine a course of action. He presumed that the bandits had returned to their camp, since they had said as much, but he had no idea how many of them there were. There was also the mage to consider.

What would he do normally? The answer came to him easily. He would have hired a team of mercenaries, sending Ansalom if the task was of dire importance. Or if the task involved another merchant he would investigate their enemies, meet them, and conspire for a single bloody strike, either armed or economic.

But this wasn't trading. It wasn't haggling or dealing or negotiating. It wasn't even sending teams of men in the night with swords and daggers. This was just him. There was literally no one else in the vecinity except for the bandits that he knew of and time was of the utmost importance.

If he did nothing, they would likely ransom Haverson, but they would open the box, and god know what they would do when they found Aster. The mere thought of them being able to open the coffin, and to gaze upon her filled him again with sudden and undeniable rage.

He found himself at his feet, moving in the direction that the men had gone. His fists were clenched and his strides were long and purposeful.

One half of his brain shrunk back in surprise at his wrath. Had he ever done anything like this before? Even when he was younger, duels usualy had been wagers, or chosen combatants if things got serious.

But that was Then. That was another life ago, before he had shed his past and realized that he had squandered years pushing money and mere objects around and around in god damn endless circles. He swatted a branch out of his way, but instead of bending, the limb shattered into pieces.

Warily, the better side of him allowed his feelings to take control. If before he had acted slowly and only on reason, perhaps now was the time for heated, impassioned action! Yes! He would come to them!

Filled with this madness, Mathis followed the clear path that the bandits had taken.

It was almost sunset. The slightest tinge of red was entering the air, and soon the sun would start to slip behind the mountains. If he was to keep sight of them and have any hope of finding their camp and Aster, he had to move now.

The journey to the camp was a blur of rage induced red as he strode straight through underbrush with impunity.

Lothar the hedge wizard stared at the assembled men with not a insignificant amount of unhappiness.

“… All I'm saying is that we could have at least tried to get them to buy things a bit more before you idiots attacked them.” he gestured, waving his arms through his red cloak.

“And all I'm saying is that you're a useless waste of space. You might be a mage, but surely you're the worst I've ever seen!” Ebwolf barked from the fire.

Malik stirred the food he was making but didn't intercede, at least yet.

“Regardless of the wizard's abilities, you've got to admit that we're not exactly rolling in it. Sure, we haven't starved to death, but we can still barely feed our families. Some of the other men wonder whether it wouldn't be worth it to just make good with the guard and go back to the farms.” Reginar said, stroking his beard.

“I'm usually the last to agree with Ebwolf, but he might have a point. Either we have to change our tactics or we should just give up the whole thing.”

Malik stared up from the fire at the skinny man, a frown creasing his forehead. “I told you once, I told you a thousand times, we're not going to kill people in cold blood! Gods, I can't believe I'm actually having this conversation! Don't any of you regret going against the codex?”

“Of course we do,” growled Ebwolf, “no one is doubting that. But perhaps its in for a copper in for a silver. You can't half ass these things! Honestly Malik, you've seen their tactics now, they're sending guard around roughing up anyone who disagrees with the new taxes! A man can't live like that!”

Malik sighed, but the other man with the accent continued.

“I think its gotten to the point where its either… its either them or us! And its sure as hell not going to be me!”

The mood turned quiet as the respective parties let the tension simmer for a moment.

“Well at the very least, I'm going to open this damned box. This must have been some special shipment of some sort. I suppose they chose those two because they were so old. No one would suspect them of carrying treasure...”

“You don't suppose its military do you? We've caused the guards enough headache, but I think the minute we mess with them they'll kill the lot of us...” Malik asked darkly.

Haverson stirred off to the side and found he was bound. He decided to keep quiet and still until he could undo the bounds they had placed on him.

Ebwolf walked up to the cart and ran a hand over the box. “Its got a hinge, I suppose...”

“Don't you dare touch that!” A voice thundered from the underbrush at the boundariy of the camp clearing.

“Who...?” Reginar managed, raising to his feet as a massive object barrelled from the forest. He had barely enough time to register that it was a person before he was hit full on.

Mathis charged straight through the man, throwing up his hands as he crashed into the surprised bandit. The man was flipped over the other man's shoulder. With no time to even comprehend what was going on, he hit the ground and groaned.

Mathis charge onward, and if anything, increased his speed. “You can't touch that box!”

Lothar got to his feet. “Oh, its the other man!” He said, quickly bringing his hands together to begin a stunning spell.

But as the magic coalesced around his hands, Mathis, propelled by rage continued his charge, and with one hand swept the mage aside mid casting.

“No!” Mathis shouted.

The lanky mage cried out in surprise as the air was knocked out of him. He skidded away from the fire and stumbled against a nearby tree, hitting his head as he did so. The spell collapsed with a kalidescope of flashes.

By this point Malik and Ebwolf had drawn their weapons. However, when Malik saw Lothar hit the tree he was filled with concern and rushed over to him. Not only did Malik like the slightly ecentric man, he was one of the only ones who agree wholeheartedly with his actions. The man was breathing, but in shock.

Ebwolf on the other hand at this point had enough with Malik's weak leadership and decided that now was the best time to do things his way. He would show this old man no mercy, even if it meant killing the raging lunatic.

The man was rushing towards the cart. Ha! So there was something valuable in there! Why else would he go to it first over his companion?

He advanced with his sword. As the man seemed preoccupied, Ebwolf brought his sword down on the man as he was trying to lift the box.

To his utter surprise, the slash merely glanced off the man!

Ebwolf jumped backwards and considered another attack. Could the man be wearing armor? That would explain the strange bulky clothing…

He attacked again. But Mathis suddenly spun and caught the sword in his guantletted hand. Pure rage flowed from Mathis's eye. With one swift action, he stepped forward and smashed the weapon from the other man's hand.

Ebwolf cried out in pain as the armored man crushed his fingers with the blow. The blade flew unhindered from Ebwolf's bloody and broken sword hand. Clenching his teeth, Ebwolf swore and pulled a knife from his side. Dodging an awkward blow from the man, who for some reason was trying to fight him with one hand holding the box against his shoulder somehow, Ebwolf guessed where the hypotheitcal armor's joint was and stabbed at the area.

He was rewarded with a howl of pain from Mathis as blood ran from underneath his cloak causing it to stick to his arm.

“Take that you son of a bitch!” Ebwolf cursed, lifting his hand to stab at the man a second time.

However, faster than he could ever have expected, the man ragined his balance and even with the stabbed arm, lashed out at Ebwolf. Not thinking, the man tried to block it with his dagger and almost broke his hand as the solid hunk of metal connected with him.

“You won't touch her!” Mathis shouted, following up his attack with another that connected directly with the man's stomach.

Ebwolf's mouth made a weak 'o', and he doubled over, consumed with unbeliavable pain. It felt no blow he had ever received in his life. As his head spun from the pain, he barely had time to understand that this was no regular man he was fighting. Something was wrong.

He had no time to react however, since at that moment he collapsed to his knee, vommitting uncontrollably.

“You won't even look at her!” Mathis screamed, hitting the prone man, sending him sprawling. Ebwolf had time to register a sudden excruciating pain in his shoulder before he was tumbling on the ground. He thought his shoulder might be dislocated, but when he weakly looked over, he thought he could see blood. He couldn't move his arm…

The old man was now directly overtop of him. He saw a glint of something through the cloak and in a dim understanding, recognized that Mathis wore some set of armor and that it was most likely magic. He had never stood a chance.

The man above him was rage incarnate, blood fell down from where his dagger had managed to catch him, but it was almost like the wound didn't even matter to the other man. Mathis brought back his fist to hammer it into the man's head. But suddenly Mathis felt a force from his side and he stumbled, the blow never connecting.

Ebwolf sighed and passed out.

“Gods man! You were going to kill him!” Haverson shouted.

Mathis merely unleashed a bestial yell and spun on his feet, screaming at the air now that there were no other enemies.

Haverson begrudgingly thanked Kerack, who work this almost udoubtably was, that Mathis hadn't descended so far that he regarded Haverson as a threat.

“Y-you've done enough. Leave them!” Haverson shouted, suddenly sprinting to hitch Lubber the donkey to the cart.

He paused to steal some of the potions the mage had made which were lying in a small pile near the fire. Mathis was still raging incomprehensibly but it looked like the worst of it had past.

“We have to get out of here before they come to. You're going to crash hard!” he warned, although he knew from experience that the man could probably hardly understand him by this point.

“Put the box on the cart” He gestured to Mathis.

But this merely caused Mathis to bellow nonsense and clutch the coffin defensively.

“Fine, have it your way, carry it. But either way, lets get out of here!” He cursed Kerack under his breath.

The two sprinted form the scene before Malik could understand what had happened.

Haverson walked down the road as the sunlight faded from the world, casting the forest around them into a dusk filled with shadows. His eyes scanned these for signs of movement but he neither heard nor seen any signs of reprisal. Perhaps they were safe.

He walked, wincing a bit here and there from the assorted bruises he had gotten during his short time being captive. One had was perpetually near his sword. He was not going to be surprised again. The other lead Lubber and the cart.

In some ways the device helped, but others merely slowed them down. It would be interesting to see how it fared against the more challenging terrain they would have to face when they turned south.

He looked over at Mathis. The man was mobile but still out of it. The experience had clearly drained him, and he stumbled along seemingly unaware of his surroundings. He had also not responded to any attempts at conversation.

This continued for the better part of an hour. When it at last began to get too dark to walk, Mathis let out a murmur. Half slurred words spilled from his lips.

Haverson looked over at the other man. It was a hard thing to have the madness thrust on you like he had. Kerack was not a forgiving god.

“w-where are we?” Mathis sputtered as if the words were foreign to him.

“A handful of miles from the bandit camp. Up the road. We couldn't help it with the cart.” Haverson explained.

Mathis groaned, and stopped in his tracks, looking up at his shoulder and the coffin on it in surprise.

“You refused to set it on the cart.” Haverson explained.

“Ah.” Mathis said, holding his head suddenly. “I'd best do that now.” he added, resting the container next to the water barrel.

He breathed heavily, and groaned again, holding his hand to his wound. “Gods that hurts.” He said, pulling his hand away. There was no blood on it which surprised him.

“I managed to give you one of the mage's potions while you were out.”

“Then why does it still feel like I've been trampled?” Mathis said, looking over his armor.

“Its part of the whole thing.” Haverson said simply. Mathis didn't quite know how to respond to that, so they continued on.

They had barely gone a mile though when Mathis came to another stop.

“Haverson, you're the adventurer here, not me. You might be fine to walk miles without end, but my old body can't handle it.”

Haverson hesitated. They further they got from the bandit camp, the more likely they would be abel to rest without another encounter. However, he changed his mind when he heard Mathis's voice. He turned to look at the older man. For the first time in their journey he looked… tired.

Haverson nodded. “Fine, we can stop, but we will have to use a small fire or none at all. We can't afford to draw any attention to ourselves.”

Mathis nodded weakly as he held his wound.

The two of them split off from the road, helping the cart over and around undergrowth and rocks until they were somewhat satisfied that they couldn't be seen from the road. Then Haverson went back to try to conceal their path.

When he returned he found Mathis sprawled against the wheel of the cart. Lubber pawed the ground, anxious to be freed from his harness that Mathis had left unattended.

Haverson freed the animal, honestly surprised that they had seemed to have gotten such a well behaved beast. It instantly folded its legs beneath it and let out a small whinny.

“Its best that we stopped.” Haverson said, “we would have had to use a lantern soon anyway, and that would have defeated the whole point.”

“Right.” Mathis said, from his sitting place as Haverson set about making a fire.

Suddenly, Mathis straightened himself against the wheel and slowly started undoing the latches on his armor.

By the time he had finished doffing the exquisite armor, Haverson had gotten a small fire going successfully.

“Truth be told,” Mathis said, now free of his armor, “I need to talk with you Haverson.”

The man looked frail out of his massive set of armor and Haverson had to remind himself that Mathis wasn't Germain, he wasn't a massive warrior unlike other who would have worn such armor. He was merely a merchant, and an old one at that. Mathis might have told him earlier, but Haverson wondered how many years seperated them. Sometimes, it seemed like the merchant was unstoppable, others, like now, it seemed like there was nothing left to the man.

Mathis eased himself closer to the fire and let out a deep sigh, partly out of exhaustion, and partly out of pain.

“What do you wish to talk of?” haverson asked, avoiding the merchant's eyes as he stirred the fire.

“I should think that should be obvious.” The older man said, staring at Haverson until the other man had no choice but to return his gaze. His body may have been exhausted but his eyes still gleamed in the firelight. There was a sharpness to them that Haverson must have missed before.

“Hmm. You talk of Kerack's gift?”

“Well, yes. But I believe there might be more that we need to talk of. I believe it is customary to sign an adventurer's agreement before going on a journey such as ours. We have not done that, which is fine by me. However, recent developments indicate that there needs to be more talk between us.”

“What do you mean by that? I usually don't like to pry into the lives of the people I adventure with.”

“I don't care. This is my operation. If we are going to have our lives on the line, we have to trust one another. No more secrets Haverson.”

Haverson looked at the man, then back at the fire. Perhaps it would be acceptable, this sharing of knowledge. After all, wasn't their current situation partly because Haverson had not been able to talk to Aster when things had soured between them?

“Fine. I agree. But you will have to share yours as well; and nothing is off the table. If you are going to drag out history, let it be the full one. Agreed?”

Mathis thought for the breifest of seconds then nodded his head. “I agree.” he put his hands up to the fire, revealing several bruises that certainly hadn't been there just a week before.

“Now tell me about Kerack and what just happened.”

Haverson ran a hand up to his chin, where the beginnings of a beard were starting to play upon his face.

“How much do you know about the god?” he asked the merchant.

Mathis shook his head. “As you might have guessed, not much. I know there is a small presence in Dor's Crag and a much large one in the capitol...”

“No. Not his followers. The god himself.”

Mathis raised an eyebrow. “He is the god of strength I suppose. It is well known that subtlty is not his specialty. What else is there to know?”

“Not much, and yet that bit contains a great deal.” haverson said, drawing out food from his pack and passing some over to Mathis.

“I once traveled with the man who would become the high cleric of Kerack, though not exactly by choice. You have not likely heard of his name, although you might expect differently of such a powerful individual. He once explained to me how Kerack the bloody operates.”

“You see,” Haverson began, gesturing with his hands half full of food, “Kerack cares nothing about humans. Not one iota. They are puny disgusting things most of the time. He barely cares about his own followers. What he cares about is pure rage. That is everything to him; he craves it, he wants it always; he needs it. He scours the world year after year and yet second by second looking for it. And when he finds it, he pours his own rage into whatever is there.”

“He can choose anyone. And since he helped you, you might think his gift is good. This couldn't be further from the truth. Kerack lusts for blood and blood only. In Westfield, I saw a grief stricken orphan tear the head off of a soldier with his bare hands. The boy was not even in his teens. Of course he was strung up not soon after, but still it is a horrible thing to see, the blood rage.”

“Then why me? I didn't kill anyone.” Mathis pointed out.

“That is true. And for that, I can imagine that Kerack is hateful. However, think about what might have happened if I hadn't been there. You are a smart, intelligent man, unaccustomed to violence. I imagine it was easier to drag you out of it. Now imagine a soldier, used to the horrors of violence, and bound with muscle… So there you have it. It is unlikely that Kerack will choose you again, because of your poor showing, but he is a particular god. Although he cares little for people in general, he had a tendency to latch on to the ones he comes in contact with. I would be careful if the rage threatens to come forth a second time.”

Mathis nodded. “And I assume this horrible crush sensation all over my body is a by product of that rage? I can barely breathe...” He said, holding a hand to his chest.

“Yes. Like I said. Kerack is not a kind god. None of them are really. Not any that are left.”

Mathis nodded, half listening still cluthing his chest as another wave of pain seemed to come over him.

Haverson stood for a moment and got out some oats for Lubber, which the donkey dutifully devoured. As Haverson watched the animal eat, he had the sudden suspicion that even if they had been captured, the animal would have been just as docile to their captors. After all, they had just acquired the animal.

“And now a question for you.” Haverson said, sitting back down. This time it was his turn to stare the other man straight in the eyes.

“Who was that woman in the barrows? And what on earth happened there. I have known elven ruins. I have seen their sorrow and their rage. But never have I seen such things manifest themselves so quickly, nor attempt to affect the world of the living with such force.” He said darkly, never looking away from the merchant.

Mathis thought for a moment. “It...It is a long story. It happened so long ago… But I suppose we did agree to tell anything, or everything. Know though that my next question will be just as direct!” he warned.

“Fine.” Haverson said. “I have long ago come to peace with my life. I will answer any question.”

“If that is the case. I will tell you everything.” Mathis started, grabbing another piece of travel bread.

“It began long ago, decades I suppose. Yes. Decades. When I was young and stupid and close to evil. I cared little for people's lives. I had grown surrounded by luxury and I did not know a signle thing I respected, save for perhaps my father, who also has a place in this story, and him only because I wanted to prove myself.”

“You see, I had several siblings. Brothers and sisters, and in fact some of them were even older than I.”

Haverson did not react to this.

Mathis sighed. “I suppose, not coming from such a family, you do not know about the importance of inheritance. In a merchant family, the overarching company and all its riches go to the first born. So this might have rendered me penniless. Often the younger sons and daughters take up other professions, the sons typically into the military and the daughters marrying the first sons of some other family.”

“I see.” Haverson said. “I only have one brother, and I am the oldest. However, I gave the farm to him.”

“Hmm.” Mathis said, before continuing. Haverson got the feeling that the merchant wanted to share his story without any interruptions.

“That did not happen in our family. Instead there was a metaphorical bloodbath of infighting among the siblings, each trying to prove their worth over the others. Fortunes were gained and lost in years between my brothers and sisters. I believe one might have even been killed, although I have not the proof to back up that statement. However, at the end of it, I emerged victorious.”

“Didn't your parents intercede?” Haverson said, horrified. “You're siblings after all!”

“Ha!” Mathis, shook his head. “Thats not it at all. My father and mother looked on at this behavior with approval, and in hindsight, may have even encouraged it. You see, they believed that the son or daughter with the best skills would be the one who came out ahead. And so it seems I did. So I forced my older brothers and sisters as I lorded over their penniless selves, and forced them to pass the inheritance over to me in return for a massive sum of money.”

But then Mathis quieted. “But that was really just the beginning. I apologize. I got excited thinking of the passion of my youth. I have since learned and there were many things I did that I now regret. However, the most important of them I do not.”

“And what was that?”

“The most important. After I had solidified my mining empire and expanded to trade with Swan, I had the funds to invest in more ventures. For a time one of the best was glasswork from none other than the elves. At the time they had not entirely slipped into their greif, and several times a year massive caravans would journey across the desert to trade goods.”

“To make a very, very long story short, during a disgustingly onesided negotiation which I had traveled to Ankhsomar for in person, I decided to press my hand even further. Instead of gold or silver or weapons or gems or anything sane I could have desired, I sought the hand of a beautiful elf maiden.”

“What!” Haverson said, jerking upwards. “What did you do that for?”

“Evil intentions, I assure you. Lustful and sordid thoughts, and the satisfaction of knowing she was the daughter of the man whom which I traded. I will never know why she agreed to the deal, since the elves trust the feelings of their children much than we humans do...”

Mathis sighed, and clutched his chest again, taking in a slow breath and gritting his teeth.

“But the deal was signed. I had no idea what I was getting into. She was and remains, the most strong willed person I have ever met on the face of the earth, present company included. She played me, feigned and twisted, pushed and pulled. She was at once untouchable and unavoidable. She went where she wanted and got what she wanted, and through it all had the heart of an angel. I suppose she looked at the state of her people and assumed that the only way they would survive was through closer contact with Humans. In this aspect, she used me, though I regret none of her actions nor hold them against her.”

“She taught me the language and customs of her people, related to me their unimaginable greif that all elves feel. She showed me the fell, and the destruction humans inflicted upon them. All in the hope that I could affect the future of her kind somehow.”

“Enthralled, I stayed for months, operating my business via messenger until it appeared like things would fall apart in my absence. I stayed as long at I could. And when I could not stay any longer, I invited her back with me to Dor's Crag, which my second greatest surprise, she agreed to.”

“But the echo of the war was still present, and rumors arose. Combined with this, her people started to withdraw into themselves, as they have. She could not stay from her home any longer. I suppose I never truly understood her, mind me, all this is in hindsight. One day she left and went for the desert. She made it clear she did not intend to come back. I do not know her fate, only that she no longer lives on this earth.”

“So she was the spectre in that graveyard?” Haverson asked.

“Perhaps. It was like her but not her. I do not claim to know what death does to the souls of the living.” Mathis said, with tired eyes.

“And now we are even. Of course there is much more to tell. I want to know what that map maker meant when he said to not trust you. And there is more, much more to tell in my story as well. But these things will have to wait for another day. My body is battered as it has never been and I am tired like no other night before.” Mathis said, lapsing off into almost prose, which Haverson thought he might be quoting from somewhere, but he wasn't sure.

Unsurprisingly, sleep came easy to both of them.

They awoke with the sun. After packing up their tents they stepped out onto the road and followed it dutifully as they had the day before. Although Haverson looked he could find no sign that they had been followed by the bandits. Perhaps the group of men had their own problems. Certainly Mathis had given them something to think about.

He looked over at the merchant. The man appeared tall and strong once again. The frailness of the day before seemed to have melted away. However, his face still held a concealed grimace, the wounds of yesterday still hurt.

After a day of mostly silent walking, they emerged out of the forest. The land sloped down for miles into a small valley ringed with hills on the northern side. They could just make out the road stretching beyond, snaking into the hills on the other side.

“That is to the fort.” Haverson said, pointing at the road on the far side of the valley. “There's a good bridge which crosses the river almost a half a day in that direction. But that heads north. We're going to travel along the river a while. Keep your eyes open. There are no towns that I know of to the south of the fort. The is nothing but wilderness from it all the way to Ankhsomar.“

“Hmm.” Mathis said, peering at the map he had taken from the man in Mellont. He held it in front of Haverson.

“Gods. Why the old one? There are many things on here I'm not even sure exist anymore!” He said, his yes tracing the parchment.

“I thought it might have more detail than the newer one. And plus there's a certain amount of satisfaction to using this one. I believe it is elven made. See the detail of their cities? No human map would have included such things.”

Haverson nodded. “What is this?” he asked, pointing to a large city in the north.

“Is this elven? There is no city there now. At least none that I know of.”

Mathis peered closer at the map. It clearly depicted a city, at least the size of Dor's crag, called Adze, far to the east, past even the fort. The fort itself didn't seem to be on the map.

“No I don’t' think so, at least not if I can make sense of the key. It appears to be human, but I too have never heard of such a place. I suppose its ruins now.”

Haverson felt something like sadness go through him the longer he looked at the map.

“There's so many towns. Elven and human...” he said his voice trailing off. “Was the war really so horrible?”

Mathis sighed and started rolling the map back up. “From all accounts it was. I have not talked to any of the elves who still remember it, and there are few of them left, but what I have read describes a horrible never ending fire, burning through towns and people alike. And enough carnage to dwarf even the splitting of the North and South.” Mathis said darkly.

The was silence for a moment, and the two of them contemplated in their own way how something so horrible could have happened.

After a long moment, though, Mathis pointed to the hills.

“But the weather is good, and there is not a cloud in the sky. Perhaps this is not the time to talk of such things. When do we turn southward?”

“If I saw correctly before, we keep to the river until the massive peak above the fort becomes visible. Then we should head south.”

And so, with their cart in tow, they headed down the road towards the river.

Haverson had been here before with Aster. The area had changed little. To the north remained as always, that spine of mountains that traveled the known world. To their south was uninhabited grasslands, the recovered devastation of what used to have been both human and elven settlements, although aside from some odd looking hills and the occasional masonry peeking above the vegetation, one might never know.

They passed only a handful of people on the road, and most of them paid their group little mind.

By midday the had reached the banks of Icerun, the eastern river. The stopped before the massive stone bridge and marveled at its construction.

It ran nearly the length of a field and was constructed from four massive arches which spanned the river. Unlike most northern masonry, Haverson noted, it used a strange white stone, rather than the blue -gray so familiar to Illithar and Dor's Crag. Perhaps it was this unfamiliar craftwork which gave him pause, or perhaps it was the scale of the construction. Not only long, the bridge was nearly four wagons wide. At its sides were simple sidings engraved with geometric patterns.

Haverson leaned over the bridge, his hands resting on the stone. The white stone was cold even in the direct sunlight of midday, no doubt due to the waters which flowed beneath it.

Almost a story down, Haverson could see the turbulent churn of the Icerun, its aluring yet frigid waters a teal ribbon which arced as far as his eye could see to the south.

When they were done admiring the stonework, they walked back to the southern side of the bridge.

“What shall we do with the cart in the wilderness?” Mathis asked Haverson, waving his hand at the thicket in front of them. “We can't bring that in here.”

Haverson scratched his head and looked at the large cart, with the provisions, water barrels and the coffin on it. “No, you're quite right. We can't bring it through here exactly, but I could have sworn...”

Haverson trailed off, motioning for Mathis to follow him.

They walked back the way they had come a few minutes, Mathis becoming somewhat confused as to their goal.

“I believe I saw a path of some sort off to the side here when we approached.” Haverson explained. “Although I had hoped to stay closer to the river… Perhaps it curves to meet it? We will have to make sure it does not go someplace far from our goal, but I suppose it can hardly cross the Icerun, so it must either follow it or go south!” Haverson concluded.

Mathis thought for a moment. “There used to be a road that lead to Ankhsomar, which some say survived the war. But ever since the elven retreat it has become ill used. Still, when I traveled there, I believe my guides took me along it.” He added, eye scanning the foliage for the path Haverson had mentioned.

“Ah, I did see that one on the map. Somehow I believe we passed the turn for that in the night.” Haverson said.

“Oh” Mathis said, somewhat defeated. “Although I suppose we aren't going to Ankhsomar. I'm not sure they would even let me in the city… Elves never forget Haverson. If you meet any, remember that. With their age comes long memories. But on the other side, if you know an elf as a friend, it is typically one that you can rely on for life.”

“Yet she left you...” Haverson said, regreting the words even as they escaped his mouth.

Mathis pondered in silence for a moment.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean...” Haverson started.

“No. You're right. Perhaps there is more to tell at some point.” He said, his face growing weary.

“Ah!” Haverson said, pointing to a break in the trees, disrutping the awkward conversation.

“There it is. We should have no trouble bringing the cart in there provided that it stays that width.” He said. “Although the going might be slower. It doesn’t look very heavily traveled. Is it on any of our maps?” He asked Mathis.

They stoped at the side of the road and consulted the sheets. The road appeared on none of the maps they had with them. The two men turn to one another and shrugged.

“It must be a game trail.” Mathis said, waving towards the opening. “I doubt many people live all the way out here.”

“Ha!” Haverson said with a shake of his head. “Its far to large for that. One second...” Seeing something of interest, Haverson dropped to his knees and looked at something in the mud on the turn off.

“Interesting. A wagon went through here a while ago, maybe a week. You can still see the ruts.” He said pointing to the ground.

Mathis couldn't really see anything out of the ordinary but he took Haverson's word on it.

Haverson peered down the way, but the path soon took a sharp turn, and beyond that, its course was indiscernible.

Haverson scratched his stubble. “Well, as you like to say, this is your journey. What do you think Mathis?”

The merchant turned over the situation in his mind, conferring with Haverson certain details. And it took the two several minutes to come to a consensus, but finally they agreed on heading down the path.

Immediately, Mathis was impressed by the change which came over the environment. The road that they had been following was the largest in the north, well maintained and kept clear constantly by the military. Here though, small shrubs grew in the missle and encroaching on the sides of the path. But what really changed was the feel of the road. Night time aside, when they had been ambused by the band of damn Easterners, the land they had traveled through had been one set of green hills after one another, a veritable sea of half boot grass and ocassional rocky outcropping.

Now however, tall needle trees loomed over them, and even though the trees were spaced farther apart than the broad leaf forests around Illithar, they were cast into shadow. The forest fell over them as their cart creaked along. There were no sounds but their own. The smell in the air was of untouched wildness, old and strong.

Mathis looked up to tell Haverson what he had noticed, but the other man was looking around as well.

“I can feel it too.” Haverson said. “Such a change. Is it possible that this area escaped the destruction of that war?” He asked Mathis.

“I do not know. I suppose it is possible. Yet I don't feel any sadness in the air, merely a foreigness, like we were the only ones to have ventured here.”

“Hmm. You're right.” Haverson said, stopping suddenly to look at some tracks on the ground.

“Yet the cart tracks are here.” He said. “Perhaps some woodsman or another. We are not too far from the road.”

Mathis shrugged. “But we are from any city. Whoever lives here must travel almost a week to anywhere.”

Now it was Haversons's turn to shrug. “Not everyone has the need to live in a town. There are many who in fact would rather keep to themselves, alone amid nature.”

Mathis made a dismissive noise, and Haverson knew that meant Mathis was done talking.

The rest of the day went uneventfully. Although haverson was concerned about whoever had made the path in the first place, they encountered no one but animals along the path until the sun started to make its way below the mountains.

“Shall we make camp?” Haverson suggested as the light began to fade.

Mathis shot a quick glance at the coffin riding on the wagon and nodded.

“I suppose we have to.” He admitted.

“Then let us stay far off the path this time.” Haverson said, warely looking up and down the path once more. “Something like this doesn't just stay in this contition. You have to have people move along it in order for it not to be overgrown...” Then pondering a bit, “unless its magic...”, but he shook his head, “however, I do not believe that to be the case.”

They walked a distance until they found an opening big enough to fit the wagon through, then, careful not to upset the cargo, they coaxed Lubber off the trail and into the woods.

If the path had been silent, the woods were alive, Mathis marvled. Now that the sun was headed behind the mountains, insects sounded, branches creaked, evening birds sang haunting melodies, and small unidentifiable creatures scurried through the brush. All of these things were common place to Haverson, who, after a fiar amount of time spent in civilization, felt at home amid the sounds. To Mathis it was a new world; a strange and somewhat disconcerning place, that it now seemed to have been lurking right next to his neat and orderly understanding of cities and trade.

They pitched camp and made a small fire as night fell. They still had plenty of food, but Haverson offered to go try his hand at hunting, since they would need all the preserved food they could carry in the desert. Mathis agreed and Haverson, seemingly just armed with his hands, slipped off into the woods.

When Mathis awoke he realized he had fallen asleep by the fire. Cursing himself for such a negligent activity, he checked to make sure the blaze was still contained within the rock lined depression Haverson had built for it. The fire was out.

Mathis sighed, and rummaged around for a tinderkit. As soon as he reached his hand out, he realized he had slept in his armor. Not only had his muscles set in strange and uncomfortable positions, but he felt a massive weariness. Twice he cursed his inattentiveness.

As he rummaged through the pack Haverson had left, he suddenly heard a noise coming from the woods behind him. Mathis stood suddenly alert, willfully shredding his tiredness.

Was it a person? Was Haverson back? Or could it be the same bandits here to finish the job?

But, in a action that was becoming second nature to him, a furious glance at Aster reavealed that nothing had been touched since he had fallen asleep.

His momentary satisfaction turned to fear when he heard the sound again. Mathis regretted not learning anything about the countryside. He could not tell whether it was an animal or person that made the sound he currently heard. However, he was now glad at leaving his armor on in his sleep.

He positioned himself between Aster and the sound of the noise and crept forward.

Haverson materialized from the trees in front of him. In one hand he held a strange shape but he seemed unconcerned with whatever he was holding. Instead his eyes and attention seemed to be focused on the path they had arrived on.

Sensing something, Haverson turned behind him and signaled for Mathis to be quiet. Mathis sneaked up to Haverson.

“Whats going on?” He whispered.

“...I'm not quite sure, but I heard movement when I was coming back from hunting.” he said holding up the strange shape, which Mathis now saw were two rabbits.

“Oh.” he said, seeing their limp bodies. He had never caught live animals before.

“Do you know what it was?” Mathis asked.

“Not assuredly, but I believe it was other people. I thought I saw torch light.” Haverson responded, looking out at the path. Sure enough, as the two waited in hiding, Mathis thought he could sense a light coming down the path from the direction of Mellont.

“Did they see you?” Mathis asked, his heart thudding in his chest. He had no desire to come into conflict with any more bandits. “Could the bandits have found us?”

Haverson shook his head. “They didn't see me. I wasn't holding any torch. I don't think it was the bandits either.”

The light coming down from the path grew brighter and definitely confirmed that it was people rather than some animal which Haverson had heard. The pines slowly turned from black to their usual dark green, and dark brown of their back illuminated from the flickering torch light.

“We should be ok so long as they don't notice the cart tracks. I did my best to hide them, but anyone who lives this far out might have a chance of noticing them still. They're holding torches so their eyes haven't acclimated to the dark. Just don't move or make a sound and they should pass right by us.”

Mathis waited in anticipation as the source of the light grew closer and closer.

Finally, the other group came around abend in the path and Mathis could make them out in full detail. There were almost ten of them, all men and they wore a ragged collection of clothes. Between them they carried a cart, loaded to the top with food and drink. Mathis didn't see any weapons on them, but looking at their physique became convinced that they probably didn't need any.

They were all nearly six and a half feet tall and abnormally well built. When they moved closer though, he saw that they all had shaggy black hair and eyes. He could not remember seeing anyone quite like them. They most looked like the Fartherners, in their fierce ruggedness, but the Fartherners had long learned to gather respect by appearing well kept.

As they passed right in front of Mathis, he held his breath. The men grunted from the exertion of hauling their cart, and one of them called to another in some strange toungue. Mathis almost shifted in shock. He could identify all languages, if not speak them, and it took him until they had passed to realize that they were simply speaking some strange colloquial dialect of his own tongue.

None of them seemed to be able to find them in their hiding place, but the last one might have cast a glance at the turn off, perhaps seeing something out of place. However, the second to last of them tugged on his shoulder and said some rough words in their strange pidgin language and pointed further up the trial. The man shrugged and followed the group. Mathis let out the air he had unwittingly held.

When the group was appreciably gone, Mathis and Haverson wordlessly went back to their camp and conversed quietly about what they had seen.

“Who do you think that was?” Mathis asked, his stomach grumbling inadvertantly.

“I honestly have no idea. It didn't seem like they were looking for us. I suppose they were the ones who made the path. Did they seem … off to you?” He said, looking at Mathis as he attempted to restart the fire.

“Uh, won't that bring attention to us?” Mathis said, looking at the firepit.

“Less than during the day in these woods, unless wherever those people's camp is is close.” Haverson replied, trying again at the tinder.

“Ah, yes now that you mention it, I've never seen anyone with that type of eyes hair. Did you hear what they were speaking? What a strange and deformed version of language it was. Harsh and guttural… It certainly wasn't like a Southerner or even a Shani. I think it most sounded like a Fartherner.” Mathis declared.

Haverson shrugged.

“Unless they try to stop us, I see no reason why they are of any importance. I was just surprised by them coming up on me in the woods.” Haverson said, sucessfully lighting the fire.

Mathis nodded, but his mind was still fixed on the strange men they had encountered. It was part of his role as high merchant to look for new things, opportunities, changes in the normal way of things, and this certainly was something new. There were thought to be no settlements south of the fort, but if that weren't the case, what did that mean? Nothing for him, he realized, a bit morosely.

He slumped to the ground and stared in the fire, suddenly feeling very very tired. For so long his thought had been always towards the future. His investments and plans were years in the making decades if he could spare the time to think that far ahead, and although not everything had always worked out, his mindset had slowly stuck looking forward.

Was it that very fact that had guided his hand when Aster had run away? He had always tried to turn a detriment into an opportunity, and perhaps he had worked his trade at a time it was not appropriate. Did it sometimes pay to dwell in the past and concern about the present? His eyes buried themselves in the flickering tongues before him.

“You want any rabbit? I imagine that you're hungry after those bandits. I dont' remember us stopping to eat.” He said, poking one of the bodies with a stick.

Mathis looked up. Haverson had skinned the rabbits when he hadn't been looking. One part of him was horrified with what he saw, their small tortured bodies sizzling slowly above the fire, their flesh dripping blood into is searing flames. Yet another part of him longed to sink his teeth into the meat.

His stomach growled.

Well. That was one way to decide, he supposed, and nodded to Haverson.

The rabbit was delicious.

Haverson awoke to see Mathis's armor lying in a heap on the ground. The old man lay near to the cart where he had laid down his sleeping pad.

Waking the man and Lubber. He saw the older merchant rub his arms vigorously as if they were sore.

“We'd best get moving.” Haverson said.

Mathis gritted his teeth as he rose. And stretched. After this he turned to Haverson. “Where do we go? Down the path?”

But Haverson shook his head. “I don't think that way is possible anymore, not unless you want to deal with those strange men who passed us last night. They way they motioned to one another, and the tracks in the path make me feel like they have some sort of shelter or residence further down that road.”

Mathis rubbed his hands together. “How many days has it been Haverson? Six?”

Haverson was about to respond, but he saw the other man didn't really want an answer.

The older merchant rose to his feet and stared down at his armor, glistening wet in the morning dew. He let out an audiable sigh. For a moment, Haverson thought the Merchant might collapse as his body trembled, but after a moment, he realized the other man trembled with anger!

“How many days since she died? By this map we have reached the edge Haverson have we not? There is nothing here but ledge and we are about to drop off!” he said, spinning and looking at Haverson. “There are no towns between here and the fell. We are going into the wilderness.” He said, growing quietly as if speaking to himself. He clenched his fists and bent to pick up the first piece of armor.

“Shall we move through the trees?” He asked Haverson without looking at him.

“It is possible. If we stay clear of the underbrush the going will be slower than normal with the cart, but we should be able to.”

“Then forget the path. Forget the road.” Mathis said, strapping another piece of armor to himself.

“We will now truly venture outward without the protection of society.” He said, as if trying to convince himself that what he was doing was the right course of action.

He fastened the last pieces of the armor to himself and turned to Haverson, who had broken down the tents and scattered the fire. Haverson looked up, not saying anything.

“We should go now. Before I loose my resolve and try the path.” Mathis said grimly.

Like Haverson predicted, the going was slow. The terrain although not especially uneven was obviously not paved or level. There were no paths, and they were forced to switch back and around the more overgrown areas, small bogs and steep hills.

Haverson watched Lubber carefully. Considering that the shaggy donkey was bread and most likely had spent his whole life in the fields and city, the beast was doing surprisingly well in the wilderness. Several times, he would scare at the strange noises of frogs or bird calls that were unfamiliar to him, but each time Haverson would comfort the animal, and before to long, he had taken back to his usual plodding pace.

Mathis surveyed the woods as they moved. According to the newer maps, they were still somewhat close to the mountains, although their view was blocked from the travelers by the numerous trees. The needle trees with their tall spans reached to the sky and the sounds of wood birds called. A number of miles away from the path, the undergrowth dropped away and the going became somewhat easier. Now it was only the trees with sometimes the span of a small house between them.

“According to the map, by the end of today we should come free of the trees regardless of how east we are.” Mathis said consulting the map. “Do you think we turned off at the right point?”

Haverson shrugged and fed Lubber a carrot, taking care to avoid the donkey's large and sometimes indiscerning teeth. “We will find out. We are not in the desert yet so the true test is yet to come. If it is required, we could just barely break even in terms of food and water here.”

Mathis nodded and they continued through the forest.

True to the map the forest thinned bit by bit as they made their way south. Haverson, with a small amount of trepidation felt the ground beneath their feet get drier and drier. Here and there, where before they would have found a pool of stagnent water, they now found low grasses in small breaks in the trees.

Mathis bent down at one and felt the ground.

“Do you feel that?” he asked Haverson.

Haverson paused and listened for a moment. “I still hear birds. What do you sense?”

Mathis shook his head. And looked around the clearing, not responding directly. He paced up and down the area, looking at the ground, sometimes backing away and looking at the whole thing from a far.

“Ah.” he said finally. “It is as I thought.” He continued grimly. He foled his arms and motioned to Haverson to see something where he stood.

“Look forward from where I stand.”

“What am I looking for?” Haverson asked, but following the other man's direction.

“Just stare forward at the ground.”

“There's just some grass and stones.” Haverson stopped and looked closer at the stones. “Are they elven?” he guessed.

“They are. There was a shrine here.” Mathis said walking to the center of the clearing. “From what I know, the whole thing would have been open on all sides, really more of a roof and columns than a true building. The whole thing was built out a stone brought from the south, and there would have been pillars here and maybe there.” He said gesturing.

“We're standing on what is left of the roof right now. By the size, of the mound, it was a fairly large one. A medium sized town would have worshiped here. You can barely even tell there was anything here.” he said, growing silent. A single bird called from far away.

“Are you a religious man?” Haverson asked, staying to the edge of the old temple.

“No.” Mathis admitted. “For many years my only worship was that of gold. I would have been an fanatical adherent of Pluor had he not been an empty husk by the time I was born. But I can't help but wonder where all the good gods have gone.”

He looked up at Haverson. “Kerack, Plotweaver, the Seaking… All so violent and uncaring. Even Geremon simply lurtches on, his doctrine that of stagnation and acceptance. Where are the gods of hope and laughter?” He asked, his voice shaking. Despite his best effort he looked at Aster.

“Were there ever such things? Did you carve only the horrible things from that space? Are they merely taking the pale reflection of ourselves? That cannot be the care, for a time Ishira watched over the elves. What I wouldn't do to understand why such a protector would fail them. To fail us really… Ishira never discriminated in her love of life, at least not that I have heard in the stories.”

Why did you do it? How could you do it?

I thought of all the reasons why I wouldn't one by one

too expensive, relationship with Ethalia, I might die, and none were more important to me than Aster.